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ArtReview

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The disorienting present

Audrey Reynolds *Lovelady*

Niru Ratnam, London 24 April–23 May

There's something confounding about the paintings in Audrey Reynolds's first London solo show in more than a decade. There are 15 of them here, spaced evenly around white walls, all but one depicting recognisably female figures in various states of apparent disquiet. Sometimes pictured alone, sometimes in pairs, often in chintzy interior settings, these women are all rendered in a manner that nods to the kind of art-historical references that contemporary painters tend to warp with layers of postmodern distortion. Reynolds, to be clear, does not.

There are murky green backgrounds evoking the sombre palette and atmospheres of Walter Sickert's Camden Town paintings; kitschy rococo flourishes in warm flesh tones; belle époque costumes that could sit at home in a Renoir portrait; and on the rare occasion we glimpse defined facial features, something of the defiant or irritated expressions of a Paula Rego figure (there's a glorious bit of side-eye offered by the subject of *The Facts* [2025–26] – an elegantly dressed bourgeoisie who wouldn't look out of place in Manet's *Music in the Tuileries Gardens*, 1862).

The straight-up anachronism of the style is striking. There's no visible irony in play, nor, though it's tempting to intuit one, is there any

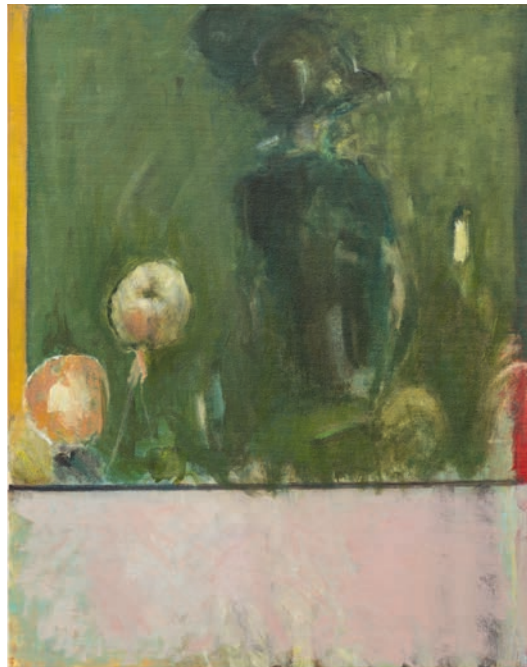
narrative link between the works. They seem psychologically complex, intentionally problematic and manifestly 'contemporary'. It's difficult to identify why this should be: perhaps it's in the constructive ambiguity Reynolds lays down between beholder and canvas, perhaps the apparently elective strangeness of the scenes she depicts. Many – not least *Fontainebleu* (2024–25), in which a figure reflected in a mirror is left as a smudgy, pale outline – appear unfinished. And there are more than a few hints of seediness: the faded, shabby patterned wallpaper of *Wait a Year* (2020–26); a stained mattress occupying the foreground of *The Earliest* (2025). One can't help but read the dilapidation as a clue to the inner lives of Reynolds's otherwise inscrutable figures. *Lovelady* (2022), for one, pictures its subject from the elbows up, her back three-quarters turned to us, a mesh of strokes implying a hand toting a cigarette. The fumes coagulate into illustrative pink, mauve and toxic green; but like the woman it depicts, the picture refuses to meet our gaze. Much as it might resemble portraiture, it isn't – but nor is it an exercise in pure form. What, then, is it?

The images themselves offer few immediate cues, so one turns to their titles. Some – for

instance, *Fontainebleu* – signal the art-historical preoccupations evident in the works. Others – *Everything I know about royalty I learnt from you* (2020), or indeed *Not generally known* (2022) – are entirely more cryptic. The former presents the show's biggest curveball, its impressionistically rendered leading lady floating on the same plane as a Cézanne-like orange, and an apple as crisply rendered as anything in Dutch still life.

Domestic features, such as the pale-green bathtub that dominates *Arrangements* (2019–20), have an imposing solidity. So too do certain details of the elaborate period clothing depicted, from the frills of a sleeve to the pleats of a blue dress. The figures who sport them, by contrast, are fleeting, spectral presences. In a work like *Modern Artiste* (2021–25), Reynolds might flirt with definition before letting a figure, or a pattern, dissolve into a gloomy background. The effect is decidedly spooky, at times bordering on the contrived.

Similarly, one could argue that displaying paintings of such an unapologetically retrograde nature in the context of a white-walled commercial gallery space amounts to an expectation-confounding gimmick in itself. Nevertheless, they stick in the mind, like chewing gum to a pavement. *Digby Warde-Aldam*



Everything I know about royalty I learnt from you, 2020, oil on canvas, 51 × 41 cm. Photo: Damian Griffiths. Courtesy the artist and Niru Ratnam, London