

Naomi Frears
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Simon Garfield

Sometimes you may just have to look away.

To spend time with the work of Naomi Frears is an overwhelmingly evocative experience, full of open endings and expectations, a period of ambiguous haunting. To say that she makes emotional paintings would be to sell them short: they are psychological explorations, always charged, modestly euphoric. She doesn't let the viewer off easily, in other words.

Something supremely fertile happens in her new collection of work, and while some of the pictures talk directly to the artist's previous concerns – errant nature, ethereal pleasures, wandering figures in outlying scenery – much is strikingly new: a stronger figurative expressiveness, a toughening of the images in a lush context. The paintings carry both intensity and serenity, and a clear maturity. You can't leave this display unaffected or underwhelmed; you may need a break before re-entering the plain world.

As befits an artist whose process involves continual overlaying and reconfiguring, there is little straightforward comfort in Frears's works. The layers are both journeys and realities, atmospheres steadied by concrete houses in a field or rooted landscape. When the figures within them glance at us directly they don't let much slip. The canvases are sculptural in their depth, and they remain lodged in our memory. But perhaps they have been our memories all along.

Frears occupies what is unquestionably one of the most desirable studios in the world, unless one has hopes of productivity. Looking out through vast windows onto Porthmeor Beach and the Atlantic, it's St Ives at its holidaying best, and it's always been a wonder that precisely none of it appears in Frears's work. Here it is the artist who must look away, although she doesn't appear to struggle with the manoeuvre. The sea is not a common visitor to her canvas, and nor is cloudless blue; perhaps the storms intrude more often, and the town's legendary light transmutes to melancholia. Previous occupiers of her studio were headstrong too, not least Francis Bacon, whose brief sojourn is said to have marked a discreet lightening of his work, in hue if not in menace.

Away from the beach window there are stauncher stimuli: the pattern of a studio sofa has seeped into a vast amber palette; music seeps in too; and her small sketchbooks are packed with jumping-off points – a bit of airport ceiling, moods from her travels, an engraving in a poetry

collection – that are often reconfigured on grander scales in fresh work. The fragments may later merge with personal history, as when a brief sketch of Walt Whitman from a book takes on the guise of her father in *British Summertime (JF as WW)* and a landscape from elsewhere is rotated to become the bower above his head.

The notion of creation by happy accident is a consistent one for Frears, although one shouldn't mistake this for loose thinking. One of the most strident works on display, *Couldn't Love You More*, is a typical amalgamation, and novel in its rare depiction of something so plainly salty. But the two people in the high-sided boat may not be having the best of times, and that denim blue threatens to envelop. And note how the thin paddle and sails combine in their uncertainty.

The title comes from a John Martyn song on the radio during creation, while the boat has been extracted from a busy scene of herring boats on an old St Ives postcard. The canvas itself has a bit of previous too, a palimpsest of other creatives: a group of young visiting artists were let loose on it for a while, although their efforts are now entirely hidden. 'I seem to feel a bit more at ease when things are upside down,' Frears says. The painting was so much of a departure for her that while she was making it she locked the studio door. Would an intruder ridicule her folly? Or would the bristling unshackled image make a run for it?

Her images remain disturbingly present. Recently she told me, 'I am more attracted to working from a source if I don't have all the information I need. Quick drawings and parts of images with gaps and unknowns are more interesting for me.' She had previously reasoned that she was always looking for an edge, an awkwardness to make things right. The potter Edmund de Waal has described similar reevaluations in the paintings of JMW Turner. It is simply what being an artist is about, a constant disruption and reinforcement. 'The ode on mourning becomes a lyric on spring.' Frears has the instinct down pat: the soft destructiveness imbued in the creation of the work results in pictures that could never be anything else, or anything less.

I've experienced these transformations first-hand. A picture that appears to be settled one day is, by the following week, almost unrecognizable. What was once the central concern has become a faint glimpse on one side: a new impression from another source has taken its place. And sometimes the image stays solid but shifts its emphasis: viewed full-on, the woman standing assured in *Inlet* becomes translucent from either side; flip the title and we're all let in. The painter's narrative is not necessarily our own, although Frears once told me that sometimes she thought she was telling the stories in other people's lives. There is certainly a desolation that sets her human figures apart, but has seclusion ever seemed more inviting?

And with all the fluidity and volatility, it is the authority of Frears's work that shines through. That her solo exhibition somehow resembles a themed group show is testament to the strength of the imagery, at once hefty and weightless, and to the flirtations with adversity so beautifully contained within each piece. Wherever one rests ones eyes there is the muted power of suggestion from an artist with much to say.

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