

Olivia Parkes. *Something from Nothing*

The most everyday things—a door, a lake, a life—are missives of impossibility. Why is there something rather than nothing? And what sponsors this incalculable leap from one to the other? For Olivia Parkes, this “what” is not so much a force (a god, quanta, the big bang, etc.) as a place: a “no-place” where, as she says, “everything happens but no one can go.” The paintings on view in this exhibition might be understood as calling cards—visitations—from this no-place; as documents of Parkes’s effort to see what is at once indivisibly ours and totally unavailable to us. These paintings arrive as fabulae from that strange nowhere country we can’t know or see, even as we are its evidence, even as our lives bear it out. Or as Maurice Merleau-Ponty has it: “We never get away from our life. We never see our ideas or our freedom face to face.”

Out of this effort of seeing, then, springs the whole assembly of Parkes’s motifs: mirrors, doors, windows, cages, feathers, fable-animals, the static ring-dances of trees: images and objects that at once signal and foreclose lines of flight, forms of passage, entry, of escape both psychic and material. These recurring motifs also sign the inversion of given laws, so that reality is presented to us as the flaw or error in the collecting surface of the eye, the mind, the mirror. In a similar impulse toward inversion, these paintings are quite literally full of holes, which, like contronyms—words signifying two categorically opposite things—simultaneously invoke both the void and the ovoid, the abyss and the egg (the black hole and the eye’s pupil; the cave’s mouth and the moon’s body; the round of a shadow and the round of a lake). What is nothing and what is something? Which witch is which?

In this inverted world, things behave differently: shadows prop up the cage on the table (*A Living Quality*); ripples are nailed willy-nilly to the lake (*Basic Solitude*); a flower escapes the wallpaper pattern only to lie inert on the floor (*Don’t Be Sorry*); the flowing river is a gate, the fish a pair of keys (*The Way Through*). Brushstrokes and daubs move chromatically around what they represent, like heat around an object; oppositely, their frozen blur suggests the silence inside a microwave or a cosmos. In the lonely hypercolor “no-place” between seeing and the thing seen, between what the world is and what we can know of it, what is seized on here is the slapstick stillness and totality of emergence itself.

To try to see the “no-place” of emergence—with its quicksilver temporality of already/not-yet—is also to get at something about the endeavor of painting itself: it’s a way of trying to look at its workings and impulses face to face. In this sense, the painting of a thing and the seeing of it are one. Merleau-Ponty, again: “‘Conception’ cannot precede ‘execution.’ ... only the work itself, completed and understood, is proof that there was *something* rather than *nothing*....”

And this nothing, now a something, becomes a thing that, resisting understanding, invites sustained looking, interest—the motions of mind that constitute what one might call love. You begin to feel, in the dog’s familiar hesitant stance (*Dark Age*), or in the riffled heaviness of the book’s pages (*My Back Pages*) that some instant of freedom, some form of life is nearby: maybe an ocean, a passageway, an evening all your own. And if the vivid color of these paintings is lonely, jagged, possessed of a violence, it is also true that the colors are so bright they act as half-mirrors, casting their intensity into the room—so that even in their alien two-dimensionality, in their no-place strangeness, you and the painting share a world. You touch one another and the other moves.

—Timmy Straw