

ROY
OXLADE'S
PAINTINGS
BY HENRY
WARD

When looking at a painting by Roy Oxlade, there is a euphoric moment when what appear to be abstract gestural marks suddenly fix as recognisable, nameable form – become arrested as something that we know.

The 'subject' of Oxlade's paintings is the banal objects of the everyday. Oxlade spent most of his life living and working alongside his wife, the painter Rose Wylie, in their home in Kent. Having a studio in the middle of his house, Oxlade took inspiration from the everyday objects lying around him: the paraphernalia of both studio and domestic interior. His paintings are arenas in which the act of painting is performed as a journey of discovery. There were no preparatory sketches, though drawing was a distinct and vital aspect of his practice. The canvas is animated by Oxlade's marks and revisions – by his repeated overworking: there are often layers and layers of heavily-laboured paint. The resulting paintings feel pregnant with the information that we know is hidden underneath the smears and smudges. As a painter looking at his paintings, I cannot help but respond to the seductive, luscious quality of the brush marks, the combinations of colours, and the palimpsest nature of the surfaces.

Sometimes it is only when reading the title that a painting by Oxlade mutates for me into the recognisable forms upon which it is

based. An initial reading of *Three Electric Fires* (1988) sees a ground of thickly applied deep red, smeared in wide horizontal bands. It is obscured by multiple layers and is broken up by three forms: two of which appear to be floating, while one is sitting on the Philip Guston-like floor (a floor which is a simply-described horizon at the bottom of the composition). These 'object forms' are spikey and animated. Each one contains a vivid yellow single brush mark within its cage-like structure. In the top left-hand corner of the painting is a fourth form, this one a dirty grey smudgy shape, overwritten with more of that red ground colour. It is something that is difficult to read. Even when including the title, and the realisation that these three forms are the subject, one is left questioning why two of the fires seem to be floating in space. A closer inspection of the smudgy grey fourth shape reveals it to be an upside-down nude with enormous, pendulous breasts. If this figure is lying down, then our initial understanding of the painting is literally turned on its head. The red ground – up until now readable as some kind of backdrop – becomes a floor, and the three fires are all facing a nude form that now takes on the role of a model in a chilly life-room. Such playful compositional contradictions are a rich part of Oxlade's approach. As his paintings are constructed – and as each iteration is reworked and obliterated – a surprising balance is created. Forms tread the line between being representations of things and existing in their own right as part of the painting without standing for anything.

That nude in the top left-hand corner pops up again and again in other paintings. We see it in *Pink Handle* (1988) where, this time, it is scribbled in white. Oxlade eschews his favoured drawn line and allows the figure to be found through the paint itself. Key details of the eyes, mouth, and nipples are picked out in chalky pink. In this work, we

Opposite: *Hidden Identity*
2009
Oil on linen
41 x 30 cm
Courtesy of the artist

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are introduced to a ghetto blaster – an object rarely seen among the more commonplace objects familiar from his paintings: lemon squeezers; coffee pots; easels; canvas pliers, and jars of brushes. It is confidently described in strong black lines and takes centre stage in an area of scumbled white overpainting found in the lower third of the painting. The painting is balanced on the right-hand side by a red-pink form, anchored to the edge of the composition by a strong black line, possibly representing an aerial. This painting, like so many of Oxlade's works, appears to be in flux: its forms moving and reacting to one another as though animated. His approach – one that finds forms as he paints, reworks, overpaints, layers, and obliterates – means that everything feels like it is on the edge of disappearing. The US American painter Amy Sillman – when asked how she knew if one of her paintings was finished – said, “*When someone takes it away.*” I wonder if there was a similar sentiment for Oxlade. I can imagine him continuing to paint any of these ‘finished works’. What we see feels like one possible state among many. The more I look at a *Pink Handle*, the more I see: those dashes of viridian green which peek out from the oppressive black background painted over an existing form; that diagonal yellow form – almost dead centre – with its bright red ‘crown’; that ghost of a form first delineated in the favoured Oxlade red, then pushed backwards by the confidently described black lines of the ghetto blaster.

In *Tins and Brushes* (1995) Oxlade is at his most forthright. The title and composition appear deceptively simple: a collection of brushes – laid out in preparation for work – are lined up at the bottom of the picture. Next to them, a couple of paint tins are depicted in thick pink and green paint mixed into the white that forms so much of the background. The majority of the composition is dominated by a heavy cream colour that covers over previous

decisions with dense opacity, but that also operates as a blank canvas within the painting – something waiting to be painted. Oxlade provides us with a playful narrative – he makes a painting about the painting that he is making. The ‘how’ of how he reaches his composition is laid bare and we can see him change his mind; see traces of things put down and then later worked over.

Often we are given no title, no clue as to what we are looking at. In *Untitled* (1985) there is, initially, little to go on. A sea of pale pink, broken up with dashes of red and black brush marks, covers most of the surface. At the centre is a darker grey area, apparently caused by something more substantial having been erased. Several drawn forms dance across the surface: simple line descriptions of things that quickly become recognisable as candles. Two of these are topped with bright yellow smears that clearly represent their flames. Oxlade has reduced these forms to the fewest marks possible in order to describe them. Not only are they barely depicted, they are barely there. They sit as drawn marks on the luscious pink surface rather than as objects in any kind of illusionistic space. Looking closer at the smudgy grey area we see two more candle forms – this time scratched back into the surface – playing, once again, with our understanding of what we are looking at and drawing us back to a reading of the painting as a painting.

In *Untitled* (1981) we see things that look like things: a light bulb (hanging above a tiny figure that looks like a baby) stands opposite a large red and white form, that looks like a giant camping lamp. Between these two elements a wide band of white divides the canvas in half vertically. Oxlade has drawn a door handle and key onto this area, and in so doing, created two distinct spaces in which the action of the painting takes place. The light bulb is a clear reference to Guston's familiar motif, but whilst the

Previous pages clockwise:

Artist and Curtain

1987
Oil on canvas
121 x 152 cm

Pink Handle

1988
Oil on canvas
121.9 x 152.3 cm

Figure and Two Brushes

1987
Oil on canvas
101.5 x 122.2 cm

Three Electric Fires

1988
Oil on canvas
122 x 152.5 cm

Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery, London

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painting has a strange story to lay out, it remains overwhelmingly about Oxlade's interest in what paint can do. The forms feel hard-wrought. He leaves the drips and splatters that betray the energy of the painting's making. The surface is heavy and loaded with multiple layers of paint. Oxlade has worked and reworked it, feeling his way to the final composition.

Oxlade's works can appear primitive. Indeed, he embraced this appearance and the importance of the 'untrained' hand in his work. He believed that many of the issues with painting were a result of artists being unable to unlearn: that 'real drawing' was usually made by people who didn't consider themselves artists. But behind the primitive appearance of Oxlade's work was an extremely educated and sophisticated mind. He was a painter steeped in art history, with a rich understanding of the traditions of painting, and he was very opinionated on what was, and what wasn't, 'good painting'.

A painting like *Infanta with Black Easel* (1989), confronts us with an explosion of fluid gestural marks – blue, brown and yellow – against a largely cream and muted pale pink background. On the left-hand side of the canvas is a large smudgy black form, upon which are overpainted cream lines that delineate a vertical form. The first impression is that we are looking at an abstract painting. But the usual euphoric moment of recognition comes quickly: we spot the outline of a dog in black in the bottom right corner, and then recognise the cream lines – working their way upwards across the black form – as being the outline of the easel mentioned in the title. This reliance on outline – the distillation of form to the barest of essential description – is something that Oxlade achieves with aplomb. Once the dog is spotted and the title is referred to again, it starts to become clear that we're looking at references



to that most famous of paintings about painting: Velázquez's *Las Meninas*. The awkward little brown hourglass form becomes the body of one of the maids, and the yellow form, floating just above the centre of the composition, might be comprehended as the Infanta herself. And that towering smudgy black is the artist standing behind his easel. But whilst the Velázquez original is a painting of darkness – with the one point of magical light being the mirror in the background in which we see the reflection of the king and queen – in Oxlade's painting the space is filled with light; with the colour of those creamy pinks and buffs.

Infanta with Black Easel
c. 1989
Oil on canvas
181.5 x 145.2 cm

Courtesy Alison Jacques Gallery
London



Las Meninas has been a subject for many painters. Picasso undertook his fifty-seven variations in 1957. But while Picasso was definitely making transcriptions based on the Velázquez, Oxlade appears to be using the original as a springboard for something else entirely. It is almost as though the Velázquez painting simply provides him with a convenient excuse to make a painting. When Oxlade renders his dog in that merest of outlines he is not depicting the dog in the original painting. Instead, the original composition has provided him with the excuse for including a dog.

It's not surprising that a painting that tackles the act of making a painting might prove a worthy inspiration to Oxlade. He regularly returned to the theme, as with his *Artist and Curtain* (1987) based on Vermeer's *Artist in his Studio* (*The Allegory of Painting*). The studio as a subject for his paintings is common in Oxlade's work and the clutter of familiar objects – both domestic and related to the act of painting – are his muses. By utilising the forms that lay about him, Oxlade was free to immerse himself in the challenge of making the painting, and he could navigate the difficult question of what to paint. When we look at one of his paintings, we glimpse half-observed previous iterations – erased forms, rewritten areas – and this evidence of the building up of layers is an important aspect in how we read his works. We can 'see' the painting being made. The longer one looks at an Oxlade canvas, the more it gives back. We can trace the journey he went on and re-enact the performance of the painting. One of the exciting aspects of looking at, and reading an Oxlade painting, is the experience of simultaneously seeing its paint and recognising the thing that the paint stands for – the form it represents. We can see both of these things at the same time. One thing doesn't contradict the other, though we might expect that it should.

In looking at *Figure and Two Brushes* (1987) I am excited, first, by the marriage of smudgy blue against the curtain of thick white on the right-hand side, and then by the splodgy pink and red brush strokes in the lower third of the painting. At the same time however, I can recognise a cup holding two confident erect brushes and can begin to recognise a reclining figure delineated in the red strokes in front of those pink strokes. The figure is both 'represented' and also just a collection of gestural red drawn marks. In most cases, the rapidly delineated outlines – the aspect of the paintings that provide us with the recognisable objects – appear to be the final act of an ongoing performance. This performance is vital.

Oxlade painted in order to find out what he was painting, and it is through active looking that we find out too.



Scaffold - Henry Ward
2019
Oil on canvas
150 x 125 cm
Courtesy of the artist