

Following Mrs. J.

Notations on a Work In Progress by Jen Waters

From New York to the Moors

A Studio Romance

Short, dark, with kindling eyes

Mrs. Jarvis is one of several peripheral characters in Virginia Woolf's 1922 novel *Jacob's Room*. She is prone to reverie and mystical thoughts voiced out loud. When unhappy she walks on the moor, though not very far. To me, she is in a state of 'ever wanting', searching for something she doesn't know but can sense. And, I think, she prefers to stay in that state, where potential is always in the present.

Distant concussions

Close reading of Mrs. Jarvis' character has alerted my creative attention in a way that I haven't experienced since the "Bea" series', on which I worked from 2001-2003. I came to New York from Canada for an MFA, with ideas for new directions in the project, and it died on impact. The course of my Master's was a fragmentary, experimental one. Following that, I fastidiously documented (in small tromp l'oeil paintings) the minutia of my daily life and immediate surroundings for three years. And now I find I have room to breathe. Literally. Since November I again have a studio space, no longer working out of a tiny Manhattan spare bedroom-cum-closet. It is an uplifting space, with 12' ceilings, a huge skylight, and wood floorboards painted white. All my artwork is in one place, no longer in deep storage. My materials and books are at hand. What follows is an account of where I'm at in the studio, and the development of this new series I've launched into.

"It is much clearer than this sometimes"

Notes:

- Reflect a solitary progress.
- In my mind's eye I can almost see the topographies of Mrs. J.'s thoughts, but as yet need more tools, more tests, to put it together.
- I make this particular type of work now in part to spite the rent past-due, the bills, the everyday pedestrian worries that increasingly crowd in with global tales of economic woe.
- Ever since starting on these pieces and related research, my recurring dreams of being desperately near water I'm not allowed to swim in have ceased.
- Virginia Woolf describes Cornwall as "the loveliest place in the world. It is so lonely".
I want to go there.

- Questions to NOT ask right now:

How is this not derivative?

Is it really more than just transcribing someone else's creation?

What is the draw for me and can that be passed on?

How is it relevant? *Is* it relevant?

How is it about *now*? What is its worth?

- John Berger: "freedom is the experience of a desire being acknowledged"

When the horizon swims blue, green, emotional

In painting and repainting the texts of Mrs. Jarvis' impressions, I'm after fixing, as she does, on that point ahead that offers the potential of desire understood, if not fulfilled. I expect these pieces, these details, to lead to drawings of spaces like those in dreams that leave one with a vague recollection and a deep desire to return: *big* drawings – with washy colour grounds and sumptuous charcoal. Everyday I go into the studio I'm poised to begin at them. I have prepped, tinted papers: colours of the moors, of pink and grey and purple skies, of vivid green grasses. There is imagery of Cornwall printed out. And then there are the Mrs. Jarvis texts enlarged, photocopied, catalogued. And so far, everyday, ultimately I'm drawn further into making these little text paintings, figuring how to marry ground to letter to word to meaning beyond what's read. Each session I leave feeling a little closer to the next move. And the next day I start as far from where I think I'm headed as the day before (which is, paradoxically, likely a good sign).

Bones, and little pieces of chalk

The means: To represent Mrs. J's veiled gleanings, I'm painting Virginia Woolf's words about her on paper over abstract grounds. The ground: Previously mixed acrylic paint residue is left on the palette. I paint layers of clear gel over the mixed colour, and then lift it all from the palette, then glue it to 15 x 20 inch paper. I paint a gesso 'scrap of paper' to float over this plastic backdrop. Then I draw on and paint in the text with transparent black and graphite grey paint.

As the work progresses, I'm breaking the phrases down further, into details of details, to see each image, each object described:

"Mrs. Jarvis thought of Paris. At her back the window was open, for it was a mild night; a calm night; when the moon seemed muffled and the apple trees stood perfectly still.

'I never pity the dead,' said Mrs. Jarvis, shifting the cushion at her back and clasping her hands behind her head. Betty Flanders did not hear, for her scissors made so much noise on the table.

'They are a rest,' said Mrs. Jarvis. 'And w spend our days doing foolish unnecessary things without knowing why,'" Becomes:

-Mrs. Jarvis thought of Paris.
-At her back the window was open.
- for it was a mild night; a calm night;
-when the moon seemed muffled
-and the apple trees stood perfectly still.
-'I never pity the dead,' said Mrs. Jarvis
-'They are a rest,' said Mrs. Jarvis.
-And we spend our days doing foolish unnecessary things without knowing why.

The end: while evolution of the work is protracted, I'm sustained by the knowledge that these little paintings have legs. They're part of ideas that unfold day by day. My best strategy is to keep moving, eyes open, researching diligently, without attempting to engage the *why* and the *how* too vigorously, lest I lose the freedom of making my way forward intuitively and intelligently.

Refracting Mrs. J's '*ever wanting*' is my more distant ridge.

*subtitles in italics are quoted from *Jacob's Room*, by Virginia Woolf, 1922, The Hogarth Press