ESSAY

SOME NOTES ON ANNE WALLACE'S 'STRANGE WAYS'

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Anne Wallace was just 21 years old when she painted *Sour the Boiling Honey* (1991), a formative example of the artist's oeuvre. Across three large panels, Wallace presents a stylised tableau of adolescent boys and girls at play by the sea. The androgynous central figure is the artist herself, seated on a grand chair, fully dressed and nursing an open book. She is detached from the other figures and her surroundings, staring intently, averting her gaze from the viewer. The sense of dislocation is amplified by the classical poses of the other figures, their retro beachwear and the painting's subdued tonal palette.

Rarely seen since it was originally exhibited, *Sour the Boiling Honey* is an unexpected highlight of 'Strange Ways', a survey organised by the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Art Museum in Brisbane that marks three decades of Wallace's compelling and unnerving practice. Wallace is remarkable for her singular commitment to figurative painting, but the images she makes are far from conventional. Despite their polite appearance and frequent references to cinema, literature and music, her paintings actively resist a narrative reading. Using considerable technical skill, Wallace lures viewers into seductive portraits of alienation, ennui and trauma, only to withhold the information required to fully apprehend or interpret each image:

> What I like about representational painting is the fact that an image can be trapped forever and, if there is a sufficient lack of information, it will never go back or forward or yield up its story.[1]

'Strange Ways' provides a unique opportunity to consider Wallace's early works such as *Sour the Boiling Honey,* concerned with adolescent experience, alongside better-known later paintings. These typically focus on a single female figure, closely framed or looking away from the viewer, set inside airless interiors characterised by their unusual treatment of perspective and lack of extraneous detail. Wallace's post-graduate research at the Slade School of Fine Art in London during the mid-1990s allowed her to study the canon of western art history in the flesh, and exposed her to the softer northern light. Both of these experiences informed her refinement of painting style and tonal variation.

In *Damage* (1996), the viewer's attention is immediately drawn to trails of blood running done the back of a disembodied pair of female legs. It is a disconcerting image, however the composition does not provide any additional clues to the cause of the bleeding or a broader sequence of events. Whatever horrible thing may have just occurred, the viewer is deliberately shut out. As Gillian Brown notes in her insightful catalogue essay:

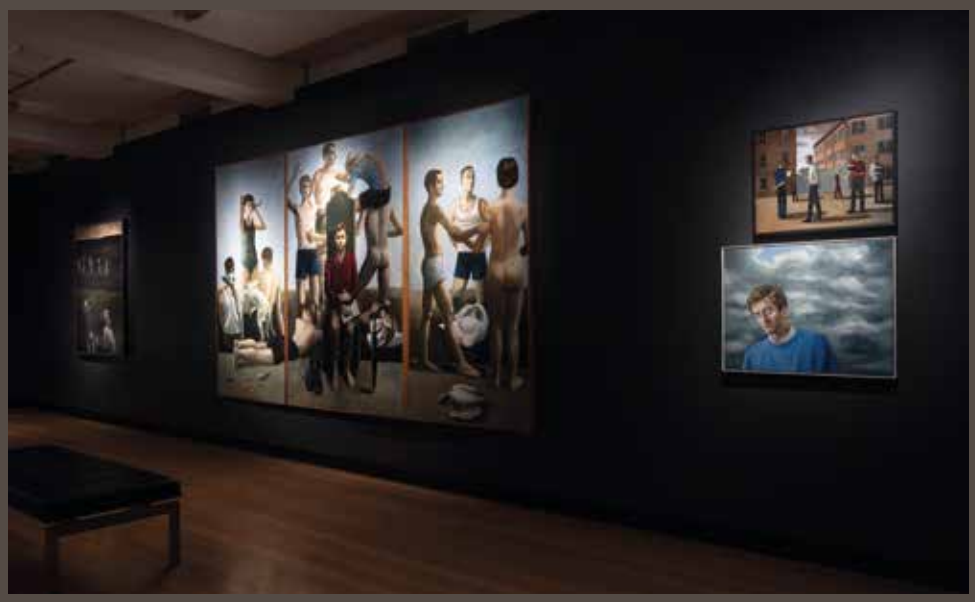
> Wallace doesn't freeze-frame; hers are not images caught panning to disclose more detail. Rather, they reveal a fixed gaze.[2]

Despite their obvious relationship to photography – Wallace's master's research addressed the work of Jeff Wall and Gerhard Richter – her paintings are not still images pulled from a larger narrative, real or imagined. Wallace is the author of these images; we only see what she wants us to see.

By the time Wallace paints *She Is* in 2001, her female protagonist projects a stronger sense of agency than in previous works. Exhibition curator Vanessa Van Ooyen reflects on the painting as part of her catalogue introduction:

Anne Wallace, *She Is*, 2001, oil on canvas, 164 x 197cm; National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, purchased 2002; image courtesy the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney

Anne Wallace: Strange Ways, exhibition installation view, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, 2019; image courtesy QUT Art Museum, Brisbane; photo: Carl Warner



> [W]hat better way is there to capture the broader cultural changes of our era than with a figure of a woman asserting her identity, beginning to scrawl 'I...' in lipstick on a mirror?[3]

Wallace's female subjects have never been passive; as even a cursory glance at the 80-plus works assembled for 'Strange Ways' illustrates, they have performed a catalytic role in her paintings for nearly 30 years. Yet, while the woman in *She Is* is assertive, confident even, her motivation for writing on the mirror remains unclear. Is it her 'black swan' moment, or something more innocuous? This ambiguity is a defining aspect of Wallace's figures and the images they inhabit.

Van Ooyen has sensibly avoided a chronological or didactic curation, opting instead for thoughtful juxtapositions that emphasise the consistent trajectory of Wallace's practice, eliciting gradual developments in style and content.

Over the past two decades, Wallace has zoomed out from the tightly cropped scenes of earlier paintings, with the previously dominant figures becoming gradually subordinate to the overall composition.

Boo Radley (2018) is one of several works in 'Strange Ways' that address motherhood. Titled after the *To Kill a Mockingbird* character, the painting depicts a humid garden scene set against a dilapidated house. Underneath an agave plant are two miniature figures, a boy and a girl, referencing both the children in Harper Lee's 1960 literary classic, as well as the artist's own son and daughter. In this work, Wallace has made the figures so small that the viewer has to seek them out, hidden (or protected?) beneath the foliage.

The garden has become an increasingly significant motif in Wallace's oeuvre, replacing the once-dominant interiors. One of her most recent paintings, *Pleasure Garden* (2019) is a fitting bookend to the exhibition and counterpoint to *Sour the Boiling Honey*. Returning to the large-scale format of earlier works, *Pleasure Garden* depicts a group of androgynous youths, languidly sunbathing in a fertile Garden of Eden. Compared to *Sour the Boiling Honey*, the semi-naked young men and women are here far more relaxed and naturally posed. The figures are viewed from behind trees in a voyeuristic way. It is unclear whether the subjects are aware they are being watched, although a topless girl stares directly at the viewer through vintage-style sunglasses. Conceivably a meditation on youth and desire, *Pleasure Garden*, like all of Wallace's work, resists efforts to elicit narrative information.

This inscrutable quality is what gives Wallace's images their quiet power and keeps viewers returning to the work after three decades. Her paintings are perfectly formed fictions that engage the viewer through their elegant but elusive surfaces, deliberately withholding the darker secrets that may (or may not) lie beneath.

1. Anne Wallace, 'Some notes on figurative painting', *Anne Wallace*, Arts Queensland, Brisbane, 1999, p. 53.
2. Gillian Brown, 'Perspective', *Anne Wallace: Strange Ways*, exhibition catalogue, QUT Art Museum, Brisbane, 2019, p. 23.
3. Vanessa Van Ooyen, 'Preface', *Anne Wallace: Strange Ways*, op. cit., p. 8.

Curated by Vanessa Van Ooyen, 'Anne Wallace: Strange Ways' was first presented at QUT Art Museum (9 November 2019 – 23 February 2020) before planned visits to the Art Gallery of Ballarat (until 20 September 2020) and Adelaide's Samstag Museum of Art.

Anne Wallace, *Boo Radley*, 2018, gouache and watercolour on paper mounted on canvas, 142 x 130cm; image courtesy the artist and Darren Knight Gallery, Sydney