

Deborah Poynton's Model for a World: A survey of 25 years of painting

Deborah Poynton at The New Church

By Amie Soudien

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Deborah Poynton

Golden Acre, 2004. Oil on Canvas 200 x 300 cm.

The semi-domestic space of The New Church serves as a comfortable temporary home for the collection of paintings brought together for Deborah Poynton's retrospective: 'Deborah Poynton's Model for a World: 25 years of Painting'. The breadth of the artist's practice follows a clear trajectory, that spans her family, friends and reflects on the places where she grew up – most significantly the dense tropical scenes of Kwa-Zulu Natal. The domestic and the 'wild' feature prominently throughout the retrospective, and in this juxtaposition, bring together a perspective of a very particular kind of South African experience – one of comfort and a flirtation with danger, generally induced through the experience of the untamed wilderness, or through physical exposure.



Deborah Poynton

Land of Cockaigne 1

2012

Oil on Canvas

200 x 250 cm

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However Poynton insists that it is nearly impossible to ascribe meaning to her paintings. In the event of such an assignment, 'any meaning applied tends to slide off.' Standing in front of a panel of her 2011 work 'Arcadia', I unexpectedly found myself staring in the foliage, allowing my eyes to wander through the image, trying to figure out what was hidden behind the trees, under the bushes. The scene seems to produce a lurking unknown and this looming sense of fear is coupled with a strange curiosity. Within the context of South Africa, fear and impending violence take on a multitude of connotations. While Poynton speaks of a fear of death and loneliness, other concepts surface in the paintings. The constructed tableaux appear to reflect the comfort of a world contained, a safe withdrawal from the dangers beyond the frame. Is it an act of retreat? If so, from what?

This idea of the seemingly contrasting ideas of expanse and containment is continued in *Small Diorama 3* (2011), and the frequently used concept of the diorama. The diorama alludes to a life of containment, and by proxy, 'shelteredness'. Just as the various kinds of European gardens were a means of controlling the wilderness or reproducing it within suburban spaces, the painting becomes a means of control – the creation of a completely self-made world, by Poynton's design. The diorama is alluring in the impossibility of its scale – at once tiny and vast, delicately accurate and wholly imagined. The re-articulation of the 'real world' in which the intimidating is brought down to a manageable, conquerable scale, defies natural order: the magnificent becomes 'cute', and the human becomes an odd addition to the landscape. A distinct void between the contained world and what exists outside of these paintings begins to arise, revealing a search for some kind of stability, or a longing for a simpler time.



Deborah Poynton

Small Diorama 3

2011

Oil on Canvas

30 x 50 cm

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But Poynton's practice contains another void. Her childhood drawings reveal a remarkable talent for observational likeness, and an early fondness for renaissance-era approaches to depicting human figures. *Land of Cockaigne 1* (2011) presents a 'twist' in the classical reclining nude genre. Incidental domestic clutter and chaos crowd the nudes in her series 'To Be Alone', suggesting the presence of the elaborately crumpled bedclothes so frequently seen in Baroque tableaux. The selection from Poynton's series 'Pictures' (2013) features even more overt references to classical painting and European folklore, as her figures replicate classical poses. But here one is led to question what it means when an artist working in Africa primarily derives his or her influences from Western sources, or when 'Africa' manifests itself in the work through its landscape and apparent 'wildness'.

However Poynton describes this landscape as a place of childhood wonder and innocence – essentially it is a place of escape that is wrested from the real. This too seems to ignore the implications of growing up in this idyllic 'model of a world' and the pressing issues of living in a complex South African society. These issues are conveniently side-stepped in favour of a discussion of 'truth' and universalist ideas of 'connection'.

Ultimately, Deborah Poynton's 'Model for a World' delivers a comprehensive survey of a significant contributor to South African painting. It offers exactly what the title implies: a view into world is as detailed as it is small.