



Long Read: Lifting the Curtain on Gwen Evans's Portraiture

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"greenish": that's what Google Translate suggests when I search the English for 'verdaccio' (the Renaissance technique of underpainting skin in a green colour). It's an eerily human response charged with self-doubt: "green-ish?". And yet, this is perfect – the ambiguity... the unnerving not-quite-human-ness... the art historical terminology... – it somehow neatly summarises what I had just the day before been discussing with painter Gwen Evans in her studio.

Evans, who is based at Paradise Works, Salford, has been preparing for her upcoming exhibition CIPHER as part of HOME's Granada Foundation Gallery Programme. Her works depict increasingly anonymous subjects; charged with dramatic suspense and radiating narrative ambiguity, they force us to ask: Who are these people? Where are they? And *when* are they? This preoccupation with ambiguity stems from psychoanalysis – Evans returns time and again to Freud's 1919 groundbreaking essay *Das Unheimliche* ('The Uncanny'), in which uncertainty is described as 'the essential factor' in creating a feeling of the uncanny. 1

It's clear that Evans is calibrating her own practice to be neither firmly Team Canny (in German, *heimlich*: "comfortable"²) in its Renaissance-inspired realism and paint handling, nor entirely Team Uncanny (*unheimlich*: "uncomfortable"³) in its unnerving manipulation of interior space and human proportions. Instead, her work oscillates *between* these two poles. We are suspended between the familiar and unfamiliar, being denied the comfort of settling into either camp. There is also, of course, *narrative suspense* and the questions raised by the mysterious figures and the liminal spaces that speak to the paralysis of contemporary and social anxieties.

In a nod to the art historical genre of the marriage diptych, *Obverse* and *Inverse* depict a young couple in profile. Evans successfully captures the stoicism of this painting tradition (see Piero della Francesca's depiction of not-so-marital bliss in *The Duke and Duchess of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza* [c.1470s]). Such paintings were not celebratory images but instead, when stripped of painterly sentiments, were formal announcements of contractually (and divinely) bound individuals. These are didactic rather than sentimental images – that is, their main motivation is to directly inform you of the relationship between the sitters.

Fig.1 Piero della Francesca, The Duke and Duchess of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza (c.1470s), Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

"They're inspired by early renaissance paintings commissioned to mark marriage and betrothal," Evans explains of *Obverse* and *Inverse*, "but I don't necessarily want them to be [romantic]. I want there to be an element of emotionless detachment between the figures."

In *Offering*, too, romance falls short. The probing gesture of the carnation – a symbol of love – hangs suspended in the air. The foremost figure looks out at us, unaware of the looming shadow waiting in the wings. Is this simply unrequited love, or a darker, Shakespearean plot of unsettling infatuation and dramatic irony? There is a vulnerability to both subjects here, even the shadow figure who, though at first instinct we read as a threat, is on the cusp of a love declaration (and by extension, rejection). An evolving motif of Evans's work, subjects are condemned to remain suspended in their perpetual isolation, whether that's introspectively disengaged from the other figure, or physically separated by walls or curtains.

Evans's methods are systematic (to some, no doubt, laborious), keeping company with the growing number of contemporary painters reviving tried-and-trusted Renaissance techniques, such as glazing and *verdaccio*. Evans uses immediate family as models, but this is secondary. In fact, she increasingly endeavours to paint her sitters as characters beyond familial recognition or connection. To my surprise, she references Lisa Yuskavage and George Tooker among her influences for whom the body is an objective yet sensory form, emblematic of shared psyches and experiences. Their subjects aren't individuals, they're iconographies of common psychologies and physiologies, allowing us to identify with them beyond figurative self-recognition – to *feel* a connection that is at once othering and sensorially connective.

Fig. 2 Detail of George Tooker, Government Bureau (1956), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Evans is drawn to Tooker's ability to convey pervasive stillness and isolation. In his best-known works, *The Subway* and *Government Bureau*, the figures are subjected to inescapable observation and a paradoxically claustrophobic isolation. In Tooker's single figure compositions, anonymity may be interpreted as a form of imprisonment, or as capturing insightful moments of human vulnerability – the interpretation being at the viewer's discretion. And this is the key role of the viewer. Evans states that "The whole point of the ambiguity around the painting and the narrative and the gender and the relationship is that there's this missing piece of narrative that the viewer fills in," where "each individual will have a different reading based on their own experiences, which I think is more interesting than saying 'this is what it's about.'"

This is something all painters grapple with: how much to give away? Yuskavage, one of Evans's influences, talks of having to trust in her audiences:

"I believe in the intelligence of my viewers. Whatever they think the painting is, that's what it is. [...] It's a passive object made active by the viewer." 4

Yuskavage's bodies-as-forms are exaggerated by their placement within thick tropical summer hazes or noxious vapours. Evans, too, refuses to anchor subjects to recognisable settings, and sensitively conjures spaces of quiet, uneasy intimacy, where seemingly domestic, wallpaper-clad interior backgrounds are persistently devoid of depth. Even in *Mute Point*, green-tinged walls and curtains that suggest knowable interiors don't reassure us that these anxious figures are *home*. Despite being witness to these private exchanges (a literal lifting of the curtain), apparent motives or meanings, like the shadowy figure, remain concealed.

This text has been written by Katie Evans to coincide with [Gwen Evans' Solo Exhibition CIPHER](#) in HOME's Granada Foundation Galleries from Fri 7 Apr – Sun 11 Jun.

About Katie Evans

Katie Evans is a writer, painter, and editor based in Salford. She is a former Haworth Trust Masters Scholarship recipient and is one-third of the Manchester-based collective PaintingWriting.

References

1. *Freud expands on the work of E. Jentsch: 'He ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty'. Sigmund Freud (1919), 'The Uncanny', p.2. Available here: <https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>*
2. *'Heimlich, adj.: I. Also heimelich, heinielig, belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, comfortable, homely, etc.'*, Freud, 'The Uncanny', p.2.
3. *'Uncomfortable, uneasy, gloomy, dismal, uncanny, ghastly; (of a house) haunted; (of a man) a repulsive fellow.'* Freud, 'The Uncanny', p.2.
4. *'The paintings of Lisa Yuskavage "What kind of things am I looking at?"', p.31. Available at: <https://yuskavage.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/9287.pdf>*

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