**Context**

Ilaria Rosselli del Turco is an Italian artist, best known for her portraits and still lifes, who first came to attention through her outstanding portraits for commission. Selected for the BP Portrait Award at the National Portrait Gallery in London in 2010, she is engaged with artist networks in London, leading courses at the Art Academy and continuing her involvement with a group brought together through a painting course at Heatherley School of Fine Art in Chelsea and Fulham. Teaching has given impetus to the evolution of Ilaria’s work, for which she finds inspiration in objects from the domestic setting. These everyday items are combined in affective compositions through which Ilaria explores desire and the underlying drives.

**Early Influences**

Born into a naval family in Genoa, Ilaria grew up in Rome. An academic child who did well at school, time at home was spent making things out of paper and knitting. Ilaria had always been aware that there were a couple of significant renaissance painters and a printmaker in the Rosselli and Turco family history, however the traditional Italian view of artists as ‘anointed’ beings, ‘beamed from the sky’, didn’t inspire her.

It was when a distant aunt visiting from Poland painted her childhood portrait, an event that she says evoked a sense of wonder that is still with her, that she was first struck by the prospective for creating likeness through drawing and painting. Ilaria remembers that although she was too young at the time to recognise herself in the image, it raised questions in her mind about how lines on a paper connect to a living person. At a young age Ilaria became aware of the capacity of painting to describe something essential, “on the border dividing the visible from the invisible1”.

Moved by this image which she says “burnt itself” into her memory, Ilaria continued to draw between periods of academic study. Between courses in political sciences and history of art she studied hyper realistic illustration. The latter both instilled in Ilaria a love of figurative art and provoked a visceral reaction against the emphasis on perfection and rendering which she does not associate with fine art. To avoid being limited by this view of painting Ilaria began to share a studio with a sculptor so that she could draw from life, noting at this point the beginnings of a shift and refinement in her vision.

Moving to London after giving birth to her other two children, where she achieved recognition through success in the BP Portrait prize, felt to Ilaria like the opening of a ‘whole new universe’. Interrogation of her underlying motivations and the evolution of new techniques is advanced through London based relationships around figure and portrait painting, such as the Portrait Society and Heatherleys. Ilaria supports fellow artists where possible, such as encouraging a group who had found themselves rudderless after a tutor moved away to continue to paint by sharing a sitter. These relationships provide an important counterbalance to her studio, evoking the approach of artists such Morandi, well known for painting in monk-like solitude, who placed teaching at the core of his work. Emphasis on learning alongside others additionally has the advantage of helping to nurture their agency.

Studio

Home is a palimpsest of Ilaria’s creative development. Site of ontological exploration, it is here that she finds inspiration in heterogeneous sources, from music to podcasts and audiobooks. Promising a quiet moment of transcendence, “where everything becomes more poetic and less trivial”, Ilaria has spoken of the richness of days spent painting and printing in the house. Location of life’s intimate moments, for Ilaria it represents a universe much larger than that outside.

Chosen for its north and south facing windows, the studio is situated on the top floor of the house. Angling the canvas to block the northern light prioritises the entrance of warmer light from the south, a practice which

Ilaria connects to the ‘Italianness’ of her painting. Continuing to paint throughout the day as the light changes incorporates time into the paintings. Time is additionally inscribed in diverse corners of the house through the progression of the creative project. Completed works are grouped together as process evolves, former vestiges reappearing in reworked prints and paintings.

Domestic objects are embodied within diverse compositions, shuffled and repurposed according to focus and process. Boxes, initially chosen for their architectural properties, the shapes painted over and over in the pursuit of mastery and likeness are referred to as the ‘past’. As the narrative in Ilaria’s work develops these boxes have reappeared in works such as Babel. As in the metaphor of the Viennese staircase, the underlying structures stay the same, it is the perspective that shifts as we progress.

1 Kristeva, Julia. *The severed head*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.3.

**Technique**

Ilaria’s decision, in 2019, to produce a piece of conceptual work through printmaking resulted in her herbarium. The book of mezzotints of plants associated with her upbringing in Rome was hand-printed and bound by the artist herself. It closes with a cord, echoing the threaded knots of the hand-made process, learnt over several days in a bookbinding studio. Pristine and alluring, it is finally stowed in a self-made box.

The plants used for the mezzotints were either grown by Ilaria in her garden or collected nearby. Ilaria started with oleander which surprised her by thriving in the London soil. It was six years old when she made the book. Encouraged by this she looked for other Mediterranean plants, taking cuttings from two large olive trees which she had watched grow from saplings, expecting them to die during their first winter.

Tying leaves from each shrub into bunches, Ilaria then made a mezzotint of each shrub. Lines of Haiku were written to accompany each page. Through verse Ilaria was able to echo her feelings, as an Italian in London, of being ‘hung out to dry’. Mythical Leander drowned taking his leaves to his lover, rosemary signifies loyalty, the olive tree is the symbol of friendship and peace, and finally we come to bay, which stands for courage.

‘Gathering, tying the familiar leaves. Is this my home? Oleander Rosemary

Olive Bay

A herbarium of Mediterranean plants Collected on a London road”.

“London, 31st January 2020”.

Ilaria’s early experiments with mezzotint began at the age of nineteen, during a year of studies when she had access to a printing press and wanted to learn etching. Finding that it was a difficult process to master, mezzotint was set aside for many years in favour of the immediacy of painting. The revelation of the possibilities of the technique and the stimulus to master it came when Ilaria discovered the monotypes of Degas, becoming fascinated by the promise of the discipline to achieve rich velvety depths. Devoting herself for a week to absorption in the mechanics of the technique, she practised making her own prints.

Identifying that with monotypes it is of the essence to work quickly, no lines are made on the plate on which the ink dries in under and hour, Ilaria looked for a way to slow down the process of creation. This led to a search for alternative printing techniques. Mezzotint is completely tonal, the most interesting attribute for Ilaria, enabling the same depth of results as the monotype without the disadvantage of time sensitivity. Ilaria uses a large rocker resembling an Italian herb chopper, the cutting edge of which comprises tiny sharp points. Prolonged back-and-forth working of the plate with the rocker leaves a mesh of tiny lines, the more intensively the plate is worked, the deeper the inky black of the print.

Printmaking provides a unique counterpoint to the mental processes involved in painting, in its required repetition of movement combined with the need for precise execution. Painting, for Ilaria, involves both focusing on emotions and making fast decisions each time the brush touches the canvas. Preparing plates for mezzotints is ideally carried out over long hours in the winter, since Ilaria does not paint in artificial light.

In considering the composition for the mezzotint Ilaria enters a dialogue with her chosen objects. She has described mezzotint as the ‘litmus test’ for the validity of an object for a future painting, a process in which she poses questions relating to aesthetics, (outside) beauty, shape, and the internal poetic energy of an item. Innate materiality is appraised, this includes assessing the scale of an item and the way in which it can connect with the human body, for example, to be grabbed comfortably by the hand or hands. This concern for physicality is reflected in the painted surface of the work, determined in part by the attributes of specific paint. One type that Ilaria likes to use is relatively coarsely ground, with a sand-like feel on the palette, the physicality of the earthiness of the substance enhancing her sense of joy in the transformation of ‘dusty particles’ into a product associated with pleasure.

Liberating Ilaria from preformed ideas about tone has perhaps been another symptom of her intense concentration on mezzotint. Attentiveness to small-scale distinctions in tone may sharpen sensitivity to colour variation, so that surrounding colour is perceived to be more intense. It is known that sensory deprivation allied to lower quality of stimulation, for example in periods of confinement, can alter received experience of colour. Lack of visual stimulation can lead to phosphenes, first noticed in antiquity by the Greeks, of the sort that can be manually stimulated through rubbing the eye. This is currently being studied in relation to effect on mood.

Pondering an apparent wider sensitivity to colour, Ilaria has noted both an augmented focus on it in the social world around her and an increased intensity in her recent paintings. She contrasts her latest playful colour-saturated works, with prior paintings of boxes focusing on soft pinks and earthy neutral tones. In the most recent paintings diaphanous sarongs are used to manipulate the light, saturating the work with an acidic green tint, the arresting brightness of which grabs the attention. Energising properties of drenched colour welcome the viewer into a pictorial space which has been closed by a curtain of draped fabric.

Spatial perception of colour and the way in which it interacts with shape in the painting object is questioned through the geometry of the square for *The Matter of Light* exhibition September 2022 at Fine Art Consultancy in London. Comprising, in addition to smaller prints, paintings of forty centimetres squared in dimension, it evolves from Ilaria’s well received solo show in Rome in 2021. Innate satisfaction in the aesthetic pleasure of symmetry and fit ensues from the democracy of equality of size of the paintings. They may be hung in various constellations, giving impetus to the viewer to a multidirectional flow of ideas whilst underlining the movement and linearity in the work. Held and bound by exquisite presentation and an underlying respect for form, the restraint finds itself in tension with the emotional processes explored in the paintings.

**Underlying Drives**

Ilaria’s paintings have a strong psychological element, in this sense she refers to them as triggers, sensory stimuli which can invoke previous events. Seeking a deeper understanding of the creative motivations and themes in Ilaria’s work begins with an examination of the essential underlying individual drives. Julia Kristeva offers a rereading of individual psychical development which prioritises the feminine and the maternal through which themes in Ilaria’s work will be unravelled.

Examining individual psychological archaeology through the stages of psychosexual development, Julia Kristeva proposes a stage which she calls the abject2 which precedes the mirror stage. The abject provides a theoretical prism for comprehending the processes relating to the establishment of boundaries which enable existence outside the mother. In this stage subjectivity and language acquisition are prioritised. Themes relating to the abject will be explored in relation to Ilaria’s painting Babel.

Once boundaries between self and the other have been established, a comprehensible internalised image of self is constructed. This narcissistic stage is the prerequisite to forming relationships and making sense of the world. Self-image is the nucleus of Ilaria’s narrative and will be analysed in terms of how associated psychological themes of castration and Medusa relate to the creative project.

2 Felluga, Dino. *Modules on Kristeva: On the abject*. Cla.purdue.edu/academic/English/theory/psychoanalysis/kristevaabject.html

**The Abject**

In Babel (2015), Ilaria probes the lived experience of the feminine, in respect of drives linked to the materiality of the body. Representing the subjective self is a pile of anthropomorphic objects, including boxes and the ‘bellies’ of rounded containers which recall the archaic fascination for female fertility evident in the statuettes of female cults from the early Upper Palaeolithic3. Ribbons retrace these curves which allude to the body whilst leading the eye through the pictorial space towards an entangled mass which has been discarded on the floor. The chaotic scene invokes the abjection of the time of pure materiality, before we were able to construct meaning through language, for which the story of the tower of Babel may be read as an allegory. When God demolished the tower, the uniquely comprehensible language of the time, Syriac, was simultaneously destroyed. The empty birdcage at the top of the pictorial tower implies the sadness of the infant who must bear the absence of the mother, before making sense of the world by naming her through the first attempts at comprehensible language, babbling.

A violent, clumsy breaking away from the maternal presence is proposed by Kristeva to be the precondition for the narcissism of the mirror stage, the central stage of human development. Structuring an ideal version of self is associated with phantasies and the imaginary which continue for the life of the individual. In Babel this simplified self-image is visible in the upside-down portrait of a bust of a woman which lies on the floor, her eyes closed to scrutiny. This image describes the order of the understandable image built over the impulsivity of outside materiality. Behind her lies a stack of blank canvases, warning of an imminent destruction of the coherent image resulting in the return of chaos and impulsivity.

Image

3 Kristeva, Julia. *The severed head*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 490.

**Castration**

The self-portrait in Babel describes a headless woman. For Kristeva, the supreme image of a “castrating, merciless, warrior femininity4” is represented by Judith of legend, who saved Israel by beheading St John the Baptist. With razor-sharp wit and a whisper of cruelty, Ilaria satirises societal constructions of feminine fury through allusions to the violence of the acephale, in her painting entitled Late, (*A Matter of Light*, 20225). The living, acephalous male presence, with its associated synonymous meanings of forgetfulness and brainlessness shows up to fill the entire pictorial space with his torso. Our full-frontal view emphasises the shock of the loss of the head. Drawing us into the narrative, contemporary attire creates a dissonance with all the representations of the headless characters of the past. The filter of these past representations offers a glimpse of the sacred in the “pact of identity6” between the sacrificed and sacrificing. In striving to make visible the unseen, the soul, the bond between viewer and subject is reinforced, which strengthens our belief in the underlying promise of redemption.

Pick (*A Matter of Light*, 20227), further develops the theme of the castrating warrior woman in the form of the praying mantis of popular renown which can be perceived in the shape of the female subject’s hand. Turning the tables on disturbing, sexualised female representations of devouring and castration, in works such as Dîner sur la femme nue, Meret Oppenheim8 (1959), in which the ambiguous model/corpse/dummy is served up as dinner, Ilaria’s female subject presents as predator. A hint of horror lurks in the faintly perceptible comedically placed bio-hazard sign outlined in the pattern of shadows which fall on her shirt as she scrutinises the row of chocolates which peep out from their paper ruffs like skulls in a death cult, disinterred from the coffin-like drawer over which the box is perched, and into which they threaten to fall back. The beauty of the composition, at its zenith in the elegance of the extended wrist and hand recalls the tenderness of play of light and shadow in ochre tones of Picasso’s Woman with Ruff (1963), in which the slashed, but still beautiful face of Mme Walter is arranged on the “platter-ruff a la Saint John the Baptist9, evoking an empathy and admiration which transcends violence and fear. In Pick, as we peruse the compassionate portrayal of the subject, we are simultaneously beckoned by a seductive little finger extended humorously in prevarication as she revels in the luxury and plenitude of choice, to kill and devour, or to seduce. In Pick, joy and sensuality ultimately override the inkling of impending jeopardy.

Image

4 Kristeva, Julia. *The severed head*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 490. 5 Ibid.  
6 Ibid. 40.  
7 Ibid.

8 Oppenheim, Meret. (1959) *Dîner sur la femme nue. [Mixed-media installation].* Photograph by Denise Bellon. [Online]. Available at lemonde.fr/blog/lunettesrouges/2007/10/28/festin-de-printemps/ (June, 2022). 9 Kristeva, Julia. *The severed head*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press,

**Medusa**

Perusing Ilaria’s life paintings raises questions about the gaze. Being looked at directly by another which has always had the potentiality to be experienced as aggressive has been further problematised through modern means of communication. In a life painting or drawing session the experience is heightened. Both parties hold a mirror up to the other, searching for meaning through each other, in a process of construction and collaboration. The choice of sitter is paramount to the success of this process. Certain works have been set aside as the poetic response of one person to another requires deeper understanding, which, if absent, undermines Ilaria’s ability to describe her creative vision. To this end she has prioritised one individual sitter in ten of her fourteen portraits, emphasising the necessary development of the relationship as the work evolves.

Sitters become both visible and invisible during the collaborative session. Elaborating on this serpentine game of emotional peek-a-boo, Ilaria elicits: “I feel that they can be me. Sometimes it’s me in the painting but when it can’t be me, I need them to be me”. Ilaria filters her poetic inquiry, the investigation of her own psychical responses, through the other who sits in front of her. When she is not able to find answers in herself, the other must know how to become Ilaria to facilitate this quest. Desire is not for an exterior object, but first my own body, my ‘narcissistic’ ego. As Ilaria asserts, the work is not ‘sexy’, she is not interested in portraying desirable young bodies. Moving beyond such representations she approaches the sublimation of the ego which works in opposition to Eros. Bodies are represented in new ways with the aim of exploring signs linked to what they can reveal about the human psyche.

Two aspects relating to the myths of Medusa provide perspective. Firstly, her punishment for the desecration of Athena’s temple was that her gaze could turn anyone who look directly into her eyes to stone. The gaze is the essence of portrait painting. Maggi Hambling has, since he nineteen-seventies, painted portraits suffused with allusions to the threat associated with Medusa as savage, monstrous, castrating gorgon, slimy gaping mouth and coiled snakes for hair. Henrietta Moraes, Maggi Hambling’s sitter eventually assumed, in the creative sense, the role of Medusa herself, the gorgon stepping out of the painting into a relationship which had allegedly become physically aggressive. Staring provocatively out of her portraits she confronts the viewer and assumes control of the work. Of Moraes, Hambling has written: “I have become Henrietta’s subject, rather than she mine12”, in a dysfunctional relationship she likens to a dance of death. Ilaria echoes this impression of a latent reversal of roles which she describes as the feeling that the sitter is impersonating her.

Ilaria obviates this sense of risk by inverting the gaze to one of contemplation. The eponymous subject of Alice-Sun, intimates introspection, the search for truth echoed in her name and the title of the painting. Her averted gaze shows that she seeks answers from within, one eye remaining in the shadows. Rather than turning to stone, Medusa’s eye as filtered through Alice is apotropaic, offering protection from rather than giving rise to harm. This recalls the composition of a drawing by Eileen Agar, *Self- portrait in a Lamp*, c.1930, a device enabling her to paint her own image without a sitter in which she portrays an inward, thoughtful regard. Agar is an artist who toppled cartoonish and vulgar surrealist caricatures of women by avoiding looking at directly at the viewer in a series of poetic photographs and paintings.

Concealing herself in the shadows, she favours veils of diaphanous cloth as a means of controlling what is to be revealed.

Second aspect of interest in the myth of Medusa in terms of Ilaria’s work is the manner of Medusa’s punishment. Athena found in Medusa a scapegoat for the desecration of her temple, because she lacked the sufficient power to punish Perseus. The Book of Leviticus describes a pair of goats, the escaped one running into the wilderness to bear our sins, whilst the other was sacrificed. Both possibilities are alluded to in Groviglio (Tangle) (*A Matter of Light*, 2022). In Ilaria’s painting a female figure is dragged towards the water, to be cleansed or sacrificed, we do not know. We perceive the suggestion of a stain on her body, and the evocation of shame as whilst the painted figures are unclothed, she alone is shielded with a cloth. The figure facing us who stands by the water appears to look towards us, but we find that she is faceless and inscrutable. Amongst the mess of limbs, it is the central character to whom our eyes are drawn. She alone provides the code for understanding, if only she could speak.

12 Barber, Lynn. *A Life in Pictures*. theguardian.com/artanddesign/2007/dec/02/art. Viewed June ‘22.

**Epilogue**

Ilaria’s paintings and mezzotints suggest the stage in early psychological development dominated by the mess and chaos corresponding to the trauma associated with the threat of the return of the time of the pure drives, or materiality of the real, here referred to as the abject. In overcoming this threat the individual constructs a defined self-image, allowing for separation from the maternal presence, thus leaving behind the pre-linguistic stage which nonetheless threatens to return. Signifiers of the abject were uncovered in Ilaria’s compositions which foreground mess, chaos and entanglement, saturated with symbolism connected with the feminine, fertility, and the mother. Associated signs correlated with castration and the myth of Medusa are invoked throughout Ilaria’s prints and paintings, as exemplified by the gaping mouth of the empty tin in Tuna, bordered by the sharp edges of the opened lid which curve menacingly upwards in a ghastly feigned smile, oil from the fish leaking like blood onto a plate which is crossed with a knife. Scissors are another leitmotif of castration, appearing in works such as Ensemble, and Bitter.

The formation of self-image in psychology provides salvation from the horror of being dominated by the impulsivity of the drives, enabling the individual to begin to build understanding through the logic of differences. I recognise myself, and I am a being separate from that of the maternal presence. Reflecting this process, as the viewer of the painting, it is by constructing our own representation in the work that we are offered the opportunity to examine our psychical responses. Ilaria’s paintings thus represent the mirror which reflects the narcissism of early development back onto the viewer. By unravelling the narrative presented in these pictorial spaces we see ourselves differently. We can be drawn in through a phlegmatic use of excoriating contemporary humour, which helps to create a bond between artist and viewer, but it is ultimately recognition of the brilliance, the luminescence of the works themselves, the “exquisite lightness18 of their execution which moves us.

Post-human theories have inferred that we have reached a stage beyond psychology because the emotional representations of the mind do not enable it to change what it perceives. These works counter this thesis because they promise an ellipsis, a space for building meaning in the image through the filter of our unique underlying responses. We believe in the life of Ilaria’s objects, in their relational and affective presence, so that, for us, “they are capable of incorporating external influences and unfolding outward their own affects19”, matter internalised as psychic representation. Shirts is a tender, moving, portrait by proxy, in which two shirts, or perhaps there a third tucked behind the others, protected by them, lay enfolded, one partially covering the other. Patterns, shapes in the rumpled cloth awaken a longing to reach out and smooth the fabric with our hand, which must feel cool in comparison to the air in the room behind which is dappled with reflected light. Love, tenderness, care, the shirts allude to diverse individual stories. For what or whom are they waiting, the folded shirts? There is a multiplicity of conceivable narratives. This embodied sense of the materiality of the objects is the key to the response elicited by Ilaria’s prints and paintings. We must inherently believe in the real existence of something to be convinced. Encoded within the paintings themselves is a grounded sense of the human presence as well as evidence of the tools, material, and creative practices used in their creation. The tactile texture of the paint, the familiarity of the cast of objects embedded in a real place, the home, all transformed by the brilliance and vitality of the light. Trace of the dynamic power of place, process and matter, created by the addition of water to a little bit of powder.

He/She is perhaps the supreme potent hermeneutic key to the possibilities of Ilaria’s work. The dark depths of velvety mezzotint provide an extraordinary sense of connection with the organic living vigour of its matter. The charismatic presence of the cactus represents the prospect of autopoiesis, the interconnectedness of all things which extends beyond anthropomorphism, in its status as an organism which is self-sustaining, independent, and vital. The areoles which support the spines are angled to move towards the light and give it a comedically fierce appearance when they are recognised as supporting a curvy ‘face’ looking down its beaky nose towards the viewer.

Human traces hint at compelling and complex narratives beyond the scary spikiness. The spines can harm but their biotic existence protects the plant from harsh climatic conditions as well as repelling predators. Culturally the cactus symbolises warmth, protection, and maternal love through its enhanced capabilities of resilience and endurance. Nurturing is evinced by its absorption of carbon dioxide during the day and its ability to oxygenate the air at night, as such it is a cipher for compassion, reciprocity and interconnectedness, essential components of future survival.

Ilaria’s story began in Italy, the child forging independence at home through making things with her hands, and it is to Rome that Ilaria plans to return. As Rosi Braidotti asserts: “Place is a one kind of embodiment of being, and the encounters of living things are recorded there22”.

When the Italian artist returns to Italy, the qualifier is rendered quasi meaningless. Altered perceptions effect change and help to throw off the unwanted categorisations and oppressive labels which threaten to hold us back. Too sexy, too serious, “housewife from Fulham”, Ilaria shrugs it all off with a contemporary skewering of mythology and art history, manipulating objects in a carnivalesque swapping of roles in which a central cast of ‘characters’ plays hide-and-seek with the audience. Empowerment, mastery, mental independence and symbiogenesis are located in the refinement and playfulness of the work. The sexuated presence of the mezzotint cactus depicted in He/She, laughingly referred to by the artist as ‘obscene’, is viewed through the spectrum of Ilaria’s “tiny acts of subversion”. The matter of the “Italianness” of Ilaria’s work once she returns will be reckoned. We can, however, assert that texture emerges as the light intensifies.

Image

15 Ibid.  
16 Ibid.  
17 Ibid.  
18 Kristeva, Julia. *The severed head*. Translated by Jody Gladding. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012. 548.

19 Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022. 134.  
22 Braidotti, Rosi. *Posthuman Feminism*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2022. 134.