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Kaye Donachie

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The modest proportions of the six paintings in Kaye Donachie's latest exhibition served only to sharpen the focus of the gaze she turns upon her subjects—a gaze that makes visible a kind of fruitful incoherence (to use artist Susan Hiller's endlessly useful and provocative term). To say, then, that Donachie's subject here is women's contributions to modernist thought and practice would be to oversimplify. What it is to be present, to be active, to have a voice, and to assume, ultimately, some measure of control over the fate of one's productive labor are all questions that these paintings bring to bear. This may be why Donachie's colors, for example, nod to the dance between domesticity, ornament, and the avant-gardes. The white and yellow blobs of paint in several of the canvases are immediately arresting, suggesting the theater lighting and leisure spaces of fin de siècle Paris; the pale greens and mauves in *Know my substance when it speaks* (all works 2010) bring to mind Bloomsbury and the Omega Workshops, while the blue-green gloom of *In the glass that mirrors me* hovers between symbolist poetics and the darkness addressed in art of the mid-twentieth century.

Figures—female figures—appear in all of the paintings. There are heads seen full-face and in profile, silhouettes, hand gestures, and bodies performing, either onstage or in pursuit of some more abstract idea of physical movement. These elements often appear as overlapping veils, building the image out of so many ghostly and insubstantial fragments. The handling is assured in its shrewd, self-conscious diversity, mixing delicate line, tonal modulation, and spatial modeling with areas of more thickly applied, almost aggressively worked paint. While all six canvases play with the language of portraiture, only two are of specific figures: *The world stood still and I am wild* uses an image of Claire Goll, while the head floating above the hillside landscape in *I do believe that most of me, floats under water* is that of Edna St. Vincent Millay. Elsewhere, the figures allude more generally to the shifting idea of the modernist woman artist. The sources of both the formal language Donachie uses here and the sense of a dynamic presence articulated by a voice of uncertain gender could be seen in the sequence of short film excerpts, selected by the artist,

playing in the upstairs gallery. There, a reading from Millay's "Journal" and outtakes from Maya Deren's lost film *Witch's Cradle* (1943) were augmented with two visual poems by James Broughton. The play of shadow and light, substance and absence in Francis Bruguière and Oswald Blakeston's *Light Rhythms* (1930), which completes the program, also provides a key to the layered composition of Donachie's paintings.

The figures in Donachie's paintings and in the films she chose are under the spotlight in various ways. The paintings—all of which, incidentally, are titled after lines in Millay's journal—impress upon us that the by-now-familiar idea of gender as performance is much more than mere theory. In signing herself Vincent, Millay can be understood as proactive as much as defensive. Moreover, our inability



Kaye Donachie, *Myself I think shall never know, how far beneath the wave I go*, 2010, oil on canvas, 24 x 17 3/4".

to place the careers of, say, Goll, Nina Hamnett, Mina Loy, or, again, Millay within established categories remains a challenge to the perennial expectations that artists should exhibit professional or stylistic consistency and rational progression. The fevered strokes with which Donachie describes Goll's almost blinded, almost weeping, discomposed eyes in *The world stood still and I am wild*, or the hand that simultaneously points to, shades, impresses upon, and protects the woman's upper thigh in *Know my substance when It speaks*, protest this bias.

—Michael Archer