

Absent Friends and Foreign Bodies

The work of Sasha Bowles.

IT'S FAIRLY SELF-EVIDENT that the work of Sasha Bowles is fantastical and exquisite. What isn't so obvious is just how complex, elusive and troubling these pictures really are.

To call them paintings would be to miss the point even though they do engage with the wider discourse that is painting.

In order to construct these elaborate, yet subtle deceits, Sasha has employed appropriation, a favourite strategy of the surrealists – her preferred 'hunting ground' being portraiture – particularly portraiture of the Spanish Court in the 17th century. More correctly, reproductions of 17th century portrait paintings from the Spanish Court.

Entire pages complete with captions sourced from books bought from charity shops and the like serve as her starting point.

These subtle and provocative pictures employ a complex mixture of modernist, postmodern and post-conceptual thinking. For those who might be wondering, the latter simply means that the lessons of conceptual art have been absorbed into her practice as a painter.

There's an exquisite paradox in these paintings. Although Sasha has made no attempt to conceal the source of her imagery, she has made great efforts to ensure that her additions and alterations are discrete – even invisible. That's not to say that the surreal products of her labours aren't already apparent.

The fact that Sasha's work exudes historical pedigree is due to the fact that the work appears to be 'torn' directly from art history – or more correctly, cut out of the aforementioned art books. Sasha then exploits the fact that the authority of the historical record has come to be regarded as thoroughly problematic.

"The highest ecstasy is attention at its fullest." Simone Weil.

These pictures are both fascinating and perplexing. But not for any obvious or conventional reasons. Sasha is neither illustrating theory nor indulging herself in what passes for self-expression – the 'fifth amendment' of 20th century art. Having said that, it's all the more remarkable that her hand is constantly present but seldom seen.

Her approach seems to involve affecting the mindset of an ill-disciplined picture restorer. One who, when asked to restore a painting, ignores all convention and replaces the likeness with a sea urchin, or some equally exotic or incongruous organism or baroque embellishment. The result is a string of sexual similes, some of which are blatant.

"Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race." H. G. Wells.

Not only are her paintings and photographs perplexing, absurd and even hilarious but thoroughly disturbing. Disturbing not because of some dramatic event or imminent disaster but because it isn't immediately clear what she has done – or more correctly, how she has done it. Let alone why.

She makes paintings that seem to resist conventional notions of identity and authorship. They appear to be the work of others – long dead. Velasquez is a particularly favoured 'collaborator' – if an unwitting one.

It's as if they were torn from some alternative, but faintly familiar history, or from a parallel universe. A universe in which the likes of Carl Fabergé not only makes the exquisite geegaws and trinkets of the aristocracy – but the aristocracy too.

Sasha's modifications and additions are painstakingly painted in such a way that they're rendered imperceptible in the particular, but viewed in the round are blindingly obvious. Sasha's intensions and her personality are invested in the concept just as much as they are in the object. For her, painting becomes an act of assimilation. If there are any quirks, they're those of a 17th century court painter, the likes of Goya – it's as if Sasha were the actor and Goya the dramatist.

"Every portrait that is painted with feeling is a portrait of the artist, not of the sitter." Oscar Wilde.

Sasha also makes sculpture. But her sculpture (like her painting) maintains a tenuous relationship with any notion of sculpture. For starters, her sculpture is quite intangible – it's intended to be – made in order that it should exist solely in photographs. Only her photographs.

These photographs look like they've been found. Lost years ago only to be rediscovered by the viewer. That's not because they're black and white but because they seem cloudy and foxed – remote. They're carefully photoshopped, resembling double exposure Victorian séance photographs – ectoplasmic and ambiguous. Others have painted additions – what appears to be a ruff or some similar appendage.

Her photographs also seem to reference the post-mortem portrait, once popular with the Victorians. They look like something from a not so distant world – these are parallel worlds presented with a striking matter of factness. A world just one degree out of kilter. A world in which a one minute glitch will have a profound impact – altering everything – as in the excellent film *'Primer'*.

"Art is not what you see but what you make others see." Edgar Degas.

The work may appear diverse but there's a common factor; the artist as collaborator, working in an alliance with the past. Sasha's role in the work is similar to that of a ventriloquist or dramatist – unobtrusive but influential. The apparent absence or anonymity is carefully contrived and multilayered.

What is erased from, or added to these images is invariably self-evident, but the ramifications of these interventions are significant. Our expectations are frustrated and our understanding contested but like disturbing images in general, it's often difficult to look away and even more difficult to ignore.

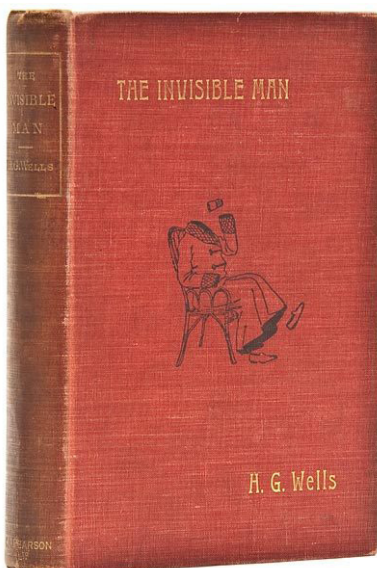
"The mind loves the unknown. It loves images whose meaning is unknown, since the meaning of the mind itself is unknown." Rene Magritte.

Sasha's intentions are cunningly 'smuggled' into the work using a form of impersonation or mimicry. She wants the degree of her intervention to be undetectable. Her hand is guided by the artist who's work is depicted in the colour plate.

In some respects it's an act of illusion that equates with ventriloquy. Against all reason something inanimate appears to be speaking. What's refreshing is that the artist's ego has become almost transparent. This self-effacing strategy only functions properly when the artist understands and genuinely respects his or her sources.

Also, in some paradoxical sense, invisibility, absence and the act of erasure collectively conspire to both frustrate and enhance our appreciation of her work. A single and precise reading is denied – not because the work is vague but because it is ambiguous. Ambiguity prevails. Mixed messages and coded references combine to produce an exquisite and perplexing image. The power of the imagination.

"Politicians should read science fiction, not westerns and detective stories." Arthur C. Clarke.



As the film's title suggests, invisibility was central to James Whale's 1933 film of H. G. Wells's novel *'The Invisible Man'*. The eponymous character in the film is referred to only as Griffin – a mythical beast: part lion, part eagle. The film presented a mass audience with the thought that maybe existence isn't what it appears to be. Ontology for the masses.

Sasha's work constantly reminds us that appearances are just that and not to be confused with facts.

What was once visible is available as a memory, particularly when looking at her modified portrait of the Duke of Wellington by Goya – it may be a mass of braid and headless but I for one can still visualise the duke's profile and sense of self importance. Sasha shrewdly relies upon a sense of collective memory.

Invisibility is commonly regarded as synonymous with non-existence or death. The subject becoming a cypher or tabula rasa – a site onto which we are supposed to be able to project our desires and anxieties.

'The Invisible Man' introduces us to a character with little history and less identity. A nobody.

It wasn't Whale's first foray into populist ontology. In 1931 he directed the first feature film version of Mary Shelley's *'Frankenstein'*. A novel which is widely regarded as raising questions of identity that reverberate today – well rehearsed existential conundrums like, what is it to be human?

Sasha's work addresses these anxieties in an agile and refreshing manner. Her 'sitters' can only be described as mutants. Objectified? Perhaps. But then they're not really people. They're transposed into the trappings of privilege, affluence and office – incarnate. They're clearly rendered as stuff but that doesn't mean that the approach isn't nuanced. The result is an aching recognition of a prevalent sense of cruelty.

These ideas are explored in staggeringly comprehensive style in Olaf Stapledon's 1937 science fantasy novel *'Star Maker'*. For those of you unfamiliar with this book it is simply overwhelming. It is a work of extraordinary vision and high ambition. A difficult and trying read.

In the course of the novel the reader encounters a myriad of life forms that are anything but familiar. A synthesis of all that might be regarded as human served up as a mystical version of 'animal, vegetable and mineral'. A mass of extraordinary and disparate life forms are hypothesised. Synaesthesia doesn't come close.

"The human body is the best picture of the human soul." Ludwig Wittgenstein.



Star Maker, rather like the Rev. Leadbeater's 1905 classic, entitled *'Thought Forms'*, would become a key text for surrealists, Theosophists and spiritualists – movements which all figured in the thinking that fuelled the ideological development of early modernism.

In fact, Malevich, Kandinsky and Mondrian were all involved with Theosophy and all of them would have been aware of Leadbeater's extraordinary book. I mention this because Sasha's 'portraits' raise more questions and cause more confusion than one would expect. And like so much thought provoking work, Sasha's pictures insinuate themselves – they constantly perplex and disturb. They can irritate.

Unsurprisingly, abstract thought and invisibility is the currency of sub-atomic physics and quantum theory. But when New Zealander Ernest Rutherford split the atom during World War 1 very few could visualise, let alone understand, what he had done. We still struggle with it.

It wasn't just science that was embracing notions of invisibility. Stalin was notorious for having erstwhile comrades and adversaries 'airbrushed out of history'. Murdered.

"Bad artists copy. Good artists steal." Pablo Picasso

There have always been artists who've either subverted or flaunted the conventions of their day. None more so than Arcimboldo the 16th century Italian painter. His paintings were a perplexing blend of portraiture, symbolism and anthropomorphism. All qualities that Sasha appears to employ in her work. I mention Arcimboldo as there are similarities, in appearance, if nothing else.



In 1990 Jaques Derrida curated an exhibition at The Louvre entitled *'Memoirs Of The Blind – The Self Portrait And Other Ruins'*. Central to this exhibition was *'Touch'* by de Ribera.

It's a portrait of a blind man touching a sculpted head with his hands. Derrida was enthralled by this painting as he thought it illustrated in an allegorical form, a central paradox of understanding.

What's even more poignant is that lying on the table in the foreground of the aforementioned painting is depicted a small portrait painting. The implications are numerous. The blind man is oblivious to the portrait within the painting.

Are we to identify with the blind man as viewer? What's also fascinating is whether the bust and the portrait within the painting are of the same person? Or is it fact the blind man – himself?

"We live in a fantasy world, a world of illusion. The great task in life is to find reality."
Iris Murdoch.

If I had to describe these pictures in terms of genre or idiom, I'd suggest that they're probably memento mori; meditations on mortality for a confused and fractious world – whether we like it or not.

Graham Crowley 2017.