

Mia Dudek's latest exhibition *Waiting Room*, presented at IMPORT EXPORT, comprises a series of tightly composed and executed figurative paintings and two large, theatrically staged photographs that place us in the most intimate of domestic spaces, the bathroom. The spaces articulated in the paintings are anonymous yet archetypally familiar. Though sparse and largely shorn of detail there are enough stylistic and material cues present to allow us situate them in, or at least project them into the pervasive world of contemporary design-led lifestyles; pastel blue, green and pink hued walls, a severely minimally designed sink, a rectangular bath tub sitting expensively in its own space on broad floorboards no less. Set against these signs of what passes as modern luxury, is an unsettling, perhaps even sinister undertow of the abject. Humans are absent as figurative subjects but, pending forensic verification, haunt the spaces of Dudek's canvases through material traces, of blood-red, pink and white organic secretions smeared, coagulated or floating on the walls, floors, ceramic surfaces and the watery planes of full baths. The humans who inhabited these domestic spaces are known here only by the stains their bodies have left behind.

Impressively, given their painterliness and the accomplished markmaking they exhibit, ranging from smooth, fluid brush work to the expressive daubing of dense, painterly textures, this is Dudek's first body of paintings. Her practice thus far has mainly employed photography, sculpture and installation, though the artist has always been experimental, fluid and adaptable in her means of expression. In its subject matter and sensibility however, *Waiting Room* is of a piece with Dudek's previous bodies of work. The tension between the "opposing forces of growth and compression", as one writer put it, has been the abiding fixation of Dudek's art, most often manifested as explorations of the visual and physical tension between structures, both physical and metaphorical, and the bodies and lives inhabiting and constrained by them. These concerns animate her photographic series *Skin Studies* (2010-2023) and *Inhabited* (2020-2021) and the sculptural pieces of *Body Recasts* (2016-2023) and *Skinscapes* (2016-2023). Indeed the two large photographs in *Waiting Room*, beyond their own particular and attractive qualities - they bring a distressed, almost New Romantic aesthetic note into the exhibition - also serve as portals that loop back to previous works and thus activate a web of allusive references within the world of Dudek's work. The bathtub, an everyday structure that after all is designed to contain bodies, is thus highlighted as an object and symbol of significance. It is present in the photographs and paintings of *Waiting Room* and in her previous installation works *Bathtub I & II* in which found bathtubs serve as uneasy containers for volumes of corporeally suggestive, intestine-like globules of polyurethane foam and from which skin-pigmented silicone has spilt and pooled on the floor beneath. The works in *Waiting Room* continue the exploration of this expansive, thematic territory and they do so all the more powerfully for being paintings. Dudek has described the move into painting as an ontological shift, driven by the desire to find and inhabit new, affective and otherwise expressive creative spaces and possibilities. The development has been a success. Within the context of

Dudek's previous series, her handling of painting as a medium here has brought an intensified open, discursive and dramatic quality into her practice. There is a compelling atmosphere of fertile, narrative ambiguity in the paintings. Whilst the artist suggests, through the exhibition's title and other statements, a set of readings and whilst we can map out their general schema at a glance, the questions of what, precisely the paintings are, or represent, still invite interpretation. Indeed the paintings present as if constructed with a formal and psychological precision so that, like Venus fly-traps, they draw the viewer in as they follow their intuitive and imagined reactions and readings further into the works.

The title *Waiting Room* is suggestive of the meanings of time and space within the paintings. Superficially it casts the bathroom as a transitional space of nominally minor significance since, naturally, waiting rooms are defined by the future events (even if just in a minute's time) that will happen elsewhere (even if just in the next room) that their users are waiting for, typically medical appointments or journeys by train or plane. Of course by making the site of the bathroom the centre stage in all the works, Dudek repeatedly undercuts the sense that we are viewing spaces of minor significance and disrupts the host of associations implicit in that premise. Temporally the title speaks to the heightened state of deferred becoming implicit in the act of waiting in a waiting room, especially in respect to medical appointments, since the status and identity of those waiting may be subject to radical change, most dramatically in the binary categorical difference between being well and being ill. As dramatic and serious as that last kind of waiting can be, there is still the sense of there being, in general, something quite silly about the act of waiting. Perhaps the clearest point in Becket's absurdist and bleakly comical allegory *Waiting for Godot* is that whatever it is that we are waiting for, it's not coming. The title *Waiting Room* might also be bleakly comical, as clearly there are no people left in the paintings to wait for anything.

In *Waiting Room* Dudek also channels something of the spirit of Virginia Woolf's excellent text *On Illness*, which has been an inspiration for this body of work. With verve and a light-touch Woolf examines how profoundly being ill can (depending on its debilitating intensity) alter our state and thus priorities (an insight well articulated in variants of the colloquial phrase "We all have 99 problems until we get sick") and by extension serves to question the priorities the world imposes on us. Further, Woolf valorises the potentially transcendental capacities to be found within the state of illness: "In Illness words seem to possess a mystic quality. We grasp what is beyond their surface meaning... In health... Our intelligence domineers over our sense... But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem... and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow...". From this perspective there is no waiting, illness is a state of self-defining meaning and value and the binary distinction between illness and health revealed as a craven instrumentalisation of the extreme productive bias of industrial modernity. In this spirit Dudek regards the paintings as, in-and-of-themselves, embodiments of organic events and bodily discharges.

As already noted, actual bodies are absent in the paintings. What we have are the architectural spaces of bathrooms and organic residues. So, like detectives we study the paintings for clues and signs. A number of the smaller pictures are close-ups of sinks. In one the sink is filled with what might be blood with unsettling neatness. In another work, one of the most powerful in the show, we stare down at a sink from above. It is surrounded by an expansive beige and narrower white surface which uncannily doesn't read as a floor and which Dudek has also exempted from rules of perspective and laws of physics so that the composition seems flat and three dimensional in different places. This unconventional plane is smeared with thick, expressively poured and brushed swirls and passages of red, pink and white paint. The visceral materiality of the painting communicates that blood, flesh and bone have been reduced down into these residues. In another couple of similar works, the two most abstract here, the colour of the staining becomes more mineral than organic, articulated in bright aquamarines, pinks, purples and yellows. In the larger paintings of bathtubs stranger things still are happening. One situates us directly facing a bath tub set against the back wall, corporeal smears stain the tub and large patches of the floor. It looks like a crime scene. In another, perhaps the most disturbing painting, a full bathtub sits in the foreground in which, it appears, a body has mysteriously dissolved into a chromatic, liquid form floating on the surface of the bath that somehow still retains some essence of the corporeal. Blobs of blood red swirl into expanses of lighter reds that shade into pinks that intermingle with passages of white. Reading the scene perception bias kicks in. We vainly try to read human anatomical features into the aqueous mess, we try to imagine what has happened here in this and other paintings. Spontaneous organic collapse? More fantastically we imagine some occult, inverted alchemical force is at work, reducing the complexity of life down to its constituent parts.

Whilst studying Dudek's painterly smears, a particular quote from Francis Bacon, the great painter of human flesh the post-war period, insinuates itself into the frame:

"I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory of the past events as the snail leaves its slime"

— Francis Bacon in conversation with Daniel Farson

Bacon and Dudek apparently share a materialist, non-identitarian vision of existence. In Bacon's most savage works, human bodies and faces collapse under the weight of the essential formlessness of the meat, as if the material substance of the body refused to believe in the temporary fiction that is the human form.

A similar process seems at work in Dudek's paintings. Bacon too was fascinated by the relationship between bodies and space, though with different nuances. Famously he depicted his subjects in what the critic Donald Kuspit described as 'space cages' - the ghostly rectangular shapes that Bacon habitually employed as framing devices. In Bacon's paintings they functionally symbolically and psychologically - intensifying the solitariness and alienation of the figure. In Dudek's paintings the entirety of the depicted spaces seem cage-like and going one step further even than Bacon's reductive impulses, figures are dispensed with completely, remembered only by the trails of organic matter they have left behind.

"There is only one picture of the bathroom, which has a single slit window but is nonetheless bright, thanks to all the reflective surfaces. A lush trailing ivy drapes itself across the window from the curtain pole, picking out the dazzling green of the mosaic floor tiles, which also run up the side of the inset bath. On a cylindrical cabinet with sliding doors the eye is drawn along a skyline of little bottles and vials, all by different brands but with similar labels in white, pink or light grey, the names printed in lightweight sans serif fonts...

...And it is a happy life, or so it seems from the pictures in the post advertising the apartment for short-term rental at one hundred and eighteen euros a day, plus the fee to cover the Ukrainian cleaner, paid through a French gig economy company that files its taxes in Ireland; plus the commission for the online hosting platform, with offices in California but tax-registered in the Netherlands; plus another cut for the online payments system, which has its headquarters in Seattle but runs its European subsidiary out of Luxembourg; plus the city tax imposed by Berlin."

— Vincenzo Latronico, *Perfection*

In considering the works of the *Waiting Room* another, perhaps oblique relational touch point persistently suggested itself - Vincenzo Latronico's recent novel *Perfection* that was shortlisted for the 2025 International Booker Prize. *Perfection* is an acute, deadpan and light-of-touch articulation of late-capitalist ennui told through the aspirational but dissatisfied lives of slightly hapless, millennial expat couple Anna and Tom in Berlin in 2010's, the apotheosis in time and place of international hipster culture. Anna and Tom's lives are self-consciously defined by their knowing consumer choices and the curated, outward projection of their taste that Latronico dispassionately skewers through detailed descriptions of the possessions and images that fill their lives. Alongside the novel captures the impotence of his subjects' image-and-social-media mediated desires - always aspirational, chasing experiences of authenticity, essence and intensity - that the world they inhabit suggests are within their grasp, but are ultimately always unattainable, being essentially, mirages. Naturally Anna and Tom themselves are active participants in the production and circulation of unreal images of perfection, as in the passages quoted at the beginning of the essay in which they artfully photograph their flat in Neukölln for Airbnb. In the unbridgeable gap between ideal and reality, disillusion and ennui grow in their lives like an infection. The book, of course, offers no dramatic ending. The characters keep muddling along in the same ways to predictably diminishing returns.

The immediate meeting ground between the paintings of the *Waiting Room* and *Perfection* is that in both human life seems more ephemeral and less substantial than the objects around them and the architectural spaces they occupy. More deeply the *Waiting Room* and *Perfection* invite us to question why this might be. Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman would have recognised Anna and Tom's predicament and described them as being trapped in 'liquid modernity'. Bauman proposed 'liquidity' as the hallmark of contemporary societies, characterised by the now constant dissolution, disruption and reconfiguration of previously solid social relationships, communities, institutions, norms and meanings catalyzed by primary agent of liquefaction - free market capitalism. Anna and Tom's low-key tragedy is their lack of understanding and accommodation with the contemporary liquefaction of signs and meanings. They keep hoping for some kind of communion with essence and thus live in ontological error. This is the root cause of their vacuity and lack of substance in sad contrast with their realness of their carefully tended apartment. Mischievously we might also imagine Dudek's paintings as depicting an alternative body-horror ending to *Perfection* in which the identities of Anna and Tom, stripped of their quotidian hopes and delusions, collapse in on themselves and following suit their bodies liquify, melting into the bath, onto the furniture and condensing into pools on the carpet. However, since, as Bauman also observed, that in our productive, consumer society the body must be healthy and efficient because its main role is authoring predictable patterns of joyful consumption, the true body-horror of our times is found in the bad-infinity of endless, digital content created by innumerable wellness and fitness influencers.

Latronico explicitly modeled *Perfection* on Georges Perec's first novel *Things: A Story of the Sixties*, in which a comfortable 'bobo' Parisian couple, Sylvie and Jérôme, in Paris, spend their lives chasing material desires and the accumulation of things, modish furniture, fashionable English clothes (this was the Sixties) and luxury accessories. As with Anna and Tom we find Sylvie and Jérôme defeated and failed by the end of *Things*. Their consumption never matches their aspirations and they themselves become consumed by status anxiety, ending up as, "tame pets, faithfully reflecting a world which taunted them". *Things* marked a time when post-war consumer society was accelerating into a state of 'liquid modernity' in which production, technology, sex, household objects and bodies and signs melded into each other. It was this fluid, uncertain ground that Alina Szapocznikow, an artist to whose work Dudek's speaks, mined to create her works in which bodies become reduced to elements, bellies, mouthes, breasts melded into consumer objects - an ashtray, a lamp, or flayed polyester skins.

In the same way that Francis Bacon considered himself a quintessential painter of the 20th century despite never explicitly addressing historical subjects, we might choose to see Dudek's works as history paintings depicting the likely fate the current population of the Global North, who despite their levels of material comfort, seem to be in a losing struggle with the structures and conditions that contain and largely define them. In an age when our species seems bent on self-termination through catastrophic consumption levels and self-induced technical obsolescence, our bodies seem more fragile and contingent than ever, in time, perhaps all that will be left will be organic traces staining our still standing structures.