

INTERFACE

Visual art exhibitions and events with a platform for critical writing

Lara Viana

Phoenix Gallery, Exeter
12 June - 19 July

Reviewed by: [Gabrielle Hoad](#)

No frames, no titles, no labels: Lara Viana's little paintings cling to the pristine gallery walls like lonely fragments salvaged from some larger narrative. They have the dreamy quality of something not quite formed, not quite remembered right.

Rendered in soft hues reminiscent of faded photographs, these pieces have a melancholy aura. There's a man playing with a dog, a cluster of figures, a trio holding wriggling babies - largely domestic scenes that could be drawn from almost any family album. Whether these are Viana's own memories or appropriated ones, it's never clear.

Her images seem to be either dissolving into or emerging from the paint. Most are identifiably paintings of something - ornaments, a mirror, a bed - but a handful resist interpretation as anything figurative. In one still life of a laden table, I can make out candles, a tablecloth and various dishes, but they seem veiled in something glutinous. Is it the fuzziness of memory obscuring the details? A need to skip over troubling content? Or a painter's struggle to pin down the slippery world in paint?

The paintings seem paused as much as finished. This sense of incompleteness is both poignant and disturbing, evoking interrupted thoughts and half-forgotten events. Many pieces teeter between precision and mush, abandoned at a critical point in their making where the paint is still fluid with possibilities yet only a few brush strokes away from incoherence. In some, there's a sketchy openness that's full of optimism. Yet in others, the face of a child has already morphed into something monstrously deformed or the carefully arranged table has collapsed into a roiling sea of gloom. For me, there's a link with Auerbach's queasy intensity: looking so hard at the world it almost melts under your gaze.

Occasionally a subject will be revisited, but these images are never hung side by side and are therefore difficult to compare. You must move back and forth, trying to hold them in your head. As I do this, my focus is disturbed by noise from the nearby bar. Initially I'm irritated by the limitations of the Phoenix Gallery space (parts of which must double as reception and corridor); eventually I accept it as a fitting intrusion which the work seems capable of absorbing within its meaning. Distraction, interference, the fragmentation of recalled experience - these all seem important here too.

Looking at this collection of paintings, I switch between the comfort of familiarity and a genuine uneasiness. Their soft, smeary textures are beautiful and, in one sense, nostalgic: you can write your own past over them. On the other hand, Viana sometimes makes me feel that her subject matter is too traumatic to spend much time contemplating, that her painted records - though tentative and oblique - are quite enough for anyone to bear.

Lara Viana's work can also be seen in 'East End Academy: The Painting Edition', Whitechapel Gallery, London until 20 September 2009.



Lara Viana, 'Three', 2008.
Photo: Andy Keate. Courtesy:
the artist and domobaal

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