

Kim Booker: Flowers Still Bloom

In the summer of 2026, artist Kim Booker found herself saving the life of a blackbird from the jaws of a cat. Acting as temporary custodian of the little fledgling's life she watched from a slight remove at her window - guarding against further predators while the creature recovered, and eventually resumed flight. This process of slow, sacred attention, bearing witness to the micro-history of life, death and urban ecology, found expression in the large-scale canvas '*Imagine A World With No Bird Song*', which is part lament for, part poetic appreciation of nature in peril. Here the little blackbird appears, transposed into a brown gestural scribble as if in stuttering flight across the colourfully flocked background of the canvas, in a painterly language that recalls the US abstract expressionist artist Joan Mitchell, one of Booker's self-claimed influences. In an interview from 1974, Mitchell spoke of a similar artistic motivation guided in part by nature, stating that "Music, poems, landscape, and dogs make me want to paint... And painting is what allows me to survive."

If not painting for out and out 'survival', Booker's practice is a means of metabolising her anxiety for a world on fire, as well as negotiating her own uncomfortable psychological relationship with personal identity and alienation. From a working-class upbringing to an Oxford education and corporate career before retraining as a painter, Booker has often felt a sense of estrangement that comes from social nomadism and class mobility.

It's a feeling acutely resonant in her treatment of the nude female body, her 'anti-Venuses' as the artist calls them, that are always a projection of Booker's own self-identity. Unidealized, with larger-than-life hands reminiscent of the visual grammar of the life drawing class, they appear as scrawled graphic outlines on top of the saturated visual noise of these canvas surfaces, as if with a marker pen rebelliously taken to defacing the colour plates of an art history book with irreverent drawings that refuse feminine 'prettiness', or the conventional allure of the sexualised female nude of western art history.

Erasure and interruption are in fact central to Booker's aesthetic; her paintings are multi-layered compositions, produced in anxious and feverish bursts, undoing at surface level anything that is, in her words, 'too perfect, too sexy, too well-drawn.' It is an act of censorship, of masking, and shape shifting - the figures never becoming whole but remaining transparent outlines, hollow containers that are filled with the environment they are steeped in.

Booker's staging of figure and 'ground' offers a further meditation beyond personal experience and into the broader potential critique of anthropocentric thinking that has consistently positioned nature as a backdrop, or a resource to be exploited for the maintenance of the human drama that unfolds within it. Her paintings suggest

otherwise – environment is not setting but something monumental, in flux, sublime, unreadable; her figures permeable, absorbed by it and inseparable from it.

Drained of the expectations of erotic titillation these bodies become, at times, almost heroic motifs: a diptych of suspended figures, heads erased, reads as a quasi-crucifixion, or a hanging. Flipped on the horizontal axis and depicted in red paint the bodies take on a similar pathos - as drowned nymphs, or versions of Ophelia, slipping below the weeds.

This implied violence and desolation also alludes in oblique ways to the subtext of climate emergency in which these paintings were forged, and the eco-feminist critique that has highlighted how the forces responsible for climate destruction and ecocide are the same ones that consume and ravage women's bodies, using both as disposable sites of consumption. And yet Booker's decorative and bucolic palette seems in deliberate discord with the tragedy of the planetary crisis that troubles and inspires her. It is catastrophe delivered in the language of the decorative, 'sunlit horror'; a fitting aesthetic to reflect our current cultural moment of wide-spread apathy and paralysis in the face of environmental emergency, a place in which flowers still bloom, even if humans may soon no longer.

Essay by Catherine McCormack