Rebecca Fortnum
* | London, UK

Rebecca Fortnum has long been interested in how artists make art, and in particular, how feminists paint. Her books *Contemporary British Women Artists: In Their Own Words* (2007) and *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think* (2013) are aimed at articulating artists' own perspectives on their practices and processes. Recent articles and chapters such as "*A Dirty Double Mirror: Drawing, Autobiography and Feminism,"* in Kelly Chorpening (Ed.), *A Companion to Contemporary Drawing* (2020) and "*Baggage Reclaim: Some thoughts on Feminism and Painting,"* in *Journal of Contemporary Painting* (2017) explore and expand Helen Molesworth's notion of ambivalence as a feminist strategy for contemporary women artists. In 2019 Fortnum was elected Visiting Research Fellow in Creative Arts at Merton College, Oxford and returned to Oxford where she originally studied English Literature and Language as an undergraduate. There she developed her project, *A Mind Weighted with Unpublished Matter,* which emerged from her ongoing drawing and painting practice, exploring the politics of the gaze. In a series called *Prosopopoeia*—a rhetorical term describing a communication via another person or thing, sometimes seen as a way of animating the dead—Fortnum paints from historical sculptural portraiture, particularly of 19th Century France, drawing on notions of 'absorption' in the representation of women. This series of work, published by *Slimvolume* (2020) includes a critical essay by Gemma Blackshaw, as well as an 'in conversation' with Melissa Gordon, which will form the Natalie Barney Gallery inaugural exhibition in London. Fortnum is currently Professor of Fine Art at the Royal College of Art, where she is research lead for the School of Arts and Humanities

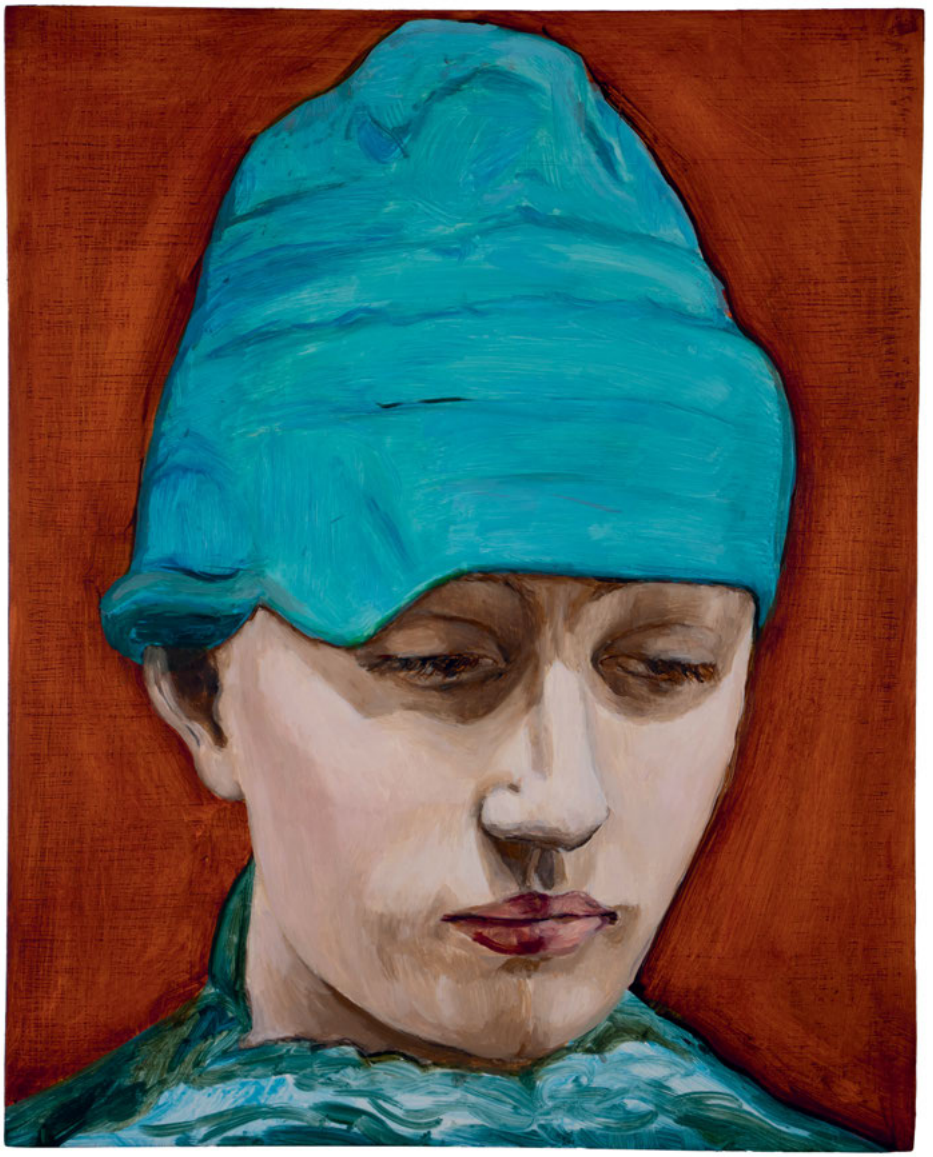
fiefdom [fi:f dɒn]

gamer's term for acquiring property / organising bot-lands (an on-screen feudalism of the 21st c kind of encounter).

I could have danced all night,
I could have danced all night,
and still have begged for more
I could have spread my wings,
and done a thousand things,
I'd never done before

So sang my grandmother when I was little. Later I realised the song came from *My Fair Lady* where the gorgeous Audrey Hepburn, slightly unconvincing as a 'common' flower girl, looked divine as a 'lady' in her Cecil Beaton dresses. My grandmother had left school at 14 to become a maid in a wealthy London household and knew the power of elocution. Years later, as a mother of three, she spoke beautifully when attending the parents' evenings and founder's days of the minor public schools her children attended. George Bernard Shaw's class hoax, a thought experiment based on Henry Sweet's phonetics as a passport to social mobility surprisingly still makes sense. But for me, his reinterpretation obscures the fascination at the heart of the Pygmalion story; that is the transformation from stone to flesh, from inert to sensible matter, via desire.

By the mid 1990s my grandmother couldn't move very well, she had arthritis, a uterine prolapse and various other ailments which included the rejection by her body of the metal pin that had been put in her hip to secure it when she had broken it falling down the cellar stairs. Over twenty years later the pin, looking like a large door bolt, was eliminated by her flesh as an alien object, and having broken the skin, was eventually wrenched free from her body by its ungrateful recipient, at home one afternoon. During this period, I inhabited an upstairs room of her house which I used as a studio and so I was around to help with her ablutions and other duties of the body. Whilst thus occupied I often thought of how she had tended me as a child and how now this 'care' was now being returned. Looking at her body made me think of mine, both past and future. And my memory of her seems to reside in my body, particularly now, as it begins what I hope is to be a long journey towards immobility.



II

You died before I had time
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
Ghastly statue with one gray toe
Big as a Frisco seal

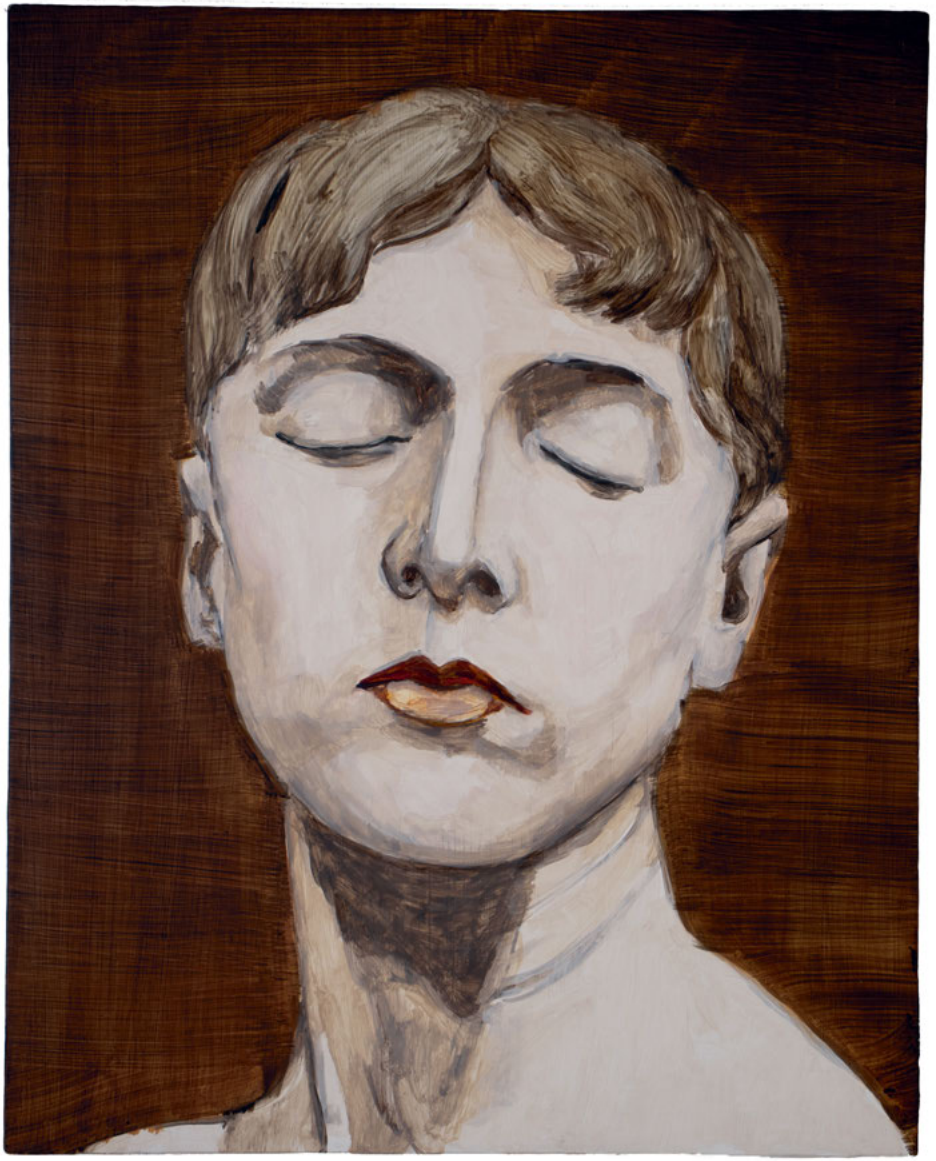
Sylvia Plath writes of her father, imagining him as a colossus, his body swelled to enormous proportions and made of unforgiving material. Stone-cold, dead, his physical occupation of the world comparable to the place he held in her psyche. But colossi weren't always big, they were statues made to commemorate those no longer living, a way to make those important to us, abide with us a little longer; the flesh transformed to stone.

Wandering around sometimes bustling, sometimes abandoned, sculpture corridors and courts in the museums of Western Europe is an encounter with the dead. In the statues and busts we confront the preserved portraits of those, both real and imagined, who have lived before us. We see not only the representations of others but can imagine their physicality, the way they stood before their image to review it, the image that now we are also in front of. We can envisage the way they touched the surface of the sculpture, perhaps to trace their likeness or perhaps to reassure themselves of their material difference from their effigy. And before us too, embedded in the surface, the presence of the artist and their technicians, the marks of their tools, their hands, moving, dexterously or clumsily, in pursuit of their vision. Scanning the work with the eye (we are forbidden to touch in the museum), this haptic looking allows the surface to open up, to transform; terracotta or marble turned to skin, muscle, bone.

III

When actress and sculptor Sarah Bernhardt portrayed her dead husband in marble, carving his strong, refined features, she appears to have chosen to reimagine him from seven years earlier, when they first met and she had fallen in love; before his acting, before the morphine, before the bitterness and madness, as the twenty-six year old, beautiful womaniser he once was. After the overdose, as she nursed his dying body, did she inspect that ruined face for signs of his former self? And how long does it take to carve a marble block into a life size portrait complete with roses? Was she crying, chisel in hand, all the time? Perhaps a happier experience was the earlier portrait (in 1878) of Louise Abbéma, 'new woman', fellow artist, companion and, because it was Sarah, probably lover too. Maybe it was reciprocity for the (albeit ghastly) portrait Abbéma had made of her three years, as important work in her career, establishing the young painter as an artist of note. Now it stands just outside the café in the Musee d'Orsay, allowing those waiting in anticipation of a pleasurable lunch to admire her stylish chignon and the self-possession of her downwards glance.

The imagination is a poor beast, it offers everything and delivers less. Looking at the homogenous photographic surface, with a pencil or brush in hand, the touchscreen having given all that it can, one must pinch to zoom in the mind's eye. Yes, chroma brings back a partial life, but never much more than that. Only a provisional translation, a half-life. How does the surface give away its materiality to the viewer? Is it really confined to the way the light glances off a plane? Terracotta absorbing the light, whereas the marble's sheen luminously reflects from its polished surface. But how is the material's weight or density conveyed to the lens or eye? Can a viewer detect what level of pressure would be needed to engrave its surface with a sharp implement? How do we know it is so bloody heavy it could break our toes if it toppled over? Can fervent imagining really, in some unaccountable way, convey a touch to the brush that will conjure the ancient stone as skin, covered with soft, downy but invisible hairs.



Rodin didn't think Bernhardt was a very good sculptor. He found her too sentimental. However, Camille Claudel he judged to be an exceptional talent and she appears to have paid the price for his admiration. The portrait he made of her in 1884, when he met her for the first time at the age of 19 (he was 44), shows how captivated he was by her image. Eleven years later, the same image morphed into that famous reflection on reflection, *Thought*, that traps her head in a block of marble, symbolically anticipating her later incarceration in the Montdevergues Asylum. In the earlier portrait of Claudel, she is indeed pensive for one so young. Having strenuously and repeatedly denied the use of life casting some years earlier, we cannot allow ourselves to imagine that Rodin took her imprint, pressing her flesh against the wet plaster before it set. Yet that pointed skull cap she wears would lend itself to such an activity, keeping her hair away from becoming enmeshed in the liquid lime and gypsum. Additionally, in the many existing versions of this work, plaster, terracotta, glass paste and bronze, the join lines of casting are present, evidence of the moves between these material states, encouraging us to believe that somehow her body played an active part in the making of the work. The following year she was to make a portrait of her own, *Jeune femme aux yeux clos,* a powerful strong-jawed woman whose reverie seems to betray a pent-up energy, but whose identity is unknown.

Paint here acts as another term in the list of material translations, flesh and bone to hard and soft mineral to pixels and retina screen to ink on paper to oil and pigment. A distancing which allows an intimacy; the soft bristles, loaded with paint of an intense hue, glancing over the silky gessoed board, smoothed by the sandpaper's rhythmical abrasions. The brush then is guided not just by image, but also haptic memory and projection. An act of faith, a moment of belief, not just in the artist or their work, but in the importance of somatic remembering.

Images

Prosopopeoia (Rodin, Claudel), oil on board, 20 × 25 cm, 2020
Prosopopeoia (Claudel, unknwon), oil on board, 20 × 25 cm, 2020
Prosopopeoia (Claudel, unknown), oil on board, 20 × 25 cm, 2020
panel, oil on board, 20 × 25 cm, 2020