

Elizabeth McIntosh

Different Uses

by Mitch Speed

They're alien to themselves. And that's the way they like it. They're definitely paintings. But lately it seems that they're paintings in the way that novels are books. Put another way, painting is the format: the empirically verifiable thing. What happens within that format is something else. It's similar to the way that walking is not only choreography between tissue and reflex, but also thought. One of painting's unique qualities is that it thematizes the simultaneous presence of multiple actions: a literal one—a paint-laden brush moving over canvas—and metaphorical ones—collaging, editing, montaging, and indexing time. Elizabeth McIntosh's new paintings are willingly alien to themselves because they amplify this situation. They do so by having unusually emphatic relationships to both Modernist painting and other technologies. The former appears in her subject matter and the latter in the mechanisms that she both uses and mimics in deploying that subject matter. Her new paintings seem to operate as models for the way in which painting can be something other than, without becoming irreconcilably unhinged from, itself.

The first thing to notice about these new paintings is their strangeness. From 2005 to 2013, McIntosh made paintings in which bold, radiantly coloured geometric shapes were arranged across the picture plane in quasi-high Modern harmonies. For the viewer, those paintings were unapologetically fun. An important part of their funness was the way they were laced with imperfections: with hard edges becoming tremulous, vivid colours going gossamer, and solid compositions portending wobbliness. For McIntosh, all of these things added up to awkwardness. The works shown here instantiate that quality with an exactitude that amplifies the magnetism of those that came before. Where we used to see colours in escalating hues rambunctiously pushing and pulling against one another, we now see more autonomous ones like burnt orange, rose, and forest green, still humming together, but separated and dampened by nearly white, permeative backgrounds. In the older paintings, flaw accented harmony. Currently, the stakes of this game, in which maladroitness is incorporated into what Peter Schjeldahl would call an "experience of beauty"—not to be confused with normative visual beauty—have been raised.¹

There are two groups of work in "Fairy Bread." First, there are large paintings in which pieces of shapes, bodies, plants, and painterly tropes exist on and within wispy, monochromatic grounds. In being both on and within, they form a correspondence with Western painting's mimicry of empirical vision: its ideal of keeping the eye in a constant state of refocusing by prioritizing an optical equivalence between background and foreground. In the practice of painting, shadows and intimations of architecture have long served as mechanisms to give ambiguous spatial contexts to principal subjects. Because none of the above appears here, these fragments seem to have just shown up. They're like leaves that have somehow floated into a frame before landing flat, or peel-off stickers against cartridge paper. On the level of behaviour, they resemble secular *acheiropoieta*.²

Being all the same size, the big and vibrant paintings McIntosh is most known for highlight her use of the rectangle as a space for the unfolding of intuition. In contrast, these rectangles are specifically proportioned to fit the fragments within them. The most curious one, *Big Lady* (2013), is around three-by-ten feet. Hung horizontally, it makes a perfect frame for what could be a recumbent human figure, were it not for the following: it is uniformly pink, flattened, missing very important pieces, and has had its illusionistic ambitions decisively disabled by thick, dark lines that



¹ This quotation is taken from a talk that Peter Schjeldahl gave at Boston University in October 2007.

² *Acheiropoieta* are images of saints, in icon paintings or otherwise, that are believed to have appeared magically, without human involvement. I learned about the phenomenon through conversations with Kara Hansen.

sporadically trace its edges. It's difficult to parse the attributes of this painting that have been directly copied from Henri Matisse's *Standing Nude* (1947)—the referent for this fragment—from those symptomatic of the technical means by which the fragment has been moved from the picture book into the painting. Here and there, the boundaries between shape and ground switch from decisive and palpable to broken and irregular, suggesting the glitchy edges of objects transmitted through green-screen technology.

That is the way that the first group of paintings looks. Their meaning unfolds in a sequence of movements set in motion by those looks and overlapping those looks, but not necessarily concomitant with them in time. Their strangeness seems to issue from their equivocal nature—how they appear to be half constituted within the picture—and the way they occupy a medial position; between a testing of the most reduced form in which a painting can still be called a painting, on the one hand, and a tradition of lyricism and immersion on the other.³ At this point in the encounter, it seems instructive to dwell on the lightspeed at which strangeness forms in the mind as something essentially Other—to beauty or grace—rather than a positively charged force. Next, in a fast dialectical movement, that highly conditioned reflex is short-circuited by the stubborn presence of composition, in the conscientious frontal placement of the fragments within their rectangles, and craft, in the evident care taken in their rendering; they are not interpretations, but verbatim facsimiles of details, maybe even trivialities, from the corners of Modern paintings.

Topology is a field of mathematics that concentrates on the redistribution and reorganization of equal volumes through processes like stretching and bending, as opposed to cutting and glueing. When, in this show, we see a suite of smaller paintings interspersed amongst the larger ones, we also see painterly data moving between disparate formats. In a kind of topological way, the constituent elements of the first group of paintings appear to be made of the same pictorial matter that fills the latter. Not in the obvious material sense, of pigment, but at the level of visual syntax: hues, the quality of edges, the confident trepidation of shapes. In the smaller paintings, colour, shape, and line have been quickly deployed without reference. It's not easy to understand these paintings. They don't seem interested in compositional mores. Sometimes their contents appear to drift into a limbo space outside the frame. Other times they draw inward, in tumbling and overlapping moves; shapes cut out of linen sit in equivalence with those made of oil paint. In these ways, the paintings divert attention away from accomplishment and towards thought. They appear as vivid residue from a catch-net that apprehends visual ideas at an amoebic stage, before they jell into assimilable information.

In the larger fragment paintings, through a process of dislocation and recreation, historical pictures literally happen again. In a second sense, however, they show those same paintings disappearing. In comparison to the carefully recreated fragments, the larger paintings from which they have been plucked appear only through a memorial fog. Picture the clarity and tangibility of an unearthed ceramic shard in relation to the fictitious memory of archaic conviviality it provokes. In this way, McIntosh incants empirical proof of history while simultaneously erasing the contexts that make them historical. Crucially, these new works are between negation and expansion: the shrewd nullification of problematic models for making art and its opposite—unthinking production. Her modality is something other than the yearning struggle for perfect compositions and hegemonic contributions to history. Here, the simultaneous action of selection and erasure adds up to a third action, which is to put the fragments into a curious vibration between roles: as active, aesthetic things to be experienced in the now, and as new editions in a long chain of original copies.⁴

³ This exploration of the formal limitations of painting is evidenced significantly in the work of Raoul De Keyser and certain paintings by Mary Heilmann, both of whom have influenced McIntosh's work. It is also the central theme of an exhibition called "Persian Rose, Chartreuse Muse, Vancouver Grey" (2014), curated by Mina Totino at Equinox Gallery.

⁴ In reference to the significance of Henri Matisse's and Pablo Picasso's mimicking of figuration in Iberian and African sculpture to the development of their syntaxes.

