

Naomi's studio opens onto a tropical stretch of Cornish coast. On a bright day, sand and sea are saturated: there is too much colour, too much light. St Ives, dense and lush, rugged and pretty, sits on a peninsula looking out across a bay, which holds the sea like a glass bowl and keeps the warmth of the sun close. The weather changes quickly. The picture framed by her studio window continually shifts. Figures come and go on the beach; the tide draws in; the sky darkens. But Naomi works away from the window, facing a white wall – a once-white wall, now marked with paint and traces of past paintings. At the canvas, a different scene emerges.

There is no complete world here. Perhaps one painting of those exhibited will have an internal space that conforms to any realist measure. For those who recognise her work's distinctive atmospheric qualities, Naomi's paintings are always in conversation with one another. Juxtaposition – as significant between the paintings as it is fundamental within them – has a dissonant quality here. The relationship of a woman's face to the patterned motif that partly overlaps it or of the figure on one side of a canvas to the dark foliage on the other: these scenarios have an artistic integrity but a pictorial instability. Across the works, we see contrasts of scale, but also the melody of placement and arrangement, the different forces that embolden some works and obscure others. This isn't a decisively imagined world; at most these emanations make their claims from a place somewhere just beyond authorial intent. Nonetheless, they are undoubtedly, coherently, the creations of the same restless intelligence.

A tree in these paintings isn't just, or straightforwardly, a tree. It might be, as Naomi puts it, an imagined tree pretending to be real. Her paintings aren't theatrical, nor do they have the carefree charm of the *fête galante*. But that doesn't mean that they aren't concerned, by accident if not intent, with questions of masquerade and imitation. In the most basic sense, the organisation of figures and objects in space, and particularly the creation of set-like interior spaces, prompts us to ask what is being performed here. Occasionally Naomi's subjects occupy a defined space but more often the space around them is detached, abstracted; not formally perfect but a zone. It may have an indeterminate quality – its colour, for instance can't easily be described – but it is an active substrate in the painting, never merely a ground. Here, there is space that is foreboding in its expansiveness and space that it clotted, claustrophobic. Here, there is an idea of containment and then the desire to break out into openness.

The inverse of realism isn't necessarily artificiality: if Naomi's paintings aren't realistic representations of the world around us, that does not mean they are fantasies or dreamlands. But they do seem to belong to a place that won't quite settle, that threatens to change again any moment. Her process is one of rest and flux. Paintings can stay at a particular stage for months, even years, before they are resumed. Sometimes they then change completely, are painted over, turned on their side. But often some scraping back of the most recent layer follows, exposing, if in unrecognisable form, vestiges of their previous life. Where another artist might plan a painting in preparatory sketches and studies, or cast aside unsuccessful prototypes, Naomi starts every work without a view of how it will develop. Even if some part of it may prove unsatisfactory, the canvas can still hold possibility – dissatisfaction is itself an interesting stage – and wait as an open-ended question to be resolved another day. One painting may contain ten, twenty, paintings

beneath its finished form. It isn't necessary to have seen the earlier incarnations (though a glance along the unframed edge will give some hints) but it explains something of the uncanny and complex force of the paintings to know that they have not been created to a singular end, but have many selves under the surface.

The strange histories of her paintings – even the frame of a re-stretched canvas can echo with the images it previously held – appears in their wonderful, suggestive layering. There is no attempt to create a particular surface texture, but the process of painting and lifting off paint, of painting brighter colours under muted ones, of making and modulating pattern or silhouette, creates lyrical, tactile effects (Naomi won't like that word – she doesn't seek particular effects – but the paintings do have an effect us). Sometimes woodgrain seems to appear, or detailed brocade, or the cracks of desiccation in dry earth. Sometimes the images float as though under gauze, or reflected in a tarnished mirror, or suggest a photograph printed in a painstaking process of silver and salt. Naomi's training as a printmaker gives her an eye for these unreadable surfaces – in isolated areas or extending across the canvas – and an ingenuity in their application. Printmaking is significant for the rhythm of her painting process too. The printmaker pauses at each stage of the work, assessing what has transpired so far, deciding how to proceed to the next step. Naomi proceeds in the same manner. Each addition to a painting means a recalibration, and each step is governed by unpredictability.

In their fixed or finished form, Naomi's paintings have an insistent quietness, but not a stillness. They don't seem to require anything of us and it is not always easy to look at them for long. Some of the recent works demand a more dynamic engagement, however. Here are faces, eyes, even eye contact. Figures are larger, occasionally taking up much of the canvas. The bodies we are familiar with from her work – faceless and headless bodies, bodies emerging and dissipating, small bodies losing out to their surroundings – are countered by bodies that push back against the space around them, or challenge us with their own preoccupations. In part this has to do with the images of people Naomi keeps in the studio – some from postcards or photographs, others from old fashion magazines. Her figures aren't historical characters, they aren't intended to inspire nostalgia or represent lost eras, but they carry a historical charge. The strong lines and fluid shapes of fashion photographs from the 1930s or 1970s are distinctive, and attractive, but where Naomi utilises them they take on a new ambiguity. And though these firm outlines and shaded faces have a greater physical heft, they do not quite form people: to Naomi they remain drawings; to us they suggest unknowable fragments, refracted through multiple viewers. Her figures have a life of their own, but it is within the construct of the painting. There is no conjuring trick here.

One thing that has changed with these new works is the quality of paint itself (the paint and also the line, which is bolder). The oil paint given a bit more room to be itself, things have been worked out in the act of painting – moving the paint around on the canvas, say, until a head emerges. Brushstrokes are a little more visible, the paint juicier. Is this an end in itself or a way onto new things? When you ask her about her working methods, it is newness that Naomi returns to: not as a novelty but in a radical sense, as a constant re-beginning, or a form of play; a refusal to be bound by any particular outcome (which would change exploration into study). 'In every single piece of work I'm trying things I've never tried

before, in a colour I've never used, looking at it a certain sort of way.' The oil paint, the painting itself, have an agency and a set of limitations that the artist tries to excavate or subvert. Sometimes one small thing – a detail of foliage in a corner – can be attempted repeatedly, all day, and still the painting won't accept it. Not knowing where these moments of resistance (and then, surprise or release) will occur and without a fixed endpoint in mind, the process is like finding answers to an unknown question, or attempting to solve a puzzle that hasn't been set.

Where does the artist possibly start this? A piece of landscape might hold the key, or placing one postcard next to another. Perhaps picking up a canvas that has sat still for a long time; perhaps a breaking out a strong colour to invigorate the day. There are many decisions to be made along the way because the biggest decision is constantly deferred: 'I'm not painting something I've decided I'm painting. I'm not carrying out my own wishes in order to get to a certain place.' The work emerges out of this deferral – or perhaps a stronger word is needed, *refusal*. This isn't to say Naomi works without confidence. She is not afraid of beginning. She knows how to use colour, when to dirty it up or cool it down. She knows what she is drawn to and where to work against that (whatever is happening in a painting at a given point will have its opposite somewhere in the studio). Most important, she knows how hard-won the gains in painting can be and the risks involved in changing what has already been achieved. When she says 'I'm very capable of losing things,' we should recognise what is so very rebellious in this. To work at a painting over several years, to slowly build its character from layers of colour, from figure and object and pattern, to painstakingly establish an internal a register of concordant and discordant elements, and then to undo this, sometimes totally, in the search for something else or out of a subtle dissatisfaction, indicates a commitment to painting as making and satisfying difficulty.

The sea and the seascape through her window aren't subjects of Naomi's painting. When she paints water, it is contained in pools and fountains; it is symbolic and it is often still. But the unfixed life beyond her window – the figures continually arranging and rearranging themselves, the weather playing out its lovely moods – is a metaphor as well as a view. The intelligent, unsettling elegance and the tonal loveliness of her work, its quiet defiance – making a language for itself – finds an echo in the poetry of Lorine Niedecker, who lived her life by water but for the physical world was no more substantial merely for being visible. Poetry, like painting, is a means of recomposing.

My life is hung up
in the flood
 a wave-blurred
 portrait

Don't fall in love
with this face –
 it no longer exists
 in water
 we cannot fish

Alice Spawls