

Fitri Graham's Diary Entries

27 September 1949 - 16 November 1949

Kate O'Boyle Collection

Transcription:

Tuesday 27 September, 1949.

Lindon called to see the work today. I knew it was more inspection than visit. Assessing the extent of the damage about to be done to the gallery – preparing to minimise casualties.

I had spent the day arranging the works in perfect order. He didn't notice. Walking past each one, he only returned to Melancholia V, peering at its surface as if surveying a layer of dust on a decrepit table's surface. Then it was over.

I'm still cringing from the silence that ensued. It was one of those threatening, accusatory silences. I am sure he did it on purpose – to throw me. I broke it with a loquacious spill of details about Dürer and his Melancholia I I had come across last year. I told him how I had seen it on the cover of a copy of The Myth of Sisyphus. The poorly reproduced etching hypnotised me. At the time, I found myself compulsively peering at the sleeve of the book, distracting me from what became a very wobbled reading of Camus. The woman in the print epitomised the ultimate internal struggle, for me, she was universal in her psychological entanglement. When I referenced Lacan, I saw Lindon shift his weight and sniff. I could hear myself talking and an internal narrative arose parallel to our conversation, providing a sniggering, critical commentary. Stop talking Fitri, it said. Why do you keep talking like that? Look, he is watching you like he would a rabid dog, wondering whether you will bite yourself or him. Please just stop talking Fitri. You are making a mess. Just stop it. Looking back now, I really wish I hadn't started.

I seem to perpetually irritate Lindon. I see his breathing changes when I talk, his body becomes both rigid and writhing. He shifts his shoulders like he has an old tennis injury – it physically pains him to be in my presence. I negate this by becoming girlish and saccharine. Niceties that make me nauseous pass my lips – only confirming his opinion of me. I betray myself with this default persona. I am not this silly, asinine girl.

He stayed for a drink, his discontentment lifting only when Eddie joined us. There is something that comes over their faces when you try and talk to them as they talk to each other. It's something akin to witnessing a perversion. Almost as if I had been sick on their shoe. There is repulsion, pity and irritation; a desperate need to desert all social niceties and run.

I slumped into the chair, its arms held me – both embraced and restrained me. I let myself become a detail. Sometimes when I step out of the match, when I stop playing, there is a feeling of resigned comfort. Everyone feels the room return to its correct orientation, we can all relax, she has given up.

Thursday 29 September, 1949.

The flickers of shapes that have followed me all week finally took their hold today. Closing my eyes against the migraine I felt the release of pressure only when my body became buoyed by the mattress. Clumsily removing my black chemise, I threw it over my head. The agonising chinks of sun from the

poorly covered windows finally blocked. I spent this afternoon with the back of my eyelids alight. A kaleidoscopic sun spun, morphing into shapes and patterns. Shifting blues and pinks. It strikes me how pain translates into such a vibrant palette. The colours moved to the beat of the throbbing that played from somewhere deep between my breasts. It was an abstract, cinematic show. All I could do was push the worry away and make the time pass by notating the hallucinations.

Friday 7 October, 1949.

Jakub's opening was this evening. He arrived perfectly late. I watched him, all faux modesty and gratitude. He guzzled their approval with greed. I can still smell the air, a combination of peppery perfume and the putrid odour of insincerity. They were a polished and slippery set. They loved the work though...or was it him? Or both? I'm never sure whether it's possible to separate the two. I guess all that matters is whether the artist is a liability. I am beginning to know myself as the weak point. Some artists transcend the work, give it authority and remove doubt. Others are like a sour aftertaste that exposes a gourmet dish as rancid

Watching Jakub, I succumbed to that inevitable, seductive trap. There I was, three weeks from now, Jakub's body metamorphosed into mine and I watched myself move in his place. I saw myself being guided through the packed gallery floor, guests drinking me in like a pack of thirsty hounds. I knew where most of their interests lay – bearing exclusive witness to the new. It was all superficial lunacy, but I knew there were a few here, those that really mattered, that actually saw the work for all that it was. They read my subconscious there; a visceral translation of my internal workings. They recognised all the deliberation that lay each surface [*sic*]. They asked my perspective on Ginsberg. They might have compared me to Miro and Masson (to which I, of course, shook my head in appropriate protest). I think I actually felt humbled. Not just in the fantasy but in the witnessing of the imaginary, and in its retelling now.

It's such a set-up – letting your mind roam like that. All that can possibly follow is the frightening realisation that things might not...maybe, somehow, just work out.

Sunday 9 October, 1949.

Dale came for dinner. He never fails to make me feel like a silly girl with a silly ponytail hanging from her thoughtless head.

I can't seem to calm down, I'm filled with unspent rage.

Wednesday 12 October, 1949.

I came home late this afternoon. The studio was cool and the evening light hit the walls, turning them blue and purple. I stayed and painted. I tried to chase the shadows that rested on the last unfinished canvas. The dusk light, pale and featherlike, showed me where to move.

Friday 21 October, 1949.

Eleanor's party this evening was crushing. I begged Eddie to come with me. He displayed his resentment from a distance at the bar, leaving me alone. I was abandoned, standing like startled child [*sic*] being

taught a lesson. I searched for familiar faces and my waves were met with warm smiles, but no gestures to join any of the clusters of guests circling the terrace. The longer I stood there, the most awkward I became – a solitary figure slowly pivoting in desperate appeal for a safe port. I felt bulky and heavy, as if any movement might cause a giant thud. I saw eyes pass over me like a flavourless plate at a buffet. More stimulating offers stood on either side – I became a glitch in a survey of the room.

I found two solitary seats, deciding that looking as if I was waiting for someone was the least painful presentation to make. God, I must have looked the fool. I made a display of looking around in a ‘where could he have gone to?’ manner just frequently enough to allay any suspicion. I sat, burning with self-consciousness, observing the crowd. After several minutes it was easy to spot the magnets in the room. They acted like suns, holding their respective planets in a gravitational orbit. I had been one of the circulating bodies many times, held more by the presence of the other spectators than the speaker themselves. If someone sees value in something it is hard not to second guess your judgement. You give the person time you might not have otherwise spared. One group closest to me circulated around a woman I knew from sight but not by name. Her face and body were animated not only as she spoke, but as she listened. She would often draw in her breath in a way that reminded me of an amazed child. She wasn’t naïve though, she held her audience in a firm, pleasant squeeze. Her skin glowed under the house lights, a strange combination of pink, copper and blue. Hues that remind me of the way light hits the sand at dusk. She instinctively ran her hand down her arm, feeling the body that was under the room’s gaze. I reflexively touched my own arm, in some sort of mutual acknowledgement. I wondered what it might feel like to touch that skin as your own. To live within it.

When my performance was becoming too drawn out to be plausible, I found Eddie, his own charm had captured a small audience at the bar. I had tried to exist without the safety of his presence; defeated, all I wanted to do was retreat to the studio. I was prickling with an unnerving ache. I wanted to paint that woman’s skin, I wanted to have it, touch it, make it. I needed to spill my desire onto a surface, see it reflected up at me.

In the quiet of the studio, I’ve taken out the yellow canvas I had abandoned last month and run an oily rag over its surface. Scumbling into the oily lustre, a haze of skin, like a flesh-coloured sky, is beginning to form on its surface.

Monday 25 October, 1949.

The humming has returned and I can’t switch it off. It’s following me. I feel like I need everything to stop just for a moment so I can catch my breath, and then everything can continue. I am inside myself with some sort of static, rhythmic droning and I feel so wonderfully alone. It acts like a failed sort of lullaby. There is an essence of tranquillity, only there is something faintly warped about it. The temptation to stay in here is painful to resist. I wonder how long I can hide without anyone noticing? I can’t go back or it will all start again; the noise, the longing. I have been here many times before and I know this feeling of protection is a cruel mirage.

Tuesday November 1, 1949.

This morning, I packed my nerves deep into the hollows of my palms, made restraining fists around them and went to Elliot's studio. My worry that his invitation was hyperbolic was immediately dispelled when he drew me in, much to my surprise, as if I had been expected.

The studio was like a surgical room, tools for dissecting and slicing, moving great bodies and inspecting their innards. The ceiling seemed so far above us I felt almost as if we were at the bottom of a disembowelled tower. Stained walls held works from bowed nails. I twisted around and around, trying to find my footing while being projected through the cylindrical chamber.

Elliot either didn't notice my disorientation, or was used to seeing it in his visitors. He didn't guide me through the studio, holding my arm or placing his hand behind my back like I had been accustomed to. He let me move freely, unmolested. Only when I went to unfold a curled piece of paper that had ripped away from its fastening, did he begin to reveal the insides of the densely packed studio to me. Papers were quickly thrown onto the stained floor, canvases unstacked like chairs, objects passed to me to hold like small birds. His manic spill of ideas surprised me a little, but he didn't apologise for his eagerness. I liked that. His heightened voice, his rushing speech was routine, it was acceptable, necessary even.

He sat sprawled on the floor, I took a hesitant seat in an overstuffed, oil-stained chair. We began to talk. Firstly, about his love of New York and his plans to live there next year. He raced through praises of Leger and Diaghilev. He told me I must see a Malevich in person, to be in its presence, he said, was the only way to know it, to hear it. He had a print of Marc's *The Fate of the Animals* tacked to the wall. It was battered, like he'd ripped it out of a book. It was the one work that made his centre quake. The way he explained it taking over his body, the tightness he felt in his throat, made me lose my alignment. I feel vertiginous recalling it now. Facing him in that dizzying room, I so desperately wanted to escape my reserve. But nodded and smiled and stuck to what I had promised myself on the walk over. Just don't Fitri. Don't talk like you do. Please don't get carried away.

Elliot seemed strange, his way of talking seemed to be directed to some third party in the room. He didn't make me feel small, or trivial. I actually found myself wondering if he had seen me as I entered the room – surely things would correct themselves when he had a moment to take me in.

He didn't though, take me in. He just spoke, and then waited for me to ease my way into the exchange. I was hesitant, at first. I saw his copy of *The Sickness Unto Death*, and I told him I'd also read Kierkegaard. He nodded and waited. Then out it all came. I told him how at nineteen I was desperately trapped, facing a life of limited circumstances. Kierkegaard had opened a way of thinking to me that made me feel as if everything that had come before I had seen through a miasma of pretext and deception. I told him how his ideas gave me grounds to live in a way that wasn't predetermined. I explained how terribly worried about the exhibition I was. How I often had moments where I wondered if the work was of any value. What if there was nothing of worth in the paintings and it was all a fabrication on my part? Was I seeing something that nobody else could because it wasn't actually there....I stopped myself in mid-manic monologue. I became shockingly hot. Don't talk about the work Fitri. Just stop it.

He smiled at my wringing hands, said he'd like to see the work. I flinched as if stung. Suddenly everything became real and I realised I had much to lose. I can't have him come. I can't bear to reveal myself to someone who understands. I have shrugged off the others to some extent, out of some form of intellectual snobbery, but Elliot can't be dismissed without knowing I am deluding myself.

I crawled back into myself, hunching over in some deranged attempt to make myself as small as possible. He saw me visibly contract and I felt exposed in the most destabilising way. I felt watched in the way that makes the back of your skull tingle and your eyes lose focus. He didn't push the issue of visiting – I was both grateful and disappointed.

I left giddy and light. I sauntered home, slow. I knew coming back here would return reality and it was like knowingly walking into a fight, with your arms tied behind your back. I waited for the blow, and it hit deep into my abdomen. I breathed it in and crept up to the studio, avoiding the small gathering of friends Eddie had assembled downstairs.

I can hear their voices as I'm working now, rising and falling like a storm threatening to break. I feel like a thief up here, moving around on tiptoe. The colours splash loudly onto the paper, which in turn scratches like gritty sandpaper against the floor. The sounds echo and I pause, muscles all tense and straining, listening for sounds of detection.

Hiding here like a hermetic shrew I have never been more conscious of my strangeness. I feel so wrong for withdrawing here away from the others. I know it's not exactly happiness, but there is a definite satisfaction, a peace, when I am alone, working. I'm not sure I am one of those people who can be happy in that pure, unrestrained way, there is always a churning going on makes moments of joy fleeting [*sic*]. I am content here though, cautious but content.

Wednesday, November 9, 1949.

The blue work finally began to vibrate with some sort of presence today. It had been paining me the last few weeks. I'd actually turned it to face the wall in an attempt to stifle its high-pitched whining. Today it became something unexpected. It was all rhythmic dashes and pulsing colours. I saw the veins in my wrists stretch along the canvas and I knew it had become a portrait of my surface. The others bared my insides, but this one is all flesh. It spoke of the movement of my hands, my thick wrists and the blue that hums under my surface. The river system followed from my blotched hands onto the canvas, I became etched into the oil.

Sometimes the secrets these works hold are the most delicious part. Past each painting, you reach a myriad of illusions understood and formed only by me. It's like having a tiny little creature hiding in my bag. I look like another guest at the party, but below the reserved smile is a bubbling delight in the secret I'm hiding just out of sight.

Friday November 11, 1949.

Eddie's protests over my nocturnal life in the studio have become noticeably infrequent and it actually worried me enough this evening to leave its beckon for a night.

He didn't look up when I came to bed and I pitifully ignored the apparent affront. As I ran my hand down his arm in inviting timidity (why any man finds coyness in an adult woman attractive I shall never know) he lifted his arm surveying my hand with what can only be described as a combination of disappointment and regret. He complained about my hands. A longstanding and tiresome gripe of his. The paint stains them and he knows that. My hands are forever a patchwork of pthalo and burnt umber. The oils stain and smell. I know he was more content when I was just using watercolour. The rare moments of consideration given

to my work always end in him telling me he prefers the watercolours. It's a delicate medium. Its trace washes off of his wife's body. It doesn't require her to set up a studio and be taken seriously – or to take herself seriously. It's not messy, sticky or... masculine. I can't help but think that is where the repulse comes from. From him seeing me excel at something that intimidates him. That sees me take control of those canvases like a man might. Unlike watercolour paper, those canvases take my weight. They can take being dug into, gouged and scratched. The oil can be concealed over and over; it can be manipulated in a way that the watercolours' instantaneousness can't. Watercolour made me vulnerable, oils allow me to take command.

Tuesday, November 15, 1949.

Mother phoned again this morning. She still didn't ask about the work. It was like a huge, heaving animal in the background that made such a noise we couldn't hear one another over its retching. When she finally paused I launched into details about the installation, hoping to indirectly remind her of Friday's opening. I almost screamed – thinking the volume might make it stick in her head.

I know she fears this 'phase' will cause some form of psychological infertility. Twenty-seven years old and I am guilty of living a life longer than others. I am an anomaly – both inside the art world and out. I worry that if this thing really does come off it will be because I am a curiosity. A twenty-seven-year-old girl (I never hear the term 'woman') trying to play like a man. Will success stem from my age, my sex? Let's face it – I am not a vivacious socialite, nor an eccentric bohemian. Even if my age and sex does lure interest – surely it can't be enough. Nor should it be! It is a pointless frustration that I'm not sure I should think about. I am a small, brown sparrow in an aviary full of colourful plumage. Some naïve part of me hopes the work is enough, that personality doesn't play a part. What of my personality? A mere reduction to age and sex. I worry, of course, that I will always be ridiculed as a woman artist, but what concerns me more at this point is that the term 'artist' might be a stretch. What if this all falls through? I'll be left naked and humiliated, exposed to a crowd of vindictive vultures, ready to take me apart chunk by fleshy chunk.

Wednesday, November 16, 1949.

The house is empty now and I feel terribly alone. The last paintings were taken to the gallery an hour ago and I feel like I have been winded by an invisible punch. I feel so uneasy and I desperately want them back with me. All I can think of is that this has all been a terrible mistake, I just want to return to that place where this moment was far away and the future was filled with so much potential, so many possibilities. Now all feels uncertain, unstable and in flux. With the works gone I can't feel them anymore, all has fallen quiet and solemn. I am lost in a sterile sort of way, directionless because the studio has been cleared, eviscerated and there is no life left.