



# Liz Arnold

Camden Arts Centre / February — April 2009  
File Note #38 *Liz Arnold*

Richard Kirwan

# Animals & Insects

*Time may enhance what seems simply dogged or lacking in fantasy now because we are too close to it, because it resembles too closely our own everyday fantasies, the fantastic nature of which we don't perceive. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as a fantasy when it is not our own.*

— Susan Sontag (1964)

A peculiar, androgynous hybrid, part-embryo, part-skull, rattles across a wooden bridge. In the background, a blood red sunset falls across a turbulent landscape. Surely one of the most iconic images in the history of art, Edvard Munch's *The Scream* is a fine example of our collective need to capture an image of anxiety. So overblown, so over familiar, Munch's original intention to capture 'the scream of nature' has slowly morphed into something altogether different. (Liz Arnold's response to *The Scream* was to always tickle the strange creature under its chin). However, Arnold's paintings might also be seen to approach anxiety and emotional unrest, from her own sense of idiosyncratic fantasy. Less natural. More artificial.

*Quality Time on Your Own* was very nearly the title of the painting that Arnold exhibited in the New Contemporaries exhibition at Camden Art Centre in 1996. Depicting a large, reclining ladybird blowing smoke-rings from a filtered cigarette into an azure sky, the work is joyful and cartoon-like, but also tinged with melancholy. Arnold eventually called the work *Mythic Heaven*; yet both the provisional and actual title indicate the artist's very particular narrative sensibility. When questioned about

Kimberley Clark 1999 / Acrylic on Canvas  
150 X 100 cm / Courtesy The Estate of Liz Arnold





her work, Arnold was clear about her interest in the ‘freeze-frame’ quality of narrative painting, and about the set of circumstances both prior and subsequent to the image being suspended or withheld. It is precisely this sense of uncertainty that allows these paintings to transcend their references to animated cartoons or illustration. Of course, the anthropomorphic quality of animals and objects adopting human behaviour or form is familiar in many cartoons, and a device that Arnold deployed in a great deal of her work. And yet, in Arnold’s painted fantasy, there is no exaggerated violence, no slapstick comedy — the ambition of such entertainment is thwarted in favour of the stillness of painting.

From the offset of her career, Arnold remained dedicated to the ongoing possibilities of painting. The larger work she made whilst at Middlesex Polytechnic (1987–1990) underwent a series of developmental changes during her subsequent study at Goldsmiths’ College (1992–1994), although many of her recurring motifs were established and sustained throughout her time at art school. Amongst the neat topiary hedges and miniature brickwork, oversized handbags with an almost architectural ambition were counterbalanced by interiors featuring a variety of feminine garments; busy floral blouses and diaphanous negligees. Arnold was fully aware of the transformative power of ‘dressing up’. The flared trouser suits, platform heels, laboratory coats and complex knitwear all underline the very particular sense of identity she created for the protagonists in her work. In some cases, assertive and sexy — in others, decidedly less so.

One of the most notable aspects of Arnold’s painting is their predilection for a colour palette of saturated, luminescent colour. These



Previous spread:  
*The Thing from Another Planet*, 1994 / Acrylic on Canvas / 61 X 91.5 cm  
 Courtesy The Estate of Liz Arnold

*Vicky Park* 1997 / Acrylic on Canvas / 54 X 95 cm  
 Courtesy collection Marcello Bonetto, Italy

preferences and choices were partially informed by a fascination with computer games — and these also informed her sense of ‘shallow’ pictorial space. The dizzy, shifting schism between superimposed layers of background and foreground imagery found in games such as *Sonic The Hedgehog* also provided inspiration for the post-industrial horizon of nuclear reactors and toxic factories in works such as *Uncovered*, 1995 and *Country Life*, 1999.

In reproduction, Arnold’s work appears to be extremely graphic — yet when we find ourselves in front of these canvases and watercolours, it is perhaps surprising how involved the handling of the paint actually is — painterly, even. In the earlier works, the colours are mixed with gel medium and literally whipped into bubbly, frothy impasto, painstakingly applied to thousands of repetitive flowers and leaves. As the work developed, Arnold began to employ illusionistic brushwork to suggest shadows and perspective, contrasting sharply with the intricacies of crazed patterning in a spilt bottle of nail varnish or the embroidered trim on a posh frock.

Animals and insects were certainly more than ciphers for the artist to play out emotional states of mind. Arnold was also preoccupied with what she called “the extraordinary human intervention into the so-called ‘natural’ world”. Her interest in animal rights and ecological issues manifests itself in works such as *Kimberly Clark*, 1999. Arnold’s creature-characters are depicted alongside human beings engaged in mysterious scientific research activities, bordering on vivisection and vegetable irradiation.

Beyond the pop-cultural influences inherent in Arnold’s painting, the B-Movie beasts, the cartoon heroines, the computer games and retro fashions, there is also evidence of a thorough understanding of art historical precedents. Certainly not in the knowing sense of the Post-Modern manner, or in the conceptual end games of Appropriation art — but certainly in the spirit of appreciation. Phillip Guston’s disavowal of his Abstract Expressionist work in favour of his later, figurative ‘story-telling’ remained a constant source of wonder. At the opening of the Alex Katz exhibition in 1998 at the Saatchi Gallery, Boundary Road, Liz was particularly pleased that Katz had personally signed and dedicated a copy of the catalogue for her. In 1994, the same year as her graduation from Goldsmiths’, the Royal Academy of Arts presented an exhibition of small paintings by Goya, entitled *Truth & Fantasy*. Needless to say, Liz loved it. We are better able to enjoy a fantasy as a fantasy when it is not our own.

Richard Kirwan is an artist based in London

## List of Works

### *Mythic Heaven* 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 61 × 61 cm  
The Saatchi Gallery, London

### *Vicky Park* 1997

Acrylic on canvas, 54 × 95 cm  
Collection Marcello Bonetto

### *Regarding Ghost* 1997

Acrylic on canvas, 65.5 × 100 cm  
Private Collection Courtesy  
Galleria In Arco

### *Saturday Night* 2000

Acrylic on canvas, 82 × 127 cm  
Private Collection, Cologne

### *Country Life* 1997

Acrylic on canvas, 90 × 130  
Lotta Hammer-Brandt  
and Ulf Brandt

### *Felicity* 1996

Acrylic on canvas, 75 × 73 cm  
Arts Council Collection,  
Southbank, London

### *Uncovered* 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 122 × 76 cm  
Arts Council Collection,  
Southbank, London

### *Chicken* 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 106 × 76 cm  
Cranford Collection, London

### *Sunset* 1999

Acrylic on canvas, 36 × 66 cm  
Collection of Gavin Turk, London

### *Petal* 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 151.5 × 88 cm  
Private Collection, London

### *Some Kind of Wonderful* 1994

Acrylic on canvas, 61 × 100 cm  
Private Collection, London

### *Untitled* 1993

Acrylic on canvas, 73 × 73 cm  
Private Collection, London

### *The Thing from Another Planet* 1994

Acrylic on canvas, 61 × 91.5 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Night Life* 1994

Acrylic on canvas, 122 × 151.5 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Bedtime Story* 1997

Acrylic on canvas, 95 × 168 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Susan was a Succubus* 1997

Acrylic on canvas, 75.5 × 90.5 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Beauty Product* 1999

Acrylic on canvas, 80 × 120 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Brunettes* 1999/2000

Acrylic on canvas, 133 × 153 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Vendetta* 1995

Acrylic on canvas, 91.5 × 61 cm  
The estate of Liz Arnold

### *Pet Champetre* 1996

Acrylic on canvas, 86 × 137 cm  
Per Gentile Concessionere  
del coll. Igino Materazzi

### *Redheads* 1999

Acrylic on canvas, 122 × 141 cm  
Private Collection, Barcelona

*Regarding Ghost* 1997 / Acrylic on Canvas  
65.5 × 100 cm / Private Collection  
Courtesy Galleria In Arco, Turin



*Beauty Product* 1999 / Acrylic on Canvas / 80 × 120 cm  
Courtesy The Estate of Liz Arnold



**Liz Arnold** (1964–2001) was born in Perth, Scotland and studied BA Fine Art at Middlesex Polytechnic, London (1987-90) and MA Fine Art at Goldsmiths College, London (1992-94). Solo exhibitions include Galeria Mario Sequeira, Braga (2000); Lotta Hammer, London (1999, 1997) and Chicago Project Room, Chicago (1999). Various group shows include 'Beck's Futures', ICA, London (2000); 'Zauberhaft', Dresden; 'The Blood Show', Five Years, London; 'Anxiety', Collective Gallery, Edinburgh (all 1999); 'Facts and Fictions', part 1, Galleria in Arco, Turin (cat); 'It', Salia Gia Gallery, London; Lotta Hammer, London; 'Inbreeder: Some English Aristocracies', Collective Gallery, Edinburgh (all 1998); 'Interesting Painting', City Racing, London; 'Wince', The Old Operating Theatre Museum, London; The Approach, London; 'GOD', with BANK, Dog, London (all 1997); 'New Contemporaries', Tate Gallery, Liverpool and Camden Arts Centre, London (cat) (1996); 'Cocaine Orgasm', Bank, London (cat); 'The Tenants', Bruce Road, London; 'Hard Work', Shift One, Exmouth Market, London (cat); 'Lost Property', W139, Amsterdam touring to Great Western Studios, London (all 1995); 'Tinsel', Adam Reynolds Gallery, London (1994); 'Pet Show', Union Street Galley, London (1993).

Since her death in 2001, her work has been exhibited in various group shows including 'Machinic Alliances', Danielle Arnaud contemporary art, London (2008); 'World Gone Mad', Herbert Read Gallery, Canterbury and Castelfield Gallery, Manchester (2006); and 'Painting as a Foreign Language', Edificio Cultura Inglesa, Sao Paulo, (cat) (2002).

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#### Reading / Viewing list

##### Publications

- *World Gone Mad* published by Herbert Read Gallery and Castlefield Gallery (2006)
- *The Saatchi Gift to the Arts Council Collection* Hayward Gallery, South Bank Centre (2000)
- *Liz Arnold* publication for Lotta Hammer / Galeria Mario Sequeira exhibitions (1999)
- *Young British Artists: The Saatchi Decade* Booth-Clibborn Editions (1999)

##### Articles and reviews

- Andrew Graham-Dixon, 'Liz Arnold', *The Independent* (02/05/2001)
- Jonathan Jones, 'Liz Arnold', *Frieze* (Jan/Feb 2000)
- Michael Wilson, 'The Blood Show', *Art Monthly* no.229 (1999)
- Martin Maloney, 'Bad Painting', *Flash Art* (Jan/Feb 1998)
- John Windsor, 'Baddies with Brushes', *Independent on Sunday* (20/10/1996)
- Martin Coomer, 'The Tenants', *Time Out* no.1310 (1995)

##### Viewing

- *The Brood* Dir. David Cronenberg (1979)
  - *Bride of Frankenstein* Dir. James Whale (1935)
  - *The Tenant* Dir. Roman Polanski (1976)
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'I am preoccupied by the fictional space inside paintings as self-contained parallel worlds. Places to explore the strangeness of a civilised, sophisticated species and its values. These other worlds may be in another solar system or they may be our world magically altered where human emotions, addictions and preoccupations have filtered through to our fellow earthlings or some other inhabitants of our universe. The heroines in the pictures are finely furry, fall in love, have their hearts broken, get furious about the environment and the destruction of their planet, come back from the dead, avenge wrong doings, have day dreams and day trips and always look magnificent.'

— Liz Arnold, October 1997



*Mythic Heaven* 1995 / Acrylic on Canvas / 61 X 61 cm  
 Courtesy The Saatchi Gallery, London

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Cover: *Uncovered* 1995 / Acrylic on Canvas  
 122 X 76 cm / Courtesy Arts Council Collection,  
 Southbank, London