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Roxy Walsh  
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SPEAK TO YOU LATER

Speak to you later

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29 November - 24 December

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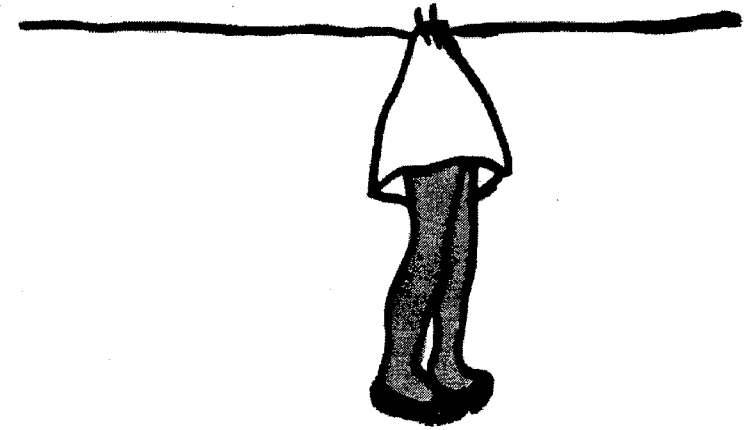
Possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility,  
yet very hard to grasp

Mark Harris

The paintings are like screens across which move close-ups of some intimate activity. Part storyboard or calendrical blur, the frames bleed into each other like a permeable web of surfacing memories. Some days seem rather quiet, almost erased, with others rich with unambiguous sexual excitements or less easily attributable pleasures. In a series of paintings, parts of bodies or organs are lit up against dark backgrounds as if in the headlights of a car. In one of these, flaccid legs drawn with a cartoon contour indicating instantaneity rather than presence, jut into view. Such disembodied legs are common enough in Walsh's work and at times seem to depict the artist herself slipping out of her own painting at the last possible moment. As an autobiographical motif they recall her paintings of Daphne (R.S.V.P. 1994), always shown with her legs intact as she turns into a tree. These might be the legs of someone sufficiently metamorphosed to be able to drift through the world unnoticed, as the iconic figures that move placidly through early Renaissance landscapes, like the Lorenzetti frescoes she has recently quoted.

During the past few years Roxy Walsh has developed an extensive pictorial language, making her paintings open to unpredictably diverse images. This gives her work its continuous invention where there is no methodology that can't be altered in the next piece and no motifs that can't be juxtaposed. Recently she has been filling paintings with words that are partial thoughts or fragments of radio talk. As these overlap and surround each other in loud script the meanings crash to release strange vocalisations. The innuendo of 'lick licky/sucks' is obvious enough, but when it's surrounded or overlaid by phrases like 'maybe that's a better idea', and 'how can I speak/I was wanting', a more intricate erotic announcement emerges.

Is there any point in considering whether this work, so small with its crammed incident and unafraid



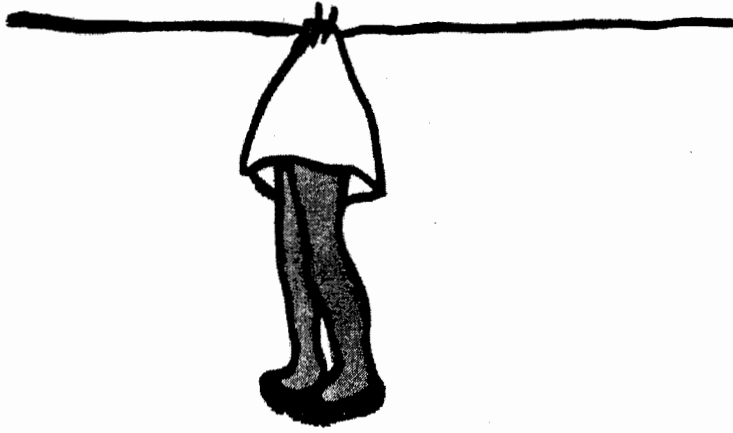
use of colour, is a feminine painting? If we can establish this does it provide us any new information, something that might help us get a better grip on the work and its meanings? Determining this feminine quality could be very useful if, allowing more than just an assertion of sexual identity, it could provide us with an idea of how the imagery functions, an understanding of why it might be painted that way. In other words, how it springs back to face a world that imposes great constraints on the way experience is represented.

Some of the implications of this kind of inquiry are shown by Luce Irigaray, best known for her critical writing on Plato and Freud as she dismantles the ideas with which they constructed an origin and development of women merely as agents of men's needs. She has built on this critique to explain a way that an authentic feminine imagination might function, one that isn't only a mimicry of the masculine model. Her emphasis on defining sexual difference over the means to equality extends from her analysis of the commodification of women which she is convinced remains unchanged in the struggle to obtain what men possess. To establish economic and social parity is only to become the same as what oppresses women and to remain subject to the same coercive ideologies. Instead, Irigaray says, women must find the area and means for their own experience to flourish which requires the disruption of all prevailing values, whether political or sexual: "[Women must] call into question all existing theory, all thought, all language, inasmuch as these are monopolised by men and men alone."<sup>1</sup> And what kind of area is a feminine that has not been occluded by male discourse? Irigaray refers to the prevalent, public feminine as a masquerade imposed on women for male benefit and insists that an autonomous feminine syntax would have to be concerned with recovering control over states of intimacy and desire, meaning control also over the language used to define these states, long betrayed

by Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis. In one of the closest descriptions of such a syntax, Irigaray writes of a language that is contradictory, veering off in many simultaneous directions and inaudible to anyone listening from the old rigid standpoints. As if turning to her advantage Plato's account of female matter "... as invisible and formless, all-embracing, possessed in a most puzzling way of intelligibility, yet very hard to grasp."<sup>2</sup> Irigaray writes of the workings of women's language, "She steps ever so slightly aside from herself with a murmur, an exclamation, a whisper, a sentence left unfinished ... When she returns, it is to set off again from elsewhere. From another point of pleasure, or of pain. One would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an 'other meaning' always in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them. For if 'she' says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means ... It touches (upon). And when it strays too far from that proximity, she breaks off and starts over at 'zero': her body-sex."<sup>3</sup>

For this form of critique to be relevant in practices other than philosophy and psychoanalysis, does it have to take along with it those ideologies it has been fighting? Does the Plato/Freud/Lacan axis have to be the one that women artists define themselves against in order to escape its classification? Or is there some equivalent in visual language and theory that has ensured a discourse fixed by men for men? There certainly have been transcendent standards persistently used to measure the value of art. Even if the appearance, the style, of artwork changes, the endurance of certain judgements of quality is telling. The idea that art should at some point be one or more of the following— true, beautiful, authentic, harmonious, resolved, whole, subjective, radical— until recently hasn't really changed much. We think the distinction of a Pollock or De Kooning painting is self-evident yet the underlying





premises for its production may not be fundamentally different from those Poussin or Delacroix depended on. The implication of Irigaray's remarks is just this: that as the appearance of work modifies historically, and in the process alters the limits of what we consider as authentic, beautiful etc., these categories for determining value in a work are neither overcome nor utterly transformed. The result is that while a certain broadening of possibilities occurs, the membership only opens up to those subscribing to the prevailing economy of ideas, in this case a long lineage of male ideologies. Thought of in this context, Walsh's title from a year ago, "Wish you were beautiful", rather than being a wistful thought about herself or a close friend, suggests the ironic admission that her small paintings don't fit into any historically determined categories of the beautiful.

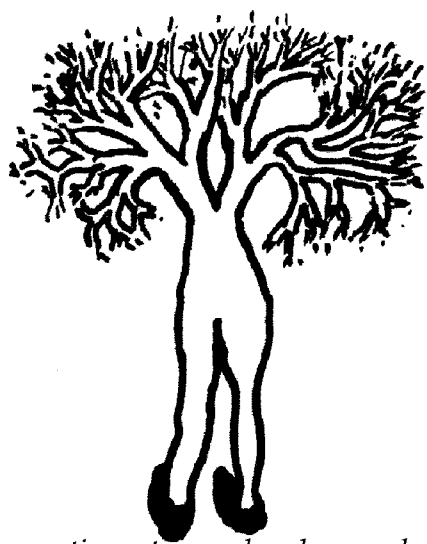
Alternatives to this canonical determinacy of contemporary art have always been around, and the importance of Duchamp is to have shown a way, very early on, that the grip of these underlying ideas might be loosened. More recently, artists like Eva Hesse, Richard Tuttle, and Kusama Yayoi have altered abstraction into something capable of giving unpredictable body to fragility and intimacy, articulating desires in a manner completely beyond the reach of dominant visual languages. It's in this kind of position that Walsh's work can be situated as it uses idiosyncratic representation to catch the edge of barely tangible experiences.

Where many artists are using the body in everyday life as material, there is a drive to make experience naked by using video or photography to compress intimacy into display. Walsh's small paintings retain a problematic for intimacy, the affection of the personal, the hesitancy of it, as if the confidence of an erotic self were embedded within a vulnerable state. The images are often private particulars preserved in the security of an intimacy that would be hopelessly vulnerable in public. Here a penis

is in metamorphosis, depicted as the funnel of a boat or embellished with unidentifiable delicate growths as if it retained a visual record of the bodies it has taken pleasure in. This is less out there, less brazenly confident than the sexual referencing of many other young artists. As a depiction of interaction, sexual or otherwise, as including a wild array of thoughts underlying the primary experience, it reveals the impulses and inappropriate memories that wilfully annotate our most ecstatic moments.

In an earlier group of paintings Walsh was absorbed by the narrative of Daphne. In Ovid's verse Daphne escapes not just from Apollo but from the logic of Greek reproductive demands which esteemed women as child-bearers, ranking them low on the scale of love where the supreme example was the homoerotic relationship between an older and younger man. Plato had described reproduction in terms of a receptacle with no character of its own, waiting to receive the male material. It is in the *Timaeus* that the feminine is associated with this receptacle through which all things must pass as they acquire their shape on their way into existence: "We may indeed use the metaphor of birth and compare the receptacle to the mother, the model to the father, and what they produce between them to their offspring..."<sup>4</sup> The older myth of Daphne, of a woman determining her own fate, is displaced by Plato's myth of the woman/receptacle.

Walsh has written of her sympathy for this retelling of a Greek narrative by the Roman Ovid in its depiction of Apollo still in love with the Daphne/tree, recognising her in the movements of the branches, as she pulls back even then from his affections. 'And still Apollo loved her; on the trunk/He placed his hand and felt beneath the bark/Her heart still beating, held in his embrace/Her branches, pressed his kisses on the wood;/Yet from his kisses still the wood recoiled.'<sup>5</sup>



*In these paintings an adolescent Daphne continues to wear her shoes as she becomes the tree, as if this resolve had overtaken a tormented schoolgirl on her way home. The shoes bring this metamorphosis down to earth as if it were a protective measure, a disguise perhaps, that allows women a way to establish, like Daphne, their own terms of sexual engagement.*

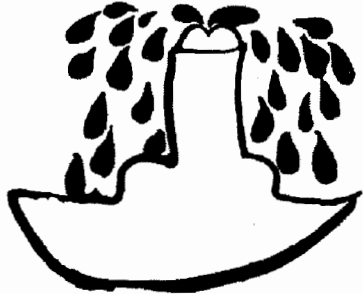
*These images of a feminine independence achieved only through the solitude of drastic metamorphosis, a complete renunciation of supple body for inert material, give way in recent work to an assertiveness face to face with male desire. There is the sense that Ovid's respectful tone yields to the bawdy irreverence of something more like Robert Graves's translation of "The Golden Ass of Apuleius", whose story of Cupid and Psyche has the gods behaving far more irresponsibly than mortals.*

*In terms of total eroticisation there are images of bodies covered in vaginas, of vaginas that float as if chatting to each other. In these paintings penises sometimes appear stunted, a bit trimmed perhaps, and interestingly bi-sexed, as when a desiring tongue sprouts hair and elongates to release drops of fluid, or where the penis seems feminised, encrusted with jewels and tears, as insignia of love. This new work often has loosely flowing patches of colour that will both reaffirm and disrupt the storyboard structure. Some of these frames will be empty, just visited by washes of colour, while others are packed with incident. With no dependable hierarchy, this informal structure, replete with written messages, with genitals, with schematic portraits and body parts, broadcasts a feeling of sensual ease.*

*Where few have time to write letters any longer, Walsh is still a passionate correspondent. The extensive writing and the tear shapes that are often a motif in the newest work refer on one level to her letters. In "Discourses of Desire", a book on epistolary fiction, Linda Kauffman writes about Ovid's Heroides, that 'tears on the page have the status of the kind of evidence one might use in a*

*court trial. Through such signs, the heroine transmits a part of herself, the corporeal, to the textual, implying that the body's message is truer than speech: tears are irrefutable evidence.'*<sup>6</sup> *Walsh's painted tears undergo their own bodily metamorphoses, becoming sperm, urine or feces while keeping their original form and symbolic identity as an expression of intense emotion.*

*Evidently Walsh does open up an area for work that is not circumscribed by the genealogy of ideas Irigaray unmasks. On one level her paintings visualise the means for a woman to find pleasure on her own terms, where instead of accessing pleasure through being a 'prop' to male needs she starts with her own desire and then brings the penis into that economy. Under these conditions obviously enough it appears in fantastic form, as if this is finally one metamorphosis that will be to women's advantage.*



- 1 Irigaray, *Questions*, translated by Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, 1985
- 2 Plato, *Timaeus*, translated by Desmond Lee, Penguin Books, 1977
- 3 Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One*, translated by Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, 1985
- 4 Plato, *Timaeus*
- 5 Ovid, *Metamorphosis*; translated A.D. Melville, Oxford University Press, 1986
- 6 Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire*, Cornell University Press, 1986

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1	When you left I could not stop	w/c on gesso panel
2/3	Blue muff / Madonna	oil on gesso panel
4	Victoria Regina	w/c + oil on gesso panel
5	This thigh was made with my thumb and warm water	w/c on gesso panel
6	I fear I may, I think I thin	w/c on gesso panel
7	Dick dress	w/c on gesso panel
8	Happy cow	w/c on gesso panel
9	Sorry	w/c + oil on gesso panel
10	Douche d'or	w/c on gesso panel
11	The origin of the milky way	w/c on gesso panel
12	Portrait	w/c on gesso panel
13	Buckle + knock	w/c + oil on gesso panel
14	Daphne's old legs	w/c + oil on gesso panel
15	Ho ho ho (spurting penis boat)	w/c on gesso panel
16	3 yellow dicks	w/c on gesso panel
17	Blue boat	oil on gesso panel
18	Lust filled life	w/c + oil on gesso panel
19	Wish you were beautiful (chick)	w/c on gesso panel
20/21	Watch my lips	w/c on gesso panel
22	It must me you	w/c on gesso panel
23	Cover it up (for goodness sake)	w/c on gesso panel
24	Legs + clouds	w/c + oil on gesso panel
25	Balls	w/c on gesso panel
26	Squarer sex	w/c + oil on gesso panel
27	Dangly dutch boys / yellow brick wall	w/c + oil on gesso panel
28	Droplets	w/c on gesso panel
29	Fleer	w/c on gesso panel
30	Will I even find out	w/c on gesso panel
31	Indian prince, pointy hat	w/c + oil on gesso panel
32	Profound / premenstrual	w/c on gesso panel
33	Cunning lingua	w/c on gesso panel
34	Teapot	oil on gesso panel
35	What's in the well, pussy	w/c on gesso panel
36	I myself, I I	w/c on gesso panel
37	Please bear with me	w/c on gesso panel





## **Roxy Walsh**

Born 1964

- 1986 M.A. Fine Art. Manchester Polytechnic  
1985 B.A. (Hons.) Fine Art. Manchester Polytechnic

### *Solo Shows*

- 1997 Castlefield Gallery, Manchester  
Globe Gallery, North Shields  
1996 Wish You Were Beautiful, Annika Sundvik Gallery, New York  
Catalogue with essay by Saul Ostrow. Wild Pansy Press  
1995 R.S.V.P., Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin  
1994 R.S.V.P., Annika Sundvik Gallery, New York  
Catalogue (drawings of Daphne), block printed dance tickets  
1993 Tongues in Trees, Tricycle Gallery, London  
1992 Blush, Cornerhouse, Manchester  
Chesil Gallery, Portland  
Merkmal Gallery, Liverpool  
1990 Kerlin Gallery, Belfast

### *Selected Group Shows*

- 1996 Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool  
1995 Por Amor à Arte Galeria, Porto, Portugal(cat)  
"HA", Knott Mill, Manchester  
Ainscough Gallery, Liverpool  
Pier Show 2, Red Hook, New York  
1994 Guinness Gallery, Dublin  
Whitworth Gallery and Castlefield Gallery, Manchester  
1993 Critics' Choice, New British Art, Christies, London  
1992 Manchester City Art Gallery  
1991 Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool  
1990 Castlefield Gallery, Manchester

### *Residencies / Workshops*

- 1994 Tyrone Guthrie Centre, County Monaghan, Ireland  
1993 Triangle Artists' Workshop, New York  
1991 Shave Farm Artists' Workshop, Somerset  
1987 Residency, Manchester City Art Gallery

### *Collections*

- Manchester City Art Gallery  
Oldham Art Gallery  
Arthur Andersen Collection, London  
Clatterbridge Hospital, Liverpool  
John Moores University, Liverpool

Roxy Walsh is currently a lecturer in Fine Art at Newcastle University





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