

CAMPLE—LINE

**GABRIELLA BOYD
PRESSER**

23.03 - 02.06.24

Gabriella Boyd: *Presser*
– Yates Norton

In her essay 'On Being Ill', Virginia Woolf questions why 'this monster, the body, this miracle, its pain' had been largely neglected in English literature despite its profound impact on how we perceive the world.¹ She suggests that in a culture that has severed the mind from the body there's a prevailing notion that literature should solely focus on the mind and 'the thoughts that come to it; its noble plans; how it has civilised the universe', relegating the body's 'daily drama' to an irritating nuisance.² When the body does surface, at least in the literature of her time, it is swiftly elevated into 'raptures of transcendentalism', distanced from its messy, visceral reality.³ And in a literary landscape that glorifies plots of epic battles and heroic deeds, the nuanced and often agonising experiences of the body, not to mention the sheer mundane reality of illness, are deemed devoid of significance or profundity.

But Woolf knows we can only perceive the world with all the weight of our bodies and it is precisely when we are ill that we become more acutely aware of this. She observes how in a culture that insists on separating and opposing mind and body, our bias towards the former deprives us of the sense of poetry that comes from attending to our experiences of the latter. In redressing this, we have to do more than attempt to add the body to the mind; instead, we must consider ways in which we perceive and represent the world that go beyond treating body and mind as distinct categories. Even if English 'has no words for the shiver and the headache' to adequately convey their peculiar qualities, when we are ill we might notice and remember how 'words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning, gather instinctively this, that, and the other – a sound, a colour, here a stress, there a pause.'⁴ We realise how language cannot be merely the transparent vehicle of ideas. We tarry with words and sentences, sense them as textural as much as text, and consider their moods just as we might register the imperceptible but palpable atmosphere of a room. We do not aim only for sense and meaning as if words were simply bits of data

to be decoded. Words do not appear to us as surfaces to shatter to achieve some 'break through' of understanding – the world, after all, and its experiences are not there to be broken apart. And as Woolf writes, 'incomprehensibility has enormous power over us in illness more legitimately perhaps than the upright will allow', for it is in this state that we are able to sense the full poetic breadth of words. We then allow them to 'give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled, slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings.'⁵

Gabriella Boyd's paintings have this luminous quality of a world perceived with all the mass and unpredictable condition of our bodies. Throughout her work, the body is everywhere. Air is vaporous, light is thick like paste: both have substance and body. And in its various textures, paint itself appeals to our sense of bodily touch, even our stomachs, as it mixes uneasily, sometimes queasily, like off-milk in too-hot tea. In her paintings, one senses pressure ambivalently, suspended uneasily between the sense of pain – like a 'tumour pressing on a nerve', as Boyd has said – and the sensuality of a caress.⁶ Rooms present themselves less with walls and ceilings (sometimes articulated in faint, woozily painted lines) as by accretions of intimate and close atmospheres as if we perceive the space around us with all the confused, hot proximity of being half awake or in a fever. Even when we see an architectural plan – that symbol of clarity cleansed of any actual body – its walls are wrenched into the shape of a heart outlined in blood-red while one of its 'doors' is penetrated by a slither of yellowing green paint like an ageing tulip leaf.

In Boyd's paintings here are rooms painted for those who know the work of maintaining them and the bodies that move through them. We cannot settle into these spaces with that satisfied ease that comes from a clear sense of knowing one's place in the world. No, we come to them with the awkwardness of not quite knowing how to move. Like bad actors, we stand before them self-conscious about our hands. We range their interiors sluggishly, with all the stupor of being ill or in a dream, where proper names for things and a secure sense of place dissolve. There is a persistent sense of being unsettled, not at ease, of being 'dis-eased', underscored by the obscure acts of medical work or bodies in beds that sometimes appear in her paintings as well as the giddy feeling of not having a grasp on those things that should ordinarily orient us through habit and intuition – walls, ceilings, openings, furnishings. Instead, the ceilings are perforated, walls seem to be veined like flesh. The lines that start to mark out clear, perspectival space only morph into cloud-like folds, not points; vaporous, diffuse, everywhere and nowhere in particular. And if a sense of the body is everywhere in these paintings, our own

1. Virginia Woolf, 'On Being Ill' in *The New Criterion: A Quarterly Review*, Vol. IV., No. I. January, 1926, p.33.

2. Woolf, p. 33.

3. Woolf, p. 33.

4. Woolf, p. 41.

5. Woolf, p. 41.

6. Email correspondence with author.

body seems to freight our looking. We perceive as if through our eyelids, aware of platelets of blood, spots of light.

‘The belly overspreads everything’, the philosopher and essayist Walter Benjamin wrote of the Louis Philippe style of interiors.⁷ And there is in Boyd’s work and her bodily, interior worlds, something curiously reminiscent of 19th-century rooms (we feel the presence of painter Édouard Vuillard (1868-1940) in her work) with their frenzy of draperies, objects, furniture and materials. Those interiors were like shells conceived as ‘a receptacle for the person’, as Benjamin would describe them, encasing their occupants and all their ‘appurtenances’ ‘so deeply in the dwelling’s interior that one might be reminded of the inside of a compass case, where the instrument with all its accessories lies embedded in deep, usually violet folds of velvet.’⁸ Woolf would likewise describe the home as a ‘shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves’ and her own high-Victorian childhood house as ‘tangled and matted with emotion.’⁹ These were rooms made up of seemingly endless folds of one sort or another, whether in the draperies, coverlets and scrolled armchairs that filled them or in the way the body seemed to unfold itself onto its surroundings in traces and imprints.

Boyd’s room-like spaces have the sense of being similarly dwelt in. Body and interior are folded into one another, as if each were flayed and turned inside out. Everything leaves a mark, a trail, a trace. Walls become like skin or bodily tissue, bruisable and supple. Surfaces are not simply things to touch, but things that touch in turn. Spaces press and are pressed. In this textural world, to touch is also to feel, to be ‘touched’ in the double sense of the word, to be moved. The tenor is emotional. And emotions are here a kind of atmosphere, not privately ‘possessed’ but filling the air at the junctures of touch

and in the spaces of proximity between figures, things and places. The philosopher Hermann Schmitz would undoubtedly see in these paintings how emotions are never purely subjective, but seem to come *to us* from outside as we are affectively shaped by the world and others around us (for example, we are ‘gripped with fear’, ‘struck with grief’).¹⁰ As any restaurant owner knows, our moods can shift by simply dimming the lights. It is this sense of subjectivity and feeling as palpable and yet also beyond and outside of us that Boyd paints, just as the figures are not unitary and distinct but appear as emergent and interdependent with the spaces around them. As Schmitz argued, the very notion of ‘me’ cannot be reduced to a pronoun I securely possess, but ‘is to be understood [...] as an adverb (like ‘here’ and ‘now’), which does not nominate an object but characterises a milieu – just as with the word ‘here’ we do not refer to an object (‘the here’) but to what is here, in the milieu of maximum proximity.’¹¹

Boyd paints these spaces of ‘maximum proximity’ where subject, object, here and there are not precise, static coordinates but come into being at the moment of their interrelation. We do not see a clear, clean world of open plans, smooth surfaces and plate-glass. We are not ushered into the ‘hygienic space’ that poet Lisa Robertson sees in the ‘moneyed interiors’ of Eugene Atget’s photographs of the homes of the wealthy bourgeoisie in 19th-century Paris.¹² Such spaces demand the erasure of touch. But like the workers’ rooms that Atget also photographed, Boyd’s spaces are full of the ‘pleatings of potential bodies’ and their ‘errant physicality’.¹³ Her paintings evoke space that is like the sensation of damp and creased sheets or textured velour

7. Walter Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, translated by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 2002), p.225.

8. Benjamin, p. 856.

9. Virginia Woolf, ‘Street Haunting: A London Adventure’, in Rachel Bowlby (ed.), *The Crowded Dance of Modern Life, Selected Essays*, Vol. 2, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1927] 1993), p.71. Second quote from Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being, A Collection of Autobiographical Writing*, ed. Jeanne Schulkind, (Florida: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Inc., 1985), p.183.

10. See Matthias Wirth, ‘Feelings as things: Hermann Schmitz’s phenomenology and the ‘realness’ of medical humanities’ lecture delivered at Kings College London available <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4O7QY3BVWYQ> last accessed Friday 8 March 2024.

11. Hermann Schmitz, cited in Tonino Griffero, *Atmospheres: Aesthetics of Emotional Spaces*, (Taylor & Francis, 2016). Available at: <https://www.perlego.com/book/1633252/atmospheres-aesthetics-of-emotional-spaces-pdf> (Accessed: 8 March 2024).

12. Lisa Robertson, ‘Atget’s Interiors’, in *CCS Readers: Perspectives on Art and Culture, Interiors*, ed. Johanna Burton, Lynne Cooke, and Josiah McElheny (Center for Curatorial Studies, Bard College and Sternberg Press, 2012), p.40.

13. Robertson, p. 40.

marked by touch and spittle or the gauzy and veined delicacy of a pressed petal kept for safekeeping – space that is touched, dragged, caressed, mixed and worked upon, like paint itself.

‘All day, all night, the body intervenes,’ Woolf writes, ‘it blunts or sharpens colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. The creature within can only gaze through the pane – smudged or rosy.’¹⁴ In Boyd’s paintings the body surges up, showing us how we can only see through and with our bodies, our bellies and skin regardless of whether we are ‘well’ or ‘unwell’ – that very binary being a simplistic reduction of life experience. We do get sick and we will be exhausted and in pain; efforts to romanticise the brute reality of this experience can be as damaging as the ideologies that insist we can be forever healthy. But as Woolf reminds us, we can never be a ‘sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear’.¹⁵ And as Boyd’s paintings show in their painterly language of touch and atmosphere, truly being present in the world in all its intensity and strangeness, its awkwardness and grace requires that we attend to our fractured and messy body-minds and do away with the idea that we can feel and think without them. Certainly, we will perceive the world smudged, scattered, warped and refracted, and how much richer is the experience for it.

Yates Norton is a curator at the Roberts Institute of Art. He also works closely with his companion David Ruebain on disability justice work, and together they have presented at arts and educational settings, including at the ICA and the Serpentine, London. Collaborations and work with artists include singing in Lina Lapelytė, Vaiva Grainytė and Rugilė Barzdžiukaitė’s Golden Lion-awarded opera, Sun and Sea (2019–) and he regularly writes on artist’s practices for a range of publications.

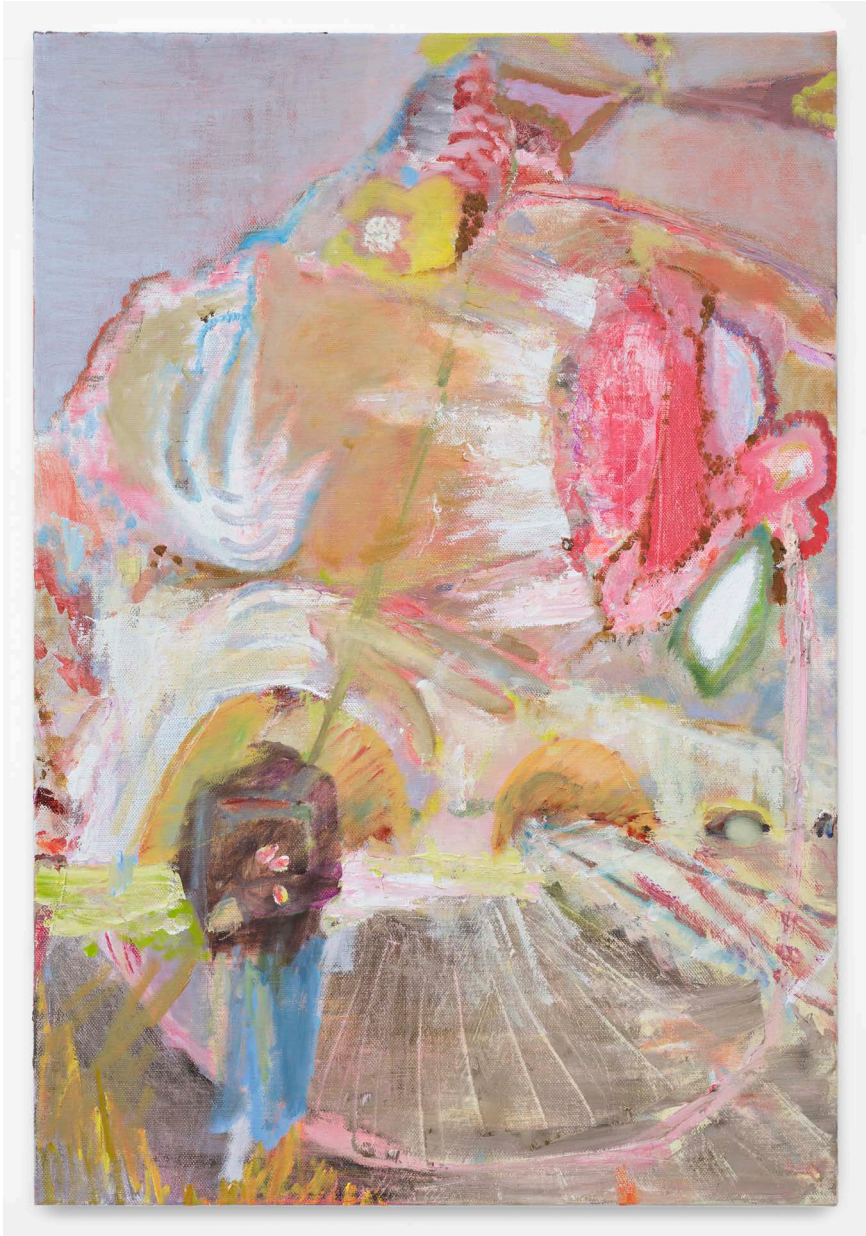
14. Woolf, ‘On Being Ill,’ p. 33.

15. Woolf, p. 32.



Retina (v), 2024





Speaker, 2024







Two, 2024



Telogen, 2022-24



List of works

1. **Loot**, 2023
Oil on linen
40 x 50 cm
2. **Lightning**, 2024
Oil on linen
70 x 130 cm
3. **Chine**, 2024
Oil on linen
90 x 50 cm
4. **Brace (ii)**, 2022-2024
Oil on canvas
35 x 40 cm
5. **Retina (v)**, 2024
Oil on linen
210 x 125 cm
6. **Two**, 2024
Oil on linen
40 x 50 cm
7. **Speaker**, 2024
Oil on linen
80 x 55 cm
8. **Carrriage**, 2023
Oil on linen
40 x 50 cm
9. **Presser**, 2024
Oil on linen,
80 x 50 cm
10. **Strangers (ii)**, 2024
Oil on linen
40 x 50 cm
11. **Telogen**, 2022-2024
Oil on linen
220 x 150 cm
12. **Sow (iii)**, 2024
Oil on linen
80 x 115 cm
13. **Pillars**, 2022
Oil on linen
40 x 50 cm
14. **Heart**, 2023
Oil on linen
60 x 40 cm
15. **Drawing in reverse**, 2022
Pastel and pencil and watercolour
49 x 39 cm
16. **Rider drawing**, 2023
Pencil and watercolour
38 x 29 cm
17. **Exit drawing**, 2024
Gouache, watercolour and pencil
46.5 x 65 cm
18. **Tracking drawing**, 2024
Watercolour and pencil
67 x 94.5 cm
19. **Loveroom drawing**, 2021
Watercolour, pencil and gouache
49 x 39 cm

Dimensions are given H x W



Gabriella Boyd (b. 1988, Glasgow, UK) lives and works in London. She studied at Glasgow School of Art and Royal Academy Schools, London. Gabriella was shortlisted for the John Moores Painting Prize in 2016, and was commissioned by the Folio Society to illustrate a new edition of Sigmund Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 2015. Her work is held in the permanent collection of the AkzoNobel Art Foundation, Amsterdam; Arts Council Collection, London; Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio; de Young Museum, San Francisco; He Art Museum, Guangdong, China; Long Museum, Shanghai; The Rachofsky Collection, Dallas, Texas; David and Indrè Roberts Collection (UK), London; Royal Academy of Arts, London and Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Landing* at GRIMM, London (2023); *Mile* at GRIMM, New York, NY (2022); *Signal* at Friends Indeed, San Francisco (2022); *For Days* at Seventeen Gallery, London (2020); and *Help Yourself* at Blain Southern, London (2018). Recent group exhibitions include *Dispatches*, sans titre gallery, Paris (2024); *The Descendants* at K11 Musea, Hong Kong (2023); *PRESENT '23* at Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH (2023); *Cursed Union* at Micki Meng, San Francisco (2023); *The Kingfisher's Wing*, curated by Tom Morton, GRIMM, New York, NY (2022); *Mixing It Up: Painting Today* at Hayward Gallery, London (2021); *Fifteen Painters* at Andrew Kreps, New York, NY (2021); *Reconfigured* at Timothy Taylor, London (2021); *Fragmented Bodies* at Albertz Benda, New York, NY (2020); *The Garden* at Royal Academy, London (2019); *Silent Tourist* at Mackintosh Lane, London (2019); *The London Open* at Whitechapel Gallery, London (2018), and *Dreamers Awake* at White Cube Bermondsey, London (2017).



Chine, 2024

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