

Before anything else in Victoria Roth's new paintings, you notice color. Sharp and deep, sour, delicate; shades soon attach to shapes and spaces, all vivid with texture. Roth's work is not figurative, but it is bodily. Things bulge and are veiny. Structures take dendritic turns. There are several, exactly applied gradients resembling psychedelic hair meticulously slicked around a part. Usually, a few forms control the composition, wringing a surface by its edges.

Central forms take on distinct personalities, as types of actors in Roth's work: intestinal masses like the rightward curve framing *Un amour tardif ou le songe de Claude Cahun* and the glandy, lightning-filled droops of *Wounds after Daylight*; trunks and stems rendered with tubular illumination in *Coast of Memory* and *Thoughts for A Curt*; limbs which stretch and crease along leathered joints. Actors sometimes turn into each other, irreverent regarding boundaries. Their materiality can be inconsistent, how the spine predominant in *Porous Heart* is spare mid-canvas, but changes its mind toward surface adornment as it extends to the left and right. At other points, forms intertwine in suffocated tangles, reach out tentatively, pin things in place. It's not all soft. Stylized ropes are used to bind and hold things in suspension; and spears and hooks puncture flesh or threaten to. A bundle of coral tissue in *Coast of Memory* is impaled by the painting's black framing device, featuring a subcutaneous stretch painted so voluptuously you forget for a second it would hurt.

It takes a while to figure out what's really going on. While the paintings are formal, the meanings they accumulate are not. Abstraction, for Roth, is obviously not about a removed language of essences and geometry, or the cool propositional play of historical gestures. Roth's abstractions get hot from wrangling feelings into whatever forms can manage to hold them, and stay that way, refusing to let that energy dissipate by settling into comprehensible subject matter. On the contrary, the work's referentiality allows a viewer to name sensorial qualities and their interplay by recognizing them in painted, metaphorical objects, creating space to consider affective forces and their effects as scenes.

Imagine what anxiety might look like, inside the body: how it twists, where it grabs, in what enclosing environment it strikes. Between a tense throat and beating heart, surrounded by muscle and fat, between blood and breath, there is a sensation. It does not belong to any organ, is not caused by concrete processes. The feeling is concrete. It makes its own contour, agitates its fleshy parameters. Imagine right next to it a stomachache, a pain which can be physiologically located, and which still might have a shape or weight beyond the stomach, and you are in the world of these paintings.

Roth takes this bodily imagination seriously, describing the experience of physical and emotional matter from the inside out. Of course the paintings are abstract. How else to account for the incongruity between the pierced specificity of a fresh heartbreak and grasping to recount it without cliché? Or, the unbinding lapse between the intimacy of interiority and the obscurity of the interior? Or, even, what our bones look like in fantasizing calcium releases? Roth defines qualitative distinctions primarily through color and texture: this slick scarlet ligament, that ochre snarl, copper ropes, a sanded viridian tooth. It is a way of illustrating contradictory impulses, the forced co-habitation of our passions, somehow held together within the form we call a body.

Roth's psychic companion in *Velvet Nerve* is Claude Cahun, the early 20th-century Surrealist writer and artist. Cahun's photographic self-portraits treat identity as malleable in images as striking as they are stylized, a reflection of Cahun's own queerness and anti-binary thinking, as well as of more Surrealist interests in role-play and tableaux. The gender play in her images is often anchored by her intense regard, so uncanny ideas about presentation and even the formation of the body are glued to the present by her gaze.

This tension is present for Roth as well: the surreal envisioning the paintings perform are rendered as fastened to their material present, to the ecstasy and sting of the here and now. The literal pinning is

complemented by Roth's use of lighting in the work. Roth will paint an active form as spotlight, often from behind or below, affixed to a specific moment through light. Even as her works reference the past and future—"tomorrow's embrace," "a late love," "wounds after daylight"—they are grounded in the extended present of emotions: yesterday's deception still aches in particular cavities; anticipating next week's love already swells the breath. This extended present becomes ecstatic, swallows reality into sensation into a kind of vibrating presence. This is another way to think about surrealism; the simultaneous life of interiority and desire alongside external, quotidian conventions.

Sex is an immediate reference in these paintings, with the kinky undertones of leather and restraints, and highlights the role sensuality plays in understanding and remaking the self. Another, less obvious model is the decorated initials in illuminated manuscripts. Included at the beginning of paragraphs or sections, these tiny paintings treat the first letter of the first word of text as the protagonist and compositional frame. In some of Roth's smaller paintings, one or two forms will take on a more iconic quality, sometimes even as nameable as the heart and hooks of *Un amour précis*. Less appellative forms occupy similarly graphic positions in paintings like *Deep Enough* and *Ypsilon Variations*, tying Roth's sensibility to language forms, and activating the dual longing: to feel the spirit in the letter, and to make the spirit legible.

In the illuminations, the negative space created by letterforms serves as an opportunity for abstract decorations in some cases, and vignettes related to the verbal content to come in others, foreshadowing the text through this introductory image. While some of Roth's paintings participate more starkly in their foregrounded dramas, as in the chiaroscuro staging of *A Private Moment*, in many other paintings, negative spaces created by dominant central forms are populated with decorations that flirt with narrative synchronicity. The pink background areas of *Ypsilon Variations*, for example, include olive variegations that could look like nerves or little figures, each a subtle reiteration of the painting's larger, ruddy loop. *Coast of Memory* brings this drama to a cosmic scale, its cobalt surround re-enacting the dynamic penetrations comprising the main spectacle.

This way of thinking the body, Roth's metaphorical visuality, is generous, expansive. Day to day, exterior visuality is so often a trap, a way to tell who or what another person is quickly, and Roth gives us a way out of these boxes by giving us a way in. The cost of this sensitivity is a little queasiness: Roth has mentioned that repetition can induce a kind of vertigo, a loss of the center and the thread. It is important to make space for this overwhelm, a profoundly human relationship to the self. Still, beyond the tenderness of

paint application, and the sweetness of embraces found alongside contortions, Roth also includes small moments of reprieve. The two sky-blue sockets of *Porous Heart*, like the sunrise gradient along *Coast of Memory's* upper right edge, are gestures toward air, an exit. It is as though Roth has given these forms not just sentience but the option of dreaming themselves in other ways, too. Even feelings can escape their fate.

-Gaby Collins-Fernandez