

Becoming Somewhere Else

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114 Commonwealth Street, Sydney

In Sarah Drinan's paintings bodies are always in motion. Limbs twist like vines, flesh collides into flesh, torsos melt into abstraction, bottoms abound. The paintings are figurative, but are cast in a glowing haze, as if Vaseline has been smeared on a camera lens. These ephemeral bodies tumble across canvases, living at the tensions of desire and chaos, ecstasy and turmoil.

While painting her largest works yet, with her loosest strokes yet, Drinan had been thinking about how bodies can misbehave. How they can be judged as unruly, even repulsive – and how there is transgressive power in this. Drinan knows that bodies can communicate painful, joyful, resistive things. Bodies can transform. As the exhibition title, *Becoming Somewhere Else*, suggests, personhood is never a done deal.

In paintings such as *Lovers as Thieves* and *Bodies Together*, Drinan mines the ambiguity of intimate relationships. Here, the boundary between self and other is blurred, the individual is overrun, lost in the thralls of love or lust. But intimacy, as the paintings show, is a long dance of push-and-pull movements. Are these haunting struggles or lovers embracing? And what about the idea of love as stealing something? Lacan famously spoke of love as giving something you don't have to someone who doesn't want it – but that the receiver might be the only person alive who truly knows the value of what you've failed to give.

Perhaps Drinan's ultimate moment of intimate ambivalence is *Shameover*. It's a strange, uncanny scene of two figures, one who is either caressing or slapping the other on the back. It might be about comfort or mastery, or the folly of thinking these are mutually exclusive.

Other paintings hold characters like *Púca*, a mischievous changeling shapeshifter that, in Irish mythology, can be either a malevolent destroyer of crops or a guiding force. Drinan grew up learning about Irish folklore, and many of the paintings have a fable-like sense. Stories leak from them, like in *Everyone in me is a Bird*. With the title borrowed from an Anne Sexton poem, 'In Celebration of My Uterus', you can feel the closing in of the painting, its calm chaos. It's as internal as a dream, knowing dreams hold truths suppressed by reality.

THE LONG DANCE

Then there's Drinan's almost renaissance-like paintings, *A Surrender Towards Amber Light* and *A Glow in the Shadows*. The former feels akin to Dante's *Inferno*, moving from hell to heaven in a wash of reds, while the latter is a scene of figures shown from behind in a sombre mood. In their style and subject, they conjure the timelessness of life and death, sin and revelation. When living on the edge of catastrophe - climate change, war, pandemics - the epic magnitude of these paintings feels warranted.

While many of Drinan's bodies seem feminine and can be linked to the female form in art history, Drinan is working through and past this. She isn't painting portraits of people, but rather of moods, sensations, feelings. She often reduces her figures to the bare fact of their bodies, a liberatory way of seeing the body when centuries of Western philosophies and laws have only served to deny it.

Like many painters, Drinan has a bodily connection to her brushstrokes. She knows the history and tactics of her form. She first sketches on canvas, paints acrylic outlines, softens these with an airbrush, and uses oils after that. She chooses pinks, oranges and reds because they're soft, fleshy, meaty, bodily colours.

In speaking about her paintings, Drinan and I talk about her work as an occupational therapist; the overlooked value of emotional labour; the tender impacts of love and separation; and how all kinds of relationships — like any of those in Drinan's paintings — covet the space between reality and fantasy.

By Tiarney Miekus