

AUTHENTIC EVERYDAY

BY HETTIE JUDAH

She seems without effort, and this is crucial, to be able to give her total attention freshly, without prejudice, to whatever it is that attracts her eye and be totally absorbed by its unique qualities. Knowledge—and this includes the background of art history as well as observation of the physical world—has been assimilated but somehow completely overtaken by the impact of the new experience. [...] At the same time her characteristic denial of cliché rests firmly upon choices made from a position of discriminating awareness.

—Roy Oxlade, "Some Thought About Rose Wylie's Paintings and Drawings" (1998)

Rose Wylie and Roy Oxlade had been married and had lived together for over forty years when he, as if seeing her work for the first time, set down these thoughts, among others, on his wife's paintings and drawings. Oxlade and Wylie met while studying at Goldsmiths College in London. Oxlade had encountered artists while on his national service, and he was inspired to start a part-time art course on leaving the armed forces, before enrolling in art school: "I fell into the trap straight away," he said.

Although Wylie took a sustained break from painting while raising their family, the pair studied together for postgraduate degrees at London's Royal College of Art in the late 1970s and lived, worked, and taught together until Oxlade's death in February 2014.

In writing and speaking about their own art and art making more broadly, Oxlade and Wylie have cited allied philosophies and common points of reference. While crucially distinct, their paintings nevertheless share certain elements of style and composition.

Since winning the Jerwood Drawing Prize in 2003, Wylie's work has attracted increasing critical attention and has been the subject of exhibitions at Jerwood Gallery, Hastings (2012); Tate Britain (2013) and the Serpentine Gallery (2017) in London; and a number of shows in Europe and the United States.

Although presented together in a small exhibition at Rutherford College in the University of Kent in 2004, Oxlade's and Wylie's work has largely been considered separately, on independent terms. Given the noxious art world tendency to view female artists' achievements through the prism of influential men in their lives—as if talent originated in the man and was transmitted, Midas-like, to those in their orbit—it is understandable, indeed laudable, that it has been so. Speaking of his wife's "resolve to be her own person," Oxlade said: "Even a glimmer of a suggestion that we have things in common, I can sense a resistance to take that in. I don't think it matters at all, but I can understand it."

Earlier this year, Oxlade's work was the subject of a first posthumous exhibition at Alison Jacques Gallery, London. While the impact of his work as an educator and writer is still felt, as an artist it is now Oxlade who is being championed as the undervalued spouse



Roy Oxlade, *Pink Handle*, 1988. © Estate of Roy Oxlade. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London



Rose Wylie, *Surprised Boy Meets Girl*, 2015. Courtesy: the artist; David Zwirner, New York / Hong Kong; Choi & Lager, Cologne / Seoul

of a prominent artist rather than vice versa. In the belief that it can do no harm to locate Wylie's art within the framework of ideas that she and Oxlade built up together, it seems an apt moment to consider these two artists in relation to one another and within the context of their shared environment—philosophical as well as physical.

Coming to Oxlade's paintings after a few years in which Wylie's work has been particularly visible, stylistic echoes immediately present themselves: the flattened pictorial space, the strong graphic line, the recurrence of individual motifs. The dictum of painting what you see—your authentic everyday—produces, in Oxlade's work,

an image vocabulary drawn from the immediate surroundings of the home he and Wylie shared in Kent: lemon squeezers, scissors, jars of pencils, his wife. Within Wylie's "everyday," we catch, too, a glimpse of football games she watched with Oxlade, her voracious appetite for film, and a mapping of remembered space.

The artists share a tendency to bathetic humor: the domestic and mundane intruding into the space of art-historical grandeur. In Oxlade's *Olympia's Trolley* (1989), the odalisque on the divan lies beside an unglamorous, wheeled shopping trolley rather than the servant bearing flowers in Édouard Manet's original. In Wylie's



Roy Oxlade, *Lemon Squeezer, Coffee Pot and Figure*, 1987. © Estate of Roy Oxlade. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London

Surprised Boy Meets Girl (2015), an improbably proportioned nude—drawn from a goddess figure in a Pompeian fresco, but now more than a little indebted to Barbie—is ogled enthusiastically by a young man, as if he is spying on her in a striptease booth.

In their handling of paint, Wylie and Oxlade diverge strongly. Oxlade's canvases are laboriously worked, paint applied heavily, layer on layer, at times scraped across the surface in great bladed arcs. Even in his brighter works, such as *Anemone and Box* (1984) or *Kitchen Knife and Scissors* (1986), there is an underlying sense of disturbance leaching through, an awareness of earlier, rejected choices: a literal darkness beneath the surface. His heavy use of black and darker tones brings a sense of an ill-lit winter interior, and the mental closing in

that accompanies it. In *Rose and Ink Pot* (1987), a headless nude figure on a dark background is viewed past a brown smear of a curtain that evokes visceral disgust and occupies a troubled object universe quite distinct from the insouciant yellow line that describes a lampshade, inkpot, and easel to the right of the canvas.

The immediate impression of Wylie's paintings suggests, by contrast, a freshness, spontaneity, and optimism. This optimism can easily be overstated—Wylie does not shy from engaging with trauma, as seen in the central darkness of *Rosemount (coloured)* (1999), which maps the bombing of her home and neighborhood during the 1940s. Wylie can also paint with a lightness of touch, and favors a deliberate sketchy quality and the use of graphic shorthand such



Roy Oxlade, *Kitchen Knife and Scissors*, 1986. © Estate of Roy Oxlade.
Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London

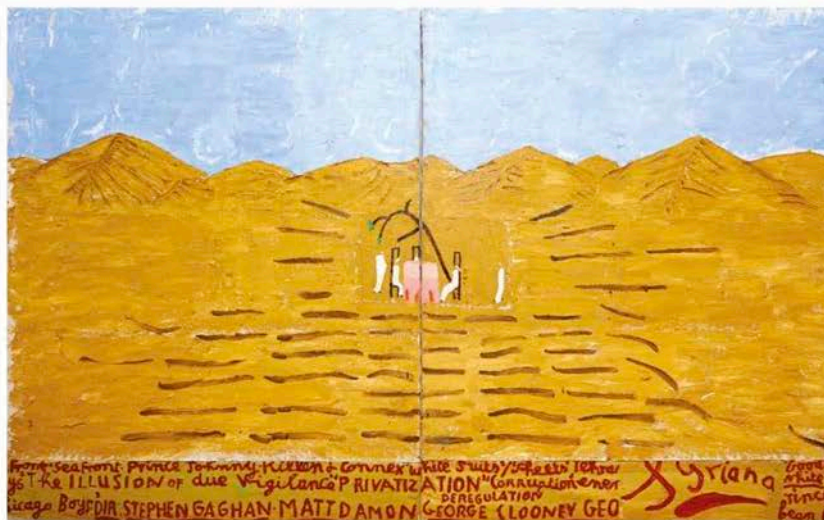
as the pattern she terms “medieval grass” (three short strokes of green, resembling clumps on a tapestry). Portions of canvas often remain exposed.

There are sometimes marks of movement and paintfall on the canvas from its being worked unstretched on the floor of her studio. Figures and words are penciled along the edges, some technical measurements, others closer to marginalia: commentary and references relating to the finished work. In *Queen With Pansies (Dots)* (2016), notes at the edge in purple crayon tell us that the large image of Queen Elizabeth I was “From the Ditchley Portrait” and the pansies to the right of it from the Kent village of Newnham. More assertive fragments of text appear within the “picture” of the painting: on either side of the virgin queen appear the phrases “can but does not take revenge...” and “in giving back she increases.” The creator of the Ditchley portrait, Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger, is named, though the name is clipped by the edge of the canvas. (Wylie has explained that she deliberately fragments and misspells words that appear in her paintings to break the authority and primacy of text).

The sense of spontaneous urgency in Wylie’s painting is enhanced by her habit of collaging additional portions of canvas, tape, or paper, apparently so that a portion of the picture might be quickly

reworked. Yet an examination of Wylie’s drawings and watercolors suggests a very different narrative: figures and compositions are tested over and over again; portions of collage and directional notes transfer quite directly from working sketches onto the final canvas. What we have, then, in the final painting, is a picture that carries within itself the entire process of its creation. In a preparatory sketch of the Pompeii Venus that stars in *Surprised Boy Meets Girl*, the goddess figure appears fully formed and framed, complete with the inscription “dressed to kill” that runs across her feet in the finished work.

A number of the grouped paintings that form Wylie’s *Film Notes* series (ongoing) reinforce the degree of planning and care that sits beyond the artist’s apparently loose and improvisatory style. In both the diptych *Kill Bill (Film Notes)* (2007) and paired works referring to the 2005 film *Syriana*—*Pink Table Cloth (Long Shot)* (*Film Notes*) and *Pink Table Cloth (Close-Up)* (*Film Notes*) (both 2013)—we are offered two subtly different views of the same scene, much as we would be offered different cinematic shots. Wylie paints from memory, so she is the photographer for the purposes of these movie moments, choosing to zoom in or out of the action, broadcasting both enjoyment in the larger background (the House of Blue

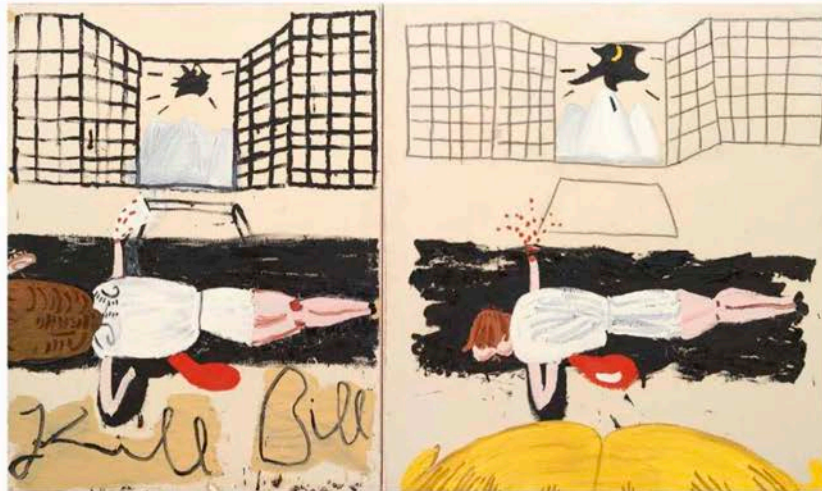


Rose Wylie, *Pink Table Cloth (Long Shot)* (*Film Notes*), 2013.
Courtesy: the artist; David Zwirner, New York / London / Hong Kong;
Choi & Lager, Cologne / Seoul

Leaves restaurant in *Kill Bill I*, the desert landscape in *Syriana*) and the dressing of the focal element (a bleeding body with a severed hand, the titular pink tablecloth).

In other works, Wylie engages with the instability of the filmed image, the flickering frames that build into an apparently still moment on screen, and how this in itself is a jarring fragmentation of the fluid, restless way in which we see and take in a scene. Sitting on a *Bench With Border (Film Notes)* (2008), the actress Penélope Cruz is recalled from a scene in Pedro Almodovar's *Volver*. In the central

panel, the seated figure of Cruz is framed by fragments of her own image—knee, hair, feet—as if we were only seeing an isolated portion of a much larger pattern composed of a single repeated image. The outer border of the work is composed of “close-up” images of the actress’s head, nearly but not exactly identical. Wylie makes no masquerade of these being individual frames within a filmed sequence, yet the suggestion of a parallel in the act of looking is there: the paradox of attempting a static portrait when neither eye nor subject can be still.



Rose Wylie, *Kill Bill (Film Notes)*, 2007. Courtesy: the artist; David Zwirner, New York / London / Hong Kong; Choi & Lager, Cologne / Seoul



Roy Oxlade, *Rose and Ink Pot*, 1987. © Estate of Roy Oxlade. Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London

In the relationship between Oxlade's drawings and his paintings, we likewise see the evolution of a cast of “characters”: forms that reappear as though painting were mental collage that brought together extant pictorial elements. First appearing in charcoal on paper, the figure study *Head First* (1986) acquires a recurring role in *Figure, Small Jug and Coffee Pot* (1987); *Lemon Squeezer, Coffee Pot and Figure* (1987); *Yellow Lemon Squeezer and Coffee Pot* (1987); *Pink Handle* (1988); and *Lemon Squeezer* (1987). The yellow lamp and easel seen in *Rose and Ink Pot* appear again in *Lettuce Dryer* (1998), and the lettuce dryer itself, with its irresistible offer of an abstract grid, lends its wire mesh dome to a number of compositions. Oxlade takes these established elements as rudiments, improvising with them in the act of composition as a jazz musician might with familiar

themes. The aim was to achieve an appearance of spontaneity within a satisfying overall design.

Writing in 1990, the critic Peter Fuller recalled his experience of the summer school Oxlade and Wylie held every year at Monson Road in Tunbridge Wells, Kent:

I soon formed the view that Roy and Rose were two of the most original and challenging teachers of art that I had come across... the classes exemplified one of Roy and Rose's central ideas: that there is something universal and indiscriminate about human creativity. Indeed, they believe that professionals are often more cut off by their training than those who are untutored in any conventional sense.



Oxlade wrote prolifically about art (often in the pamphlet *Blunt Edge* and the magazine *Modern Painters*), so it is largely through his writing that we have these “central ideas” expanded. Here amid summary dismissals —of celebrity artists, the pursuit of the market, grandeur, and the prioritization of idea over execution (among other contemporary ills)—we find Oxlade’s thoughts on the woeful tendency to confuse the importance of an artwork’s subject with the significance in the artwork itself: “Art cannot lean for its authenticity upon the artist’s response to portentous events. Not every crucifixion is a Grunewald.” Advocating a return to the “shared language” of drawing, he suggests as appropriate subjects “less our concepts and more our perception of things around us, our lives: things, trees, houses, cats, people.”

In searching for art that recaptured the untutored immediacy of cave painting, Oxlade and Wylie shared, to a degree, a common pantheon. They admire Tal R, and certain works by Matisse. Wylie has written of her regard for late Philip Guston and the “jump” from his early work and from the New York School that I find particularly exciting.” Oxlade likewise cited Guston’s hard-fought turn from abstraction in a number of essays, describing his deathbed self-portrait *East Coker-Tse* (1979) as one of his “finest paintings.” It was a work that set a precedent, in Guston’s explicit identification with the text of T. S. Eliot’s poem *East Coker*, with Oxlade’s own (and Wylie’s) incorporation of textual reference points within the body of a painting to “fix a contextual background for the work.”



Rose Wylie, *Lolita's House* installation view at David Zwirner, London, 2018.
© Rose Wylie. Courtesy: the artist and David Zwirner, New York / London / Hong Kong.
Photo: Anna Arca

Oxlade routinely attacked the art critical canard (one he associated in particular with the critic Robert Hughes) that an artist must first master “good” drawing (i.e., academic draftsmanship informed by late Renaissance ideals) to earn what Hughes termed “the right to radical distortion.”

Inherent in Oxlade’s disavowal of the academic value system underpinning received ideas of “good” and “bad” drawing is a concomitant rejection of the hierarchical value system of art that places Western European/Renaissance drawing and painting at its apex. “As everyone can speak, sing, dance, everyone can draw. To regain the ‘spirit of the cave,’ there would be every reason to benefit from the study of examples of drawing from the whole of human cultural history for companionship and not just those which celebrate our ‘superiority.’”

Wylie, too, has taken pains to clarify her position in relation to, for example, the paintings of lions and zebra seen on the side of trucks in Africa that informed her work *Lorry Art* (2010). It was her aim, she writes “to respect them as paintings, and stay with them, and not modify them into Western art, as the Cubists did with African ritual imagery a hundred years ago.”

Both as an educator and as an artist, Oxlade’s commitment to art rooted in instinct sprung in turn from his early studies under the British artist David Bomberg at Borough Polytechnic in the 1950s. Later, as a mature student at the RCA, Oxlade returned to consider his early years as part of Bomberg’s Borough Bottega Group (1953–1956), first in his MA thesis, and later as the subject of a PhD.

Bomberg had regarded his classes at Borough as “re-education by shock treatment.” “It is impossible at this distance to convey just how big a potential danger to orthodoxy Bomberg’s classes were in the parochial climate prevailing in the art schools of London in the

years just after the Second World War,” wrote Oxlade, years later. “Inevitably Bomberg’s influence at the Borough Polytechnic was seen as threatening. Students from other London art schools attending his part time and evening classes were seen, and saw themselves, as subversives.”

Bomberg had been expelled from the Slade School of Art in 1913 for his radical rejection of the accepted approach. Examining the older artist’s long search for an alternative to the values and ideals of the Slade, Oxlade found, in Bomberg’s Spanish landscapes (1929–) and the work that came after them, “a significant breakthrough” in his approach: a rootedness in nature and the recovery of an instinctive capacity.

Oxlade promotes a view of Bomberg’s legacy that places his work as an educator on a par with his (posthumously recognized) achievements as an artist. Both art and teaching were eloquent of an approach that should be seen as “a synthesis in which personal expression, as that which is specific and unique, is allied to the universal within a fundamental language of form.”

In rereading “Thoughts About Rose Wylie’s Paintings and Drawings” in the light of Oxlade’s earlier writing on Bomberg, as well as his broader art critical writings, certain dearly held ideals become apparent. One might see the description of Wylie’s fresh and unprejudiced way of looking, and of painting rooted in experience, as perhaps the highest praise her husband might have afforded any artist.

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Rose Wylie, *Queen of Pensies (Dots)*, 2016.
Courtesy: the artist; David Zwirner, New York / London / Hong Kong;
Choi&Lager, Cologne / Seoul

1. Peter Fuller, "Monsoon Road Remembered" (1990), reprinted in *Art & Insincerity, Selected Writings of Roy Oxlade* (London: Ziggurat Books, 2010).
2. Roy Oxlade, "And Death I Think Is No Parenthesis," from *Blunter Edges 3* (2009), reprinted in *Art & Death* (London: Ziggurat Books, 2013).
3. Ibid.
4. "Rose Wylie responds," *Big Boys Sit in the Front* (Jerwood Gallery, 2012).
5. "A Dialogue between Roy Oxlade and Marcus Reichert," *Roy Oxlade* (Art Space Gallery, 2004).
6. See, for example, Robert Hughes, "The Artist as Entrepreneur," *New Republic* (December 14, 1987).
7. Roy Oxlade, "There's an Iceberg Up Ahead" (2009), reprinted in *Art & Insincerity, Selected Writings of Roy Oxlade* (Ziggurat Books, 2010).
8. "Rose Wylie responds," *Big Boys Sit in the Front* (Jerwood Gallery, 2012).
9. Quotation from Bomberg's papers by Roy Oxlade in "David Bomberg: The Climate is Changing" (2007), reprinted in *Art & Insincerity, Selected Writings of Roy Oxlade* (London: Ziggurat Books, 2010).
10. Roy Oxlade, "David Bomberg: The Climate is Changing" (2007), reprinted in *Art & Insincerity, Selected Writings of Roy Oxlade* (London: Ziggurat Books, 2010).
11. Ibid.
12. Roy Oxlade, "David Bomberg 1890–1957" (Royal College of Art Papers, No. 3, 1977), reprinted in *Art & Insincerity, Selected Writings of Roy Oxlade* (London: Ziggurat Books, 2010).

Rose Wylie is a British painter. She studied at Folkestone and Dover School of Art, and at the Royal College of Art. All of her work is centered on painting and drawing. Rose Wylie's solo exhibitions include: Serpentine Galleries (2017), Neue Galerie Gladbeck (2017), Choi&Lager, Cologne (2017), David Zwirner, London (2016); Chapter Gallery, Cardiff (2016); Turner Contemporary, Margate (2016), Space K, Seoul (2016), UNION Gallery, London (2016), VW (Veneklasen / Werner) Berlin (2015), Staatliche Galerie Wolfsburg (2014); Tate Britain BP Spotlight Display (2014).

Roy Oxlade (1929–2014) was an English painter, writer on art, and an art educator. Selected solo exhibitions include: Alison Jacques Gallery, London, (2018); *It's What You See*, Art Space Gallery, London, (2013); Reed's Wharf Gallery, London, (1993); Gardner Centre Gallery, University of Sussex, (1990); Odette Gilbert Gallery, London, (1988). A prolific writer, Oxlade contributed regularly to *Modern Painters*, *Art Monthly*, *Blunt Edge* and *The London Magazine*.

Writer **Hettie Judah** is chief art critic for *The I* and a regular contributor to *Numéro Art*, *The Guardian*, *Garage*, *Frieze*, *Artnet*, *Art Quarterly*, *The New York Times* and *T Magazine* online. She is a contributing author to numerous books including the forthcoming *Vitamin T* (Phaidon, 2019), *Space Shifters* (Hayward Publishing, 2018), as well as *Ding Yi* (Anomie, May 2017), *Olafur Eliasson: Your Glacial Expectations* (Thames & Hudson, May 2017), *Fashion Game Changers* (Bloomsbury) and *Footprint* (Lannoo). She lives in London. When not looking at, discussing, and writing about art, she can usually be found walking her dog on Hampstead Heath.



Roy Oxlade, *Lettuce Drier*, 1998. © Estate of Roy Oxlade.
Courtesy: Alison Jacques Gallery, London