
Diana Copperwhite

Words: Skye Sherwin

A crowd scene. The mood is urgent. Figures blur, faces dissolve. Amid the throng you see two people that you think you know. The woman's white pillbox hat, her partner's straight black tie, the black lines of 'Buddy Holly' style spectacle frames: it could be the Kennedy's, but the image refuses to completely resolve itself into that decisive moment of recognition. A figure turns a pair of binoculars upwards. Another points to the sky behind: its blue confused by energetic streaks of fleshy, fiery pink. Two circles dominate this backdrop: one filled with a burnt orange and a crescent of green, muted like the colours of memory, of the past, the other no more than a hollow, linear echo of its brother. Though recalling any number of photographs documenting the 1960s golden couple, in Diana Copperwhite's *Inner Space of and Outer Thought* (2008) they are located in a domain particular to contemporary artists: faced with a history full of holes, the vagaries of interpretation, and the question of what to represent in a world overrun with images.

Copperwhite's choice of source material is a combination of chance discovery and intent. Like many artists of her generation, she collects images from the multitude of visual media that surrounds us – from Internet sites such as Flickr, the annals of art history, magazines that are often from countries whose language is alien to her thus allowing a freer interpretation of their pictures, and from personal sources, using objects loaned from friends and family for example. But what Copperwhite aims for is never a straightforward assemblage of meaning from chaos. There are readily identifiable figures like The Kennedys, or art historical types such as the figure in the foreground of the 'big country' landscape in *Argentina* (2007) who recalls the little girl from Valazquez's *Las Meninas* (1656). They rub shoulders with the lesser-known denizens of pop culture and art-history, placed in unexpected environments affecting a dual pull of estrangement and resonance.

As with all of Copperwhite's output, *Inner Space of and Outer Thought* impresses one with the feeling of half-remembered dreams, evoking what exists beyond the visual: the processes of memory, a sense of loss, and the history embedded in objects. Typically, forms are blurred, perspective confused, and imagery is overlain or doubled, as she applies and reapplies paint so that nothing is ever fully erased, though an idea, a discovery or a decision might be painted over, as new possibilities suggest themselves. When it comes to a discussion of how what we see accrues meaning, JFK is certainly one of the twentieth century's more loaded figures. As such, the colliding orbs in the painting's background could be an omen portending disaster, or perhaps more aptly, a memento mori.

These double circles materialise throughout a number of the artist's recent works, their inclusion punctuating her painterly landscape, often rendered fuzzily indistinct, with simple geometric forms. In *Inner Space of and Outer Thought*, the circles pose as a natural part of the environment. Elsewhere they appear as rings, hollow and large enough for her figures to step into like portals between two worlds, abstraction and figuration perhaps or reality and imagination. This seems to be the case with the watercolour *Ocular Innocence* (2008) where a young girl is framed by one half of another pair of circles; its twin appears as either a black hole or solar eclipse that she watches through a window. Playing with space – interior and exterior, psychological and physical -- the delicate outlines of what look like clouds, or hollow Rorschach-like blotches, drift inside the panelled room: the girl's head is quite literally in the clouds.

In *Rodchenko Blue* (2008), a colour wheel (the red, yellow, and blue of Rodchenko's 1921 monochrome canvasses) is set inside a white ring, positioned against a black background, realised with a thick impasto and expressive rough-hewn edges that undercut its formal similarity with geometric abstraction. The painting teases us with the suggestion of representation. Indeed, Copperwhite has compared her circles to the mirror images of the earth and the moon, where something as complex as the earth appears as a simple tiny disc, when viewed from the vantage point of outerspace. The

stark palette, in contrast to her usual preference for subdued colours suggestive of memory's foggier shades, stands for a similar moment of recognition or clarity. But *Rodchenko Blue* says something further about different kinds of seeing, moving on from meditations on our subjective view of history, it alludes to how what we see is physically dictated by the bounds of our planet: the circles chart the journey of light as it leaves the earth's atmosphere and changes from colour to white and then to black.

Aside from the painting's titular dedication and its use of geometry, it's further obvious reference to Constructivism is in its echo of Kasimir Malevich's first total abstraction, *Black Square* (1915), a painting with iconic status. Yet just as Copperwhite looks to the past, Malevich himself was of course part of a cultural movement fixated on the future. Here art's capacity for innovation is poetically acknowledged by Copperwhite in her play with cosmic references -- specifically the black holes that continuously punctuate her paintings and which are reminiscent of Black Square. Might Malevich have even been exercising a prophetic vision, the genesis of which as a backdrop for the opera *Victory Over The Sun* (1913) presaged Karl Schwarzschild's theoretical positing of another kind of degree zero, the black hole, by two years?

A painting is not an answer. Indeed the dominant attitude in Copperwhite's work might be best described as one of productive doubt. In a watercolour that is markedly streamlined when compared with the abundance of more boldly coloured action in *Inner Space of and Outer Thought*, the surreally evocative *Monkeys and Ghosts* (2008), presents a world where space and time have been destabilised and uncertainty is the keynote. Depictions of three monumental porticos recede dramatically into the picture plane, with a tugboat approaching in the distance between the strong vertical columns. In the foreground a group of seemingly unrelated figures wait on a blue-tinted ice floe. Clouds laced with ochre confuse the eye, floating across the surface of the picture plane and at the same time belonging to the skyscape behind what is depicted, making solid forms appear transparent.

Realised in expressive strokes evoking the whirr of action, sound, and indecision, these images seem to constantly teeter between the brink of collapse and an act of becoming, a phenomenon that pushes figuration towards abstraction in the watercolour *Replay* (2008). Chasing what is beyond the usual confines of a static image – the realm of sound and movement - her works often include audiovisual equipment: a radio keeping a single figure company as he nurses a coffee in *Radiowaves* (2007); an old fashioned record player, perhaps spinning a nostalgic album, occupies a bare room with a similarly lonely body in *A Little Light Music No. 2* (2007).

In *Six Degrees of Separation* (2008) people are absent: a collection of televisions are positioned against a blank background, as if in conversation with one another, their different dialects evidenced by their individual rainbow colours: one screen is green, another mauve, another stripes of blue. The source material for this image is a broken TV set that formerly belonged to the artist's mother. Represented by Copperwhite in a kind of television limbo, this broken technology now devoid of its original purpose is given new meaning as a compositional unit in a painting that hovers between source material and the artist's invention in a zone of fantasy and alternative possibilities.