

THE SPIDER, THE PLANTS AND THE BLACK, BLACK COT. Communications with Shani Rhys James.

'Trees are black, all black as far as the eye can see after a bush fire'.

In the many self portraits of Shani Rhys James, black haired, her black eye's stare out at us from her vibrantly colourful paintings. In this essay I would like to focus on the artist's use of black. Black is a difficult colour to use. There is arguably, no such colour, it is always various shades of grey, but in conjunction with bright red's and yellows, it becomes a deep and dark void, or alternatively it advances out of the picture towards the viewer, depending on how we read the form it takes. And this essay is all about a 'reading' that I am making. What is the meaning of the recurrent use of black backgrounds and more particularly, black forms by Rhys James, an artist usually regarded as a painter of bright colours? This constant presence of 'blackness' is such that when I think of her work, my mind conjures up, yes, reds certainly, but predominantly, black. Incidentally, these are the colours of the Anarchist flag, the colours of revolution. Also colours favoured by Spanish painters like Goya and Velasquez, soulful black suggests the 'duende' of passion and heightened emotion. Recently Rhys James visited the Prado in Madrid to view Goya's paintings and sent me a message about the thrill she felt on seeing his work, particularly his use of black. The same was true of her feelings on seeing Picasso's 'Guernica'. She quoted this line to me; 'Noble black in the hands of the Spanish artists has asserted itself as a colour and not as the absence of the same" (Joaquin de la Puente) She also witnessed Flamenco performances, of which she says;

The duende- the spirit seen in the flamenco and art realised the essence of it all touching that inner spot of fear, dark. Having to go through that, Andalucía's music like a wail of the soul, keening for something lost, was riveting and the dance was extraordinary

'Black as night', 'Bible black', 'crow black', 'black dog', 'black as sin', apart from 'In the black' in your bank account, there are few cheery connotations to black despite the predilection of many artists to wear it a lot, as I do, and as does Rhys-James in most of her paintings. In a sketch from TV's 'The Fast Show' of a decade ago, a middle-aged couple is seen painting 'en plein air' with easels and watercolours. The man, happily painting away suddenly notices a dark cloud and tells his female partner, who instantly tries to change the subject. But he is transfixed. 'It's almost, yes, it is.. Black' he says. Again his partner, who seems to know what comes next, tries to re-direct his gaze to the light, to the bright colours. But it is too late. 'Black' he says, getting up, 'black' he repeats as he goes into paroxysms of rage, kicking over his easel and hers. He goes crazy, screaming, 'black', 'black', 'black'. Black is dramatic, it sets a mood that an artist like Goya deployed to great effect.

This essay (without suggesting any similarity to the above comedy sketch) will examine how black underlies and enhances the otherwise colourful paintings of Shani Rhys James, and also its predominance in the three dimensional installations that she has produced. In conversations and written messages with the artist, it appears that she is in some ways unaware of the implications of this usage, but surmises several explanations. However, certain elements of imagery that is painted in black, might suggest an interesting, if speculative, attempt to cross-reference these instances with the work of other artists such as the French/American Louise Bourgeois and Palestinian/British Mona Hatoum. Rhys James, like the two mentioned above, also has a hybrid identity of Welsh/Australian, she holds an Australian passport and has talked often of her complex sense of identity.

This, I feel, is an opportunity to look at an aspect of Rhys James' work that has not previously been explored, and to put this in the context of (female) artists of the time. But there is also a line that might extend back to Australia, a land of burnt out farmsteads and trees, and the homeland of Sidney Nolan, whose black silhouettes of 'Ned Kelly' in the brightly lit landscape have become a familiar motif that has become embedded in the iconography of Australia. Similarly, Rhys James' work has become part of the iconography of Wales, and needs celebrating as such. When I asked about influences from painters such as Nolan, Rhys James replied:

'Not that I am aware, re; Nolan - love them though-- but the Australian freedom of paint must be in my blood, Arthur Boyd, Charles Blackman. As a child I would stay at Charles Blackman's family house a lot and wander into his studio. I was brought up with the work of all those artists; my mum has one or two. They all started off as potters Arthur Boyd's parents, so in the blood I suppose'.

Despite departing Australia at a young age, the place still looms in her imagination; seven generations of her mother's family lived there (her father arrived there from Wales).

Something about Australia, the transience of the land; bush fires, impermanence and yet we arrived with all the trappings of the front parlour; the corset, the doilies. Our family houses were burnt, and all traces lost time and again. The earliest of my family arrived in chains. Also the black Victorian costumes of women giving up in mourning for their lives stuck in houses that they obsess about.

In a conversation with the painter Brendan Burns, I mentioned the theme for this essay, and he commented that for him, the reds in Rhys James' work seemed to have a ground of black beneath them. It gives to the reds richness, and I could picture clearly what he meant.

The combination of red with black has a long history in art, creating chromatic dynamism. The Bauhaus movement made dynamic use of this combination in formal terms, but there is also symbolism. Red is often a symbol for blood, and red with black was used repeatedly in filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's work,

particularly in 'Ivan the Terrible' (1946-58) and Ingmar Bergman's 'Cries and Whispers' (1972) that was influenced by Edvard Munch's 'By the Deathbed' painted in 1895.

'I see black as a colour, not a shadow, though it can be a shadow.'

It is a strong graphic element to a painting. Positive, dynamic if undiluted. If thin and slightly transparent, lively, if thick black paint can get cloggy and dead.

The black on the wallpaper is something entering the wallpaper not so seemingly nice, also a strong graphic element, like a drawing on the wallpaper, but also like a crack.

The black ground simplifies a painting, like a Manet or a Goya, velvety black, it has to be the right black and sometimes difficult to achieve.

You can bring all the symbolism to it, the drama of the theatre, emotion, dark emotion fury, rage, repression, mourning, sadness, dark thoughts, black moods.

Black of the 60's clothes, the black polo neck of the beatniks, the black silk dress of the Victorian, European, Swedish, Russian ladies at the turn of the century. Repressed, unable to express themselves outside the confines of their family, trussed up in corsets and buttons and weighed down by heavy garments of black if a certain age. A kind of mourning for life and an expression of personal fulfillment'

Chandeliers, along with flock wallpaper with bold design have been recurrent motifs in recent work. *Bedsit 111* for example, a painting that shows a head (self portrait) in the lower third segment of the painting, surrounded by a black floor with floorboards roughly scratched into the paint. The walls are red, and hovering menacingly above the head is one of the artists black chandeliers, like a tentacle'd creature, or a spider about to descend on the unwitting figure that is looking out at us. Bourgeois is evoked even more in *Giant Black Chandelier*, (2013) where the head is smaller, occupying only the lower quarter of the painting. The chandelier form closer, almost touching the hair, and is larger and more distinctly akin to a spider. The 'wallpaper' background has on it a pattern of large fleshy bright red flower or foliage that again dwarf the head.

In *Shower Cap*, (2013) the foliage plant life on the wallpaper has turned to black on a sky blue background. It may not be wallpaper at all; the bath might be in the open air and the plants real, and now towering over a recumbent figure (again a self-portrait) in a bath. Only the shower cap wearing head is visible over the high-sided 'retro' bathtub, and the face is turned towards the viewer as usual, and seems unaware of what is behind. But the plants remind us of the carnivorous Triffid's of John Wyndham's SF novel¹, and even the stainless steel taps and shower head become complicit in this scenario that suggest imminent and unpleasant attack. It is tempting to shout in unison 'it's

behind you!' in pantomime mode.

Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) has become an influential artist in the later part of the last century and the beginning of this one, an artist who dug deep into her own history and psychology to mine a set of visual metaphors (she is known as the founder of 'confessional art') one of which is the spider, which she titled 'Maman' (Mother or Mummy). The colossal sculpture made in 1999 follows from drawings and smaller works produced from as early as 1947. I have seen it several times in different places, from London (where it was installed in the vast Turbine Hall of Tate Modern at its opening exhibition in May 2000) in Bilbao outside the Guggenheim and in Doha, Qatar, in the unlikely setting of a massive and empty conference centre. The original steel sculpture commissioned by the Tate was subsequently replicated in bronze in an edition of six. The spider 'Maman', looms over the spectator, we can walk between the legs that balance on sharp points, under the body with its mesh 'egg sac' containing seventeen marble eggs.

'For Bourgeois making art is a way of fighting specific fears (Bernadac and Obrist, p.267)ⁱⁱ, one of which is the 'trauma of abandonment' that she suffered not only through her untimely birth on Christmas Day (Bernadac and Obrist, p.246) but also on her mother's death in 1932, when Louise was only twenty-one (Bernadac and Obrist, p.207). Having experienced motherhood herself, she has dealt with the ambivalent feelings a mother may have for her children, as contradictory as those a child may feel for his or her mother. Just as the 1971 sculpture Le Trani Episode represents 'a double attitude to be like a mother, and to be liked by a mother' (Bourgeois quoted in Morris, p.288; sculpture reproduced p.289), Maman may be read as referring to more than one possible maternal figure: the artist, her mother, a mythological or archetypal mother and a symbol of motherhood. In a diary entry in March 1975, Bourgeois wrote: 'you need a mother. I understand but I refuse to be your mother because I need a mother myself.' (Quoted in Bernadac and Obrist, p.72.) Encountering Maman always from the perspective of the child looking up from below, the viewer may experience the sculpture as an expression of anxiety about a mother who is universal – powerful and terrifying, beautiful and, without eyes to look or a head to think, curiously indifferent.ⁱⁱⁱ

It appears to me, that the black chandelier in Rhys James' work, suspended as on a strand of webbing, bears some comparison to Bourgeois' sculpture, in particular due to its recurrence as a motif in several paintings. As was the case with Bourgeois (who lost her mother when she was only twenty-one) Rhys James has a close relationship with her mother, an actress and colourful personality who brought the young Shani with her from Australia to London when she was a child. As she says, she 'only had the mother'. The chandelier hovers menacingly above the solitary figures in a series of paintings, seemingly about to pounce.

The way Louise Bourgeois is affected by her personal biography over and over again I relate to, haunted by experience. The need for physically creating

objects from her past, the bed, the room, the memory, the clothes, yes I relate very strongly to this and the symbolism of such objects.

Bourgeois lived to the age of 98 and managed to keep the trauma of childhood, her father's infidelity, her mother's death alive in her mind and her work. No sign of 'moving on' in her mind. Shani too, though not in such a directly confessional way, has a complex, competitive relationship with her mother, who also looks very like her, so that in the images of child and adult together (such as *The Black Cot* (2002) we cannot be sure if one is the mother of the other, or if both are versions of the same person, usually the artist herself. Part of the Jerwood Prize winning series, *The Black Cot* features the figure of a woman (mother or self-portrait again, or could it be an elder sister?) standing next to the child in the cot. The black cot becomes another consistently repeated motif. (What parent would chose to paint a child's cot in black?). Thus the cot appears to be made of steel or cast iron, looks institutional, and suggests a cage for an animal rather than a comforting and safe place for a child to sleep. Some paintings present a figure of a young girl standing next to a black hen coop, with similar effect.

The white latex glove on the dark floor beneath the cot in *Black Cot and Latex Glove* (2003) adds another layer of troubling narrative. What does all this mean? It can be argued that the 'props' are merely compositional, formal devices in the structure of the painting. A painting that is an elongated 'portrait' format, the lower third being dark, the rest a shimmering white. The 'cot' emerges out of the dark, its bars highlighted against the white. In effect this means the cot had to be black to stand out against the background, yet, the feet and caster wheels are delineated against the black with a white outline. The white glove underneath serves as a balance for the empty white expanse in the top third of the painting. The middle third is cot, child in white nightgown with red/pink skin looking directly at us, both hands gripping the cot bar. Even though I have described this only in terms of formal arrangement... there is no getting away from the fact that a scene has been set here for a 'narrative. As in Anselm Kiefer's similarly proportioned *Parsifal 1* (Tate collection) of 1973, this time it is an empty cot that immediately sets a train of thought running. There is a sense of heightened 'drama' in all of Rhys-James' work, no doubt one can suggest that her childhood within a family of 'travelling players', theatre people, actors and an immersion in plays, poetry and literature is inexorably connected to this. *I was brought up in the theatre; my parents had their own tiny theatre in Australia. I would hear lines being learnt costumes being made.*

It is also possible, that the 'actors' in Rhys-James' work are merely players', and that they are there to entertain us, puzzle us and make us think. It is noticeable also, that the figures face us full on, hardly ever in profile, as if addressing the seated audience in front of them. But, the artist, as 'author' of these dramas, is she separate from the play, or involved in it? Is the work not only self-portraiture, but autobiographic too. If so, to what extent can or should, such interpretations go? We might imagine that the empty, lone glove under the cot belonged to someone who has departed the scene. It looks like a surgical glove (one's of the kind that Rhys James uses when painting to

protect her hands from the oils, and which are strewn over her studio floor in great abandon). But a solitary latex surgical glove? Does it help us, or does it hinder us, to know that Rhys James' Welsh father, absent for most of her life, was a surgeon in Australia.

The cot itself is partly protective, but more clearly constraining. The child inside it is a toddler, standing up and holding onto the bars like a prisoner in a cage. The cot, in its solidity and blackness brings to mind some of Mona Hatoum's sculptural/installation works. Hatoum, born in Beirut in 1952, is an artist who does not like to tie her works down to explanatory statements, either to do with political, cultural or biographical background. But it is difficult not to bear in mind some or all of the above when looking at her work. She also deploys cage like structures, transforming familiar objects of the household into threatening and overpowering things. Cots and beds, and wheelchairs in gunmetal black feature, and a cot (*Incommunicado* 1993, Tate Collection) with a base made of razor sharp steel wire is memorably troubling.

In Rhys-James' own three-dimensional work, which was produced after a twelve-year period of gestation, it seems that elements from her paintings have materialised in real space and time. They take her work literally into another dimension. Suddenly, the crinoline wearing mannequin figures we had seen in her paintings confront us in our own space. Lit in gloomy shadow, they have a troubling presence, headless, clothed in black like mourners at a Victorian funeral, and surrounded by familiar props; prams and cots. These are female spaces, as if we have stumbled into the bedroom uninvited. There is an element of animation in the mechanised 'automata' as she calls them. A figure has a tapping finger, the pram moves backwards and forwards, the cot rocks suggesting the presence through absence, of the child within the cot. Seen three dimensionally, and without the bracing reds and yellows of the paintings, the installation of these 'objects' projects a menacing and disquieting atmosphere, awaiting the appearance of actors.

I wanted to act, but it seemed out of reach, their game. When my mother started to paint it was as if that part of her life was closed, had died, been denied, too painful to go to. So I went there, I asked my mother at seventy-five to record all her most significant acting roles. She was brilliant you see (ask Michael Bogdanov, Stephen Berkoff, David Hare) tragic she gave it up. The recordings don't do it justice, but it's a glimmer of something that is always intangible, elusive, that moment on the stage and then over. Most of the characters she played were woman at the turn of the century, from play's by Chekov, Ibsen, Strindberg, Tennessee Williams, all frustrated woman craving for something beyond the restrictions laid on them by society, the constrictions of gender, class, the time. Emotional, in mourning for their lives as Masha said in 'The Three Sisters' by Chekov.

The Tapping Hand Automata taps a metal hand, a metronome, the passing of time and says;

*'Amo, amas, amat amamus, amatis, amanti!
And I'm so bored, bored, bored! (sit's up)
I can't get it out of my head ...its simply disgusting. It's like having a nail
driven into my head.*

*When you have to take your happiness in little snatches, in little bits as I
do, and then lose it as I have lost it, you gradually get hardened and
bad tempered (pointing at her breast).
Something is boiling over inside of me, here'*

*This is from Masha's speech in Chekov's The Three Sisters, she is in a
black silk dress, and there is also Madam Arkardina from the Seagull
and Nina from the Seagull (Chekov) recorded within these automata.*

It would be reductive however, and possibly myopic, to see only this in the work of an artist as complex as Shani Rhys James. However, the biographical facts seem to re-enforce the feeling that we are looking at a stage set, both in the paintings and in the installations, where there is a role playing game going on, with tropes that repeat and reference relevant texts as well as the 'confessional' aspects of Rhys James' own life story. The stage is illuminated; we are focusing on the action on that stage. The rest is surrounding darkness, blackness.

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ⁱ 'Day of the Triffids' John Wyndham. Penguin Essentials. London 2014

ⁱⁱ Marie-Laure Bernadac and Hans-Ulrich Obrist (eds), *Louise Bourgeois: Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father, Writings and Interviews 1923-1997* MIT Press, London 1998.

ⁱⁱⁱ From Tate Website. <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625/text-summary>