

THINK PIECE

From the lovestruck work of rising painter Sophie Barber, to a Frieze Week show of the late Sam Gilliam, some thoughts on the role of adoration in art's history, and its present. By Matthew McLean.

LOVE LETTERS

During the pandemic, I started telling people I loved them. People I already loved, or was on the verge of loving, but wouldn't necessarily enunciate it to, suddenly became loved: verbally, out loud. The narrowing of life at the time, its special, slender parameters, made not saying 'love' feel like a waste of time, a waste of words.

That Sophie Barber isn't afraid of the word 'love' was evident in the title of her 2021 debut at Alison Jacques in London, 'How Much Can a Love Bird Love'. The titular fowl appeared in different poses of cooing and courtship across five small paintings in the show, as sweet and plump as cupcakes. Barber's works range in size from the handheld – canvas wrapped in lumpy layers over tiny frames – to sheets the height of a garden shed, suspended weightily from the wall. *Wolfgang feeds Tukan Hovis and seeds mix from the shop on the corner* (2021), a two-

and-a-half-metre long cascade of three sheets of canvas pinned together, registers almost as a tapestry, as much a work of fibre or sculpture as pure painting. On its surface, Barber's brushstrokes rendered a reproduction of Wolfgang Tillmans's photograph *Tukan* (2010) above the words: 'WOLFGANG LOVES TO LOVE BIRDS'.

'I started that painting,' Barber tells me of this work, 'just thinking about how much I love that image. And the closest I could get to it was painting it, from my iPhone screen.' Like an art collector, love for Barber is a feeling tied to possession. 'When you love something so much, you just want to have it, to own it,' she continued, describing her favoured subjects as ones that are 'there for the taking'. The things Barber loves – that is, the things she paints – are very often other artworks. Some of her paintings record a glimpse of shows she loved seeing, with the artist's name and the venue dutifully recorded

(*Lee Lozano at Hauser & Wirth*, 2022), others her perception of iconic artists' own passions. Not only does Wolfgang love birds, but 'Donald baechler loves his flowers', as one work declares; 'Alex Katz loves the rain' states another, while Michael Dean, proclaims a third, simply loves 'painting' itself. Of these works, Barber explained: 'I might want to paint flowers, but I don't know how to translate that through me, so I'll look at Donald and paint the flowers he did. It's another way of getting to what I want,' she states, 'I can't paint things that I don't love.'

If the history of painting is a series of love stories, then Barber's work reminds us that these romances are often between artists and other artists. It has long been the case that artists looked to their forebears for instruction: going to Rome to study directly from classical examples was a staple of painterly education from the Renaissance onwards. But even at

Below
Sophie Barber, *Michael Dean loves painting*, 2022. Courtesy: the artist and Alison Jacques Gallery, London

'Sam Gilliam: Late Paintings' is on view at Pace Gallery, London, from 11th October to November 12th 2022. 'The EY Exhibition: Cézanne' is on view at Tate Modern, London, until 12th March 2023.

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the dawn of modernism, Cézanne, whom Picasso allegedly dubbed 'the father of us all', spent many hours in the Louvre drawing Delacroix and Rubens obsessively, as well as more obscure figures such as Félix Nicolas Frillé and Pierre Puget. You can see what Cézanne learned from these studies in Tate Modern's major survey of his work, opening in London just ahead of Frieze Week.

The work of perhaps the ultimate example of an 'artist's artist' – that is, one whose gifts may pass the public by, but are deeply cherished by their creative peers – is on view across town. That 'Sam Gilliam: Late Paintings' at PACE is the late artist's first solo show in this country testifies to the strange pattern of his career: though he won early acclaim for his ground-breaking, richly coloured 'draped' canvases, and was included in the 1972 American pavilion at the Venice Biennale by Walter Hopps, by the 2010s he was an underrecognized figure, making shows but without the public attention, or the financial security that was his due. It was the love of another artist, Rashid Johnson, who changed that. While being wooed for representation by Los Angeles's David Kordansky, Johnson and Kordansky discussed a mutual passion for Gilliam's work. 'Sam Gilliam: Hard Edge Paintings 1963–1966', curated by Johnson and organized by Kordansky, resulted in 2013, re-establishing Gilliam on the art map. Works from the show were acquired by MoMA, and Gilliam became part of Kordansky's programme, including given a stunning presentation at Frieze Masters in 2015. In 2017, Gilliam's works was included in the seminal touring exhibition 'Soul of a Nation'. This new exhibition will no doubt cement the late artist's work's ascendance to the highest echelons of art world esteem. But it took an artist's love, first forged as a student, to re-start him on that trajectory.

So it goes: love preserves art, extends its life, and in turn, makes more. In his 1956 poem 'An Arundel Tomb', Philip Larkin considered the survival of an English medieval funerary carving of married couple. Reflecting on the monument's stone gestures of romantic fidelity, he concludes: 'What shall remain of us is love.' Looked at another way, what really remained in front of Larkin, was an artwork; love, of different kinds, was what put and kept it there.

