

## A Life of their Own: Anne Rothenstein's Paintings

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When Anne Rothenstein paints, something strange happens: as her characters emerge, in oil on wood panel, they spring vividly to life. The artist watches with interest as one acquires a necklace threaded with lentil-like beads, and another's smudge of pale pink eyeshadow purples into a bruise. Where these signifiers come from is as much a mystery to their creator as it is to the viewer. It may sound frivolous to say that where her characters go, Rothenstein follows, but they certainly surprise her.

Rothenstein surprised herself when she became a painter. It's not that she didn't have a point of reference, she tells me. On the contrary, she was born into a family of artists in the Essex village of Great Bardfield, where everyone – her mother, father, friends, neighbours – did this thing called art. Naturally, she felt she had to break away from it, so instead she modelled and acted and wrote. She was always creating work, but it was only in her early thirties, when she was married and living in Notting Hill with her former husband and their first child, that she began to think seriously about a career as a painter.

We're chatting in the artist's colourful kitchen. It's hot in her top-floor studio, but downstairs there's a breeze. When she and her family first moved here, she was making small, dark paintings, almost always populated by women. Over time, her work has become larger and mostly lighter, with flattened interiors and landscapes featuring androgynous figures. The bruise that appeared as if from nowhere cushions the eye of a subject with short scarlet hair and a stripey robe, drawn open to reveal the gentle curve of a breast.

Rothenstein's paintings are inspired by existing images: other art, adverts, magazines, filtered photos from social media. In recent years, her personal life and world events have seeped in. After separating from her husband came melancholic paintings of smoking brides. During the pandemic there were snapshots of solitary strangers glimpsed through windows. The war in Ukraine has prompted paintings of cloaked figures travelling through harsh and unfamiliar territories.

The artist starts by drawing on tracing paper before transferring that drawing onto wood panel. What happens next looks a little like colouring in, she says, laughing. But by the time she's done, the painting barely resembles the source image. Rothenstein always creates two versions, sometimes three or four, flipping things around or changing up the palette. Very occasionally the works are almost identical, as is the case with *Dancer 2* and the work that preceded it: a ballerina with cropped hair kneels with her back to the viewer, feet poking out from under a frothy tutu, and hanging on a small metal hook is a bright white cloth, its fringed edge stained red. From far away, the pearly wall resembles a blank canvas, but come closer and you'll realise it's composed of thin washes of pink, yellow and green, overlaid with Pointillist-like dots.

Avoiding our gaze is a common feature of Rothenstein's subjects. Another pairing shows a single figure, naked with a partially shaved head, perched on the far edge of a bed, face obscured. The artist is wary of easily readable expressions and as a result prefers to either blur facial features or keep them neutral. Like her characters, her paintings are at once beautiful and troubling, sensual and sinister.

Rothenstein tells me she's interested in ambiguity, blurred boundaries and questions asked – the answers are irrelevant. She invites viewers to look at her figures and actively wonder whether they're young or old, male or female, happy or sad. Her response in all instances is the same: whatever you think. The lack of resolution leaves room for us to imagine – to join the dots as we see them. She likes the impression that something has happened, and that we don't know what. Empty apart from the odd prop, her blank spaces are free from distractions and barriers, leaving nothing between us and her enigmatic characters.

This slipping and sliding applies to the artist's style, too, which oscillates between realism and something altogether more surreal. On the one hand, she gives us an image that's entirely ordinary: a black dog sniffing around outside a house; a person lying in bed, gazing dreamily up and out of a window at a full moon. But what about the stream of light spilling from the door of that house, neatly slicing the lower half of the wood panel in two, and the inky-black silhouette of a tree? The bed is tipped forwards, giving the impression that the dreamer could fall at our feet any second, the scene awash with twilight blues.

A self-taught artist, Rothenstein is guided by intuition. She moves with her materials rather than against them, applying her oils to the rhythm of the wood grain. Beyond found imagery, her influences are wide-ranging, though they often only become clear to her when a work is complete. Up in her studio, she tells me *The Bedroom 2* makes her think of the grey interiors of Vilhelm Hammershøi, his wife Ida lurking in the shadows, her hair pinned up to reveal the milky nape of her neck. Other works remind me of Félix Vallotton, with his flat blocks of offbeat colour and stylised forms. Also, the soft and dissolving veils of paint of the Colour Field painters; there's a hint of Helen Frankenthaler's pastoral abstractions in *Wave 1*, a watery landscape with deep blue mountains, a salmon-pink sky and foaming waves.

Despite the peculiar pull of her characters, Rothenstein isn't the kind of artist who completely loses herself in the world of her paintings. As she works, she may be thinking about what to have for lunch, she tells me, smiling. She listens to country music, turned up loud, and she can paint while on the phone. As important to her as the subject matter are the shapes and lines and the paint itself. Painting is her life, her job. It's not a mystical process, she says, but it's still the most mysterious thing of all.