

FINDING THE HAND OF KINDNESS

PAINTINGS AND WORKS ON PAPER
1978-2024 BY JANE OSTLER

CURATED BY
@EDVARDOSHADALOW
@FIRSTSITECOLCHESTER
@DITLEDINGLINGDIN

Firstsite



Based in Colchester, Jane Ostler, works across painting, drawing, printmaking, and collage. Her art delves into the interplay between creativity and autobiography, highlighting how personal histories and subjective experiences shape art. Ostler also incorporates diverse materials, including medical objects, to comment on significant moments in our collective history, such as the pandemic.

Alongside Ostler's exhibition, you'll find the works of Leonora Carrington (from Sat 26 Oct). Both artists' shows reveal a fascinating connection, exploring how their artistic careers were shaped and sometimes impacted in different ways by caregiving responsibilities and the challenges of gender bias.

About Jane Ostler:

Jane Ostler was born in 1958 in Tonbridge, Kent, UK. Jane studied MA Fine Art at Goldsmith's College of Art between 1983-86. Following her studies she worked at Whitechapel Art Gallery as a gallery technician and has since worked for a number of London galleries including Serpentine Gallery, and Hayward Gallery in various roles.

From 2007-2024 she worked as the Art Project Lead at Level Best Enterprises in Colchester and supported the launch of its new building. Level Best facilitates crucial work and life experiences for people and young adults with learning disabilities through art, gardening, cooking and other projects. Firstsite has previously worked with trainees from Level Best on the exhibition Level Best: Sunshine Coast, and some of the Level Best artists also had their work featured in Firstsite's Lunar Lullabies show.

‘Finding The Hand of Kindness’ is inspired by Jane’s own life, reflecting on her roles as a caregiver, the impact of patriarchal expectations, and the everyday moments of kindness. Through her art, Jane invites us to see how creativity can be a source of comfort and connection.

She says: “It is easy to edit all the difficulties and want to forget them. But being stuck and trying to work through them is what I do.”

Featuring over 20 artworks, discover whimsical landscapes of both East Anglia and of the sea, playful scenes of animals, human figures, and geometric shapes. Ostler’s work explores popular culture references like Disney, personal histories, expectations of social conformity for women and gender roles through history – from local oyster pickers to models of contemporary domestic settings of the American Dream and in television.

Making things bigger or smaller, layering and bringing together several images and objects, Ostler often creates deeper, more complex images inviting you to find your own interpretations and meanings – or perhaps none at all.

@EDVARDOSHADALOW

My practice

“I have stayed loyal to painting and drawing to retain a coherent visual language, and as paint is easily manipulated, there is an infinite variety in the way it can be applied; sculpturally as a form in itself, thinly brushed to offer areas of potential, worked into while wet or left to dry to create the smooth shiny surface of a perfect circle or triangle or square.” “I still believe in the power of the still image”.

“I juxtapose or superimpose several images or objects, to create a deeper, more complex image, from which I hope the observer will make conjectures of meaning or non-meaning which may or may not be relevant to their own lives and minds.”

“My practice is very reliant on time. So being imprisoned in another time world is frustrating, but unavoidable.
I see parcels of time on my horizon, like a freight train, sitting there waiting.
Like small mirror fragments of time on dusty floorboards.
If you sweep them all up together, you make enough time to get it done.”

Bio

“Absorbed dual aspects of frivolity and legality as the 4th child and only daughter of an actress and a lawyer.
Adopted Nihilistic Process Art in 1980 at Bath Academy of Art.
Embraced Personal Histories in 1987 at Goldsmiths' College.
Worked at the Dacon Trust 2007-2024 as Art Project Lead Facilitator.”

The work in general

“I explore the links between creativity and autobiography, and the role of subjectivity and personal histories in constructing art.” “I wish to find kindness every day. I am tired of being ready for battle.”

“It is easy to edit out all the difficulties and want to forget them. But being stuck and trying to work through them is what I do. Finding comfort in going to the studio and spending valuable time to consider all the potential situations in the work and isolate my priorities is my process.”

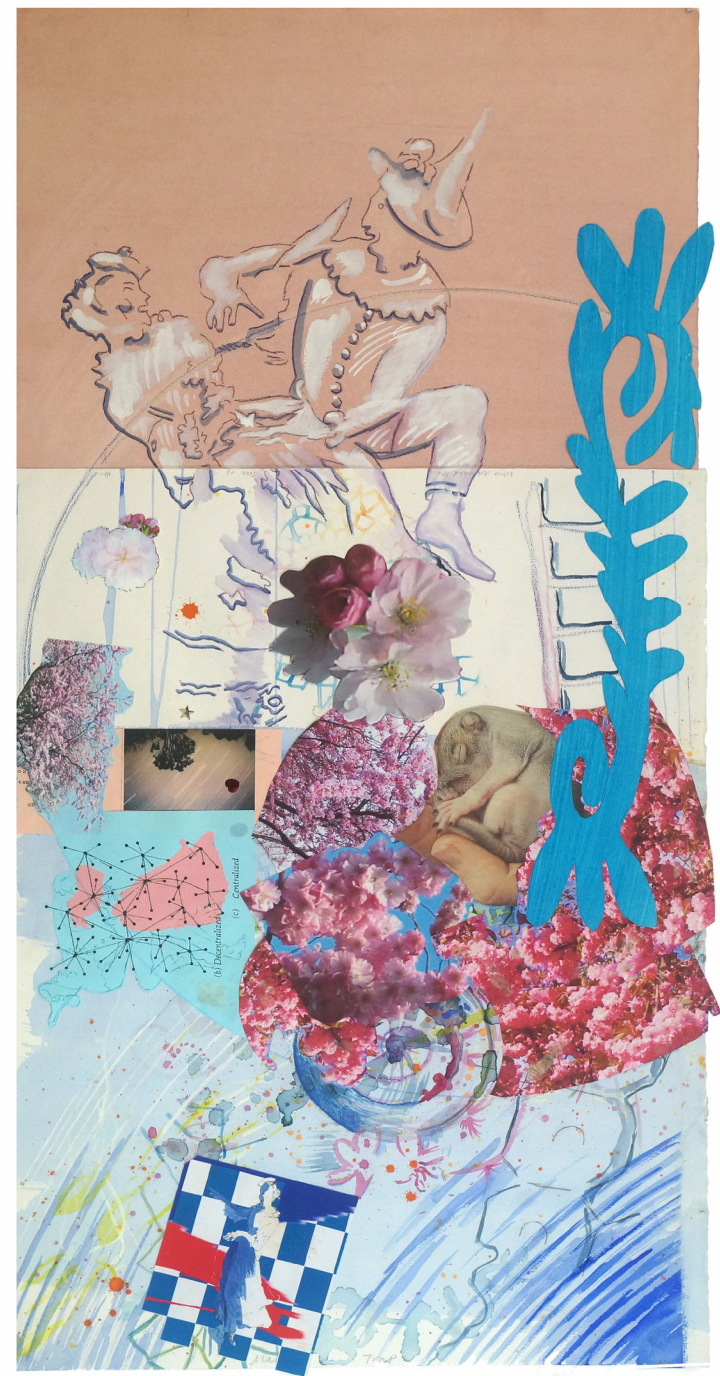
@janeostler 15.05.24



Distributed Network (C)
2006
watercolour on paper
55.5 cm H x 46. cm W



Baby Squirrel Finds Hand of Kindness
2006-2009
watercolour and collage on paper
200 cm H x 100 cm W



The Dancing Squid and the Coy Carp
2008
watercolour on paper.
76 cm H x 57 cm W

Kindly lent by BEH Archibald.

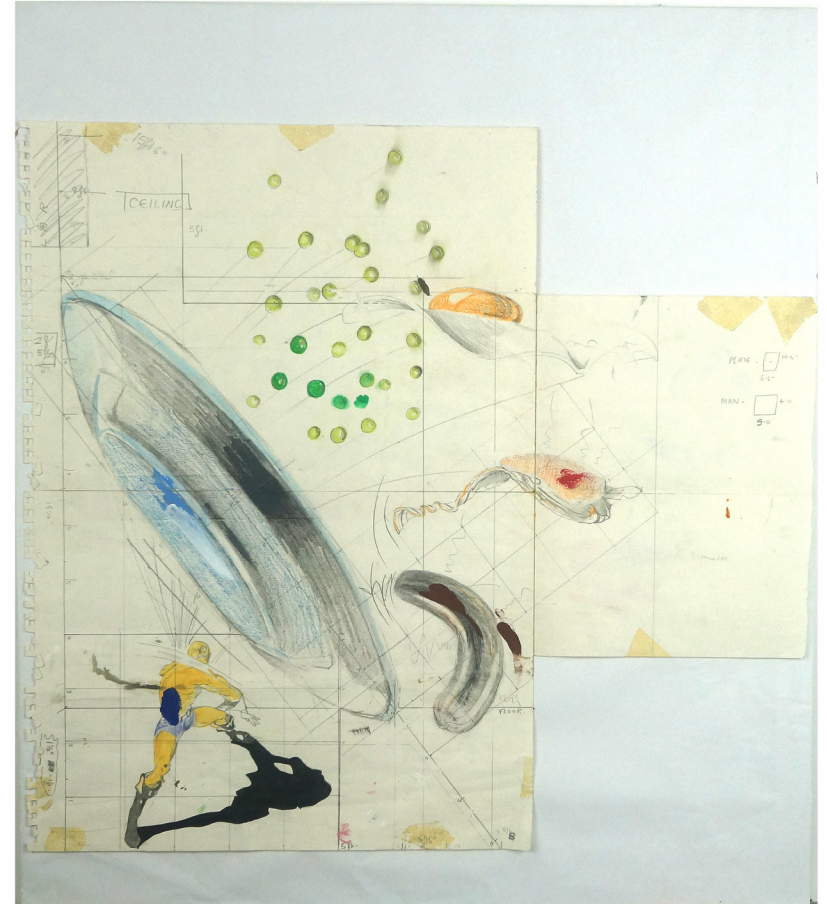


Discus-throwing Super Hero Hurls Breakfast Plate
(Egg, Sausage & Peas)
1978
ink and goache on paper
approx. 80 cm H x 35 cm W

This is a working sketch for a mural at RAF Lyneham, Wiltshire. In an uncharacteristic move, I took part in a commission while at Bath Academy of Art in the first year BA painting class. The nearby RAF base were redecorating their dining hall and asked us to provide sketches of mural ideas for this dining hall. After submitting a sketch for an abstract work of art, which was not acceptable, I submitted this sketch instead and later completed it scaled up as a mural for them.

While undertaking a fine art course, I considered comic book art to be out of bounds. How narrow minded of me!

@janeostler



Chicken
2004-2007
oil on canvas
230 cm H x 140 cm W

“Playing chicken” is an idiom that means to engage in a dangerous test of courage or to make mutual threats or challenges in the hopes that the opponent will back down before a collision or conflict. The term originated from a game where two drivers would drive towards each other on a collision course, and the first to swerve would be called a “chicken”.
Wikipedia

We eat chickens. We don't respect them much.

We use them.

Yellow. Traditionally the colour of cowardice and custard.

Cowardy, cowardy, custard.

Chicken satay on a stick.

The blue diamonds come forward.

She won't leap.
Learning to dance, safely.

@janeostler



Anatomy of Nonsense (Yet to Go)

2004-2007

oil on canvas

230 cm H x 140 cm W

Powys Castle was visited by my mother as a girl. Later I visited it too as an adult. The figure of the older woman is a reference to how my mother could have looked had she lived to old age.

The Spitfire is a reference to Birt, her fiancé, who was killed in WW2 and to whom she referred when telling her life story to me. My mother was an actress, and recounted numerous anecdotes about her adventures, both in England and in Burma (Myanmar) in WW2.

Tea was drunk in large quantities, and the cups on the steps refer to this activity, something I have been happy to continue.

@janeostler



Mops, Mums & Mickey (Mme. Matisse wearing Marigolds)
2022-2023
watercolour and collage on paper
58.5 cm H x 76.2 cm W

Mrs Catherine Booth, né. Mumford, wife of Salvation Army Founder General William Booth, is painted in the top left corner. Her husband, William Booth (10 April 1829 – 20 August 1912) was an English Methodist preacher who, along with his wife, Catherine, founded the Salvation Army and became its first General (1878–1912). The Christian movement with a quasi-military structure and government founded in 1865 has spread from London to many parts of the world. It is known for being one of the largest distributors of humanitarian aid. (Wikipedia).

A philanthropic couple, before social services were developed in this country, picturing her helped me imagine how vulnerable people would have fared before our care system was created. Caring has historically fallen upon women, home-making and raising children taking up the largest share of their time.

In this picture I show mopping and wearing yellow Marigold gloves as a way to restore order to a cosmos out of balance, with the mop handles as dynamic as lazerbeams, and the mop-men coming to back-up Mme. Matisse. The grocery delivery van is arriving and Mickey Mouse is keeping our spirits up, amongst this eternal drudgery and unrelenting domesticity.

@janeostler



Raspberry Sob Beret, Bobby Shafto (Great Expectations)

2013

acrylic and oil paint on canvas

76 cm H x 51 cm W

Upon a cloudy day when the sun won't shine, in an effort to be optimistic people try to find the patches of blue sky, however small. The old saying goes, "Enough blue sky to make a sailor's trousers". This always felt like a pretty disappointing remark, as you would not have enough to construct a whole sailor-man.

Expectations of marriage were planted in the human psyche at an early age, and depending on your point of view, they can foster a sense of loss of expectations in a naive person.

The nursery rhyme "Bobby Shafto",

Bobby Shafto's gone to sea,
Silver buckles at his knee;
He'll come back and marry me,
Bonny Bobby Shafto!

@janeostler



World Leaders, Diplomats and Experts

2009-2012

oil on canvas

76 cm H x 100 cm W

This painting grew from a feeling of futility after the Kyoto Protocol failed to be ratified. In 1997 it was China that was unwilling to commit. Today the United States is the only country that has not ratified the Kyoto Protocol, and it later withdrew its signature. The US signed the agreement in 1998, but the Senate did not ratify it due to the Byrd–Hagel resolution. This resolution stated that the US should not sign any protocol that would:

Mandate new commitments to reduce greenhouse gas emissions for Annex I Parties without also mandating commitments for Developing Country Parties

Result in serious harm to the US economy. Google AI.

The Kyoto Protocol was a historic step in international efforts to address global warming. It combined environmental targets with market-based mechanisms to reduce the cost of meeting them. As it was bound for display in a hospital, I felt that “Dr No” had some negative connotations which had to have a positive spin put on them for the hospital audience. I tried to show a healing force coming through. “Dr No” signifies macho gun-toting mankind. Is it possible to promote a change in the minds of the acquisitive and violent?

Unchecked emotions running out of control pose less of a threat without weapons. Gaining consensus on environmental issues is a problem. The men strive to find balance as the robot caretaker of the Earth is rebuked by its finite resources and Guan Yin, the Goddess of Compassion, invokes healing amethysts. If local communities collaborate for long term gain, we can thrive. The colour green is an anomaly. Either way we are stuck with it: green signifies Nature’s supremacy or green signifies irradiation. The nuclear low carbon answer to generating power relies upon us controlling our emotions and scrupulous planning. Art and health and the health of our world society is all mixed up. @janeostler



She saw the World and Wanted it All
In the Audience Tonight
Lost for Words
2013-2015
oil on canvas
76 cm H x 151 cm W
two panels

Post Minimalism* required me to find the starting point for a series of pictures, using the fundamental (yet arbitrary) structures of the circle, stage-platform and central rectangle, with a standing figure to its' right, and an array of backdrop panels hanging from the top of the canvas.

Having this structure to work from, numerous possibilities opened themselves up to me, and it was more a case of what not to include to make a satisfactory picture, than what to include.

World events gleaned from the BBC, Channel 4 and The Guardian among others informed me about the many deaths of assylum seekers trying to find safety by crossing the Channel in little boats.
@janeostler

As of November 2, 2024, more than 31,000 people have crossed the English Channel in small boats to reach the UK, which is more than the same period in 2023 but fewer than in 2022. The number of people crossing in each boat has also increased, from 28 per boat in 2021 to 53 per boat in the first 10 months of 2024. Google AI.

* Postminimalism is an art term coined (as post-minimalism) by Robert Rauschenberg in 1971 and used in various artistic fields for work which is influenced by, or attempts to develop and go beyond, the aesthetic of minimalism. The expression is used specifically in relation to music and the visual arts, but can refer to any field using minimalism as a critical reference point. Wikipedia.



Sunshine

2024

oil on canvas and silk

approx 76 cm H x 51 cm W

In some ways Sunshine is an improvement on Raspberry Sorb Beret, Bobby Shafto, in that the man has a complete body, albeit shrouded in a silk cloth, upon which is painted another face, and an extra hand, holding what looks like a saucepan or magnifying glass.

Lighthearted, yet observing a crisis of identity, the woman retains her inner warmth and glow, and wears a buttery yellow skirt, embellished with flowers and a thick layer of oil paint.

This piece experiments with surfaces and insubordinates the traditions of canvas painting by casually placing the silk fabric over the top right corner of the canvas and painting onto this unprimed, delicate and expensive surface in oil paint.

@janeostler



In the Garden

2024

oil on canvas

76 cm H x 51 cm W

Dressing up.

Striped Clown pyjamas with paper pom-poms safety-pinned on at the buttons. Bonnet (as worn by Catherine Mumford).

We had a dressing up box which contained Turkish genie trousers, a netted bonnet, a frilly petticoat and a clown outfit made from old pyjamas. The day my friend came to play, and I had to let her wear the bonnet and petticoat and I had to wear the clown PJs. I didn't like it. It felt wrong but I acquiesced and tried not to mind imagining myself as a boy clown.

I guess it comes down to wanting to be liked. With any shift in your situation, relationships change. They can be seen as very delicate shifts in powerplay or as opportunities for kindness and hospitality.

@janeostler



La Pecheuse, The Fisherwoman

2013

oil on canvas

76 cm x 51 cm

Women appear throughout the artist's work, placed in domestic settings, amongst working occupations, or in conversation with other women.

La Pecheuse translates from French as 'The Fisherwoman'. Essex, particularly Mersea, has a strong history associated with fishing and oyster picking, in common with the Vendee region in France where offshore farming of shellfish (oysters and mussels) is significant. Jane visited this area as a small child and remembers the atmosphere there.

The painting depicts a lone woman standing with a basket on a beach undertaking work, with either a defiant pose or appearing tired.

Lifting various figures of women throughout historical periods, Jane is interested in communicating the disproportionate expectations of emotional, labour, and caring roles placed on women.

@edvardoshadalow



Acting
2012
oil on canvas
60 cm H x 40 cm W

This picture is a version of a film still from "Blithe Spirit", by Noel Coward. It shows the scene with Mme. Arcati, Elvira and Ruth. Mme. Arcati can't see the two ghosts, but is the leading character who steers the plot.

On a personal level my understanding of realith was furnished by many anecdotes about acting and plot lines. The borders between the literal and the imaginary worlds were always the terrain I inhabited. Coming from a semi-theatrical family background where harsh reality is avoided at all costs.

@janeostler



Stagecraft

Who takes the gaze? Who is in the spotlight? Where does the eye rest?
Who is in focus? Strong stage lighting requires stage makeup.
Stage lighting adds another dimension.

The objectivity of the disillusioned.

Objectivity.

Subjectivity.

Dispassionate objectivity.

Deep empathic emotion.

Two sides of the same coin.

Being able to step back and look at it....

The answers differed depending on who asked the question.
I felt uncomfortable and among a different set of expectations.

The academic answer.

The hobbyist's answer.

The professional answer.

The teacher's answer.

The artists' answer.....

I used to be asked "Oh, what kind of art do you do? Oils or watercolour?
Landscapes or still life?"

The truthful answer was always hard to give.

The problem was one of wording. I would say, "I try to make the invisible, visible".

I know how much it meant to her. From a small child, she performed as Beau Peep when the vicar came to tea. Taking medals and moving on it was her great obsession. Attending Birmingham Repertory Company and then becoming a Star in Battledress, moving out by boat and playing many roles of popular theatre, her favourite was Elvira. This character stayed with her all her life. The boundary between real and imaginary worlds became blurred. Life followed art.

@janeostler



LOST AT SEA

Don, Doff, Sleep, Repeat

2023

oil and acrylic paint, rubber glove and catheter bag on canvas

78 cm H x 100 cm W

The artist made a series of painting during the pandemic referencing caregiving by those who worked in the NHS. At the time Jane's daughter was a nurse and this work reflects the anxiety of a mother for her wellbeing at this time.

The title of the painting implies the repetitive feeling and exhaustion that can come with this work, and the worries towards those who undertake the profession.

These can be seen by the use of digital communication with family members over social media, and mobile phones, with those who are within these healthcare environments. These are then combined with images of robots and characters from children's television to present the conflicting emotions being felt.

Ostler incorporates here diverse materials, including medical objects, to comment on significant moments in our collective history.

@edvardoshadalow



Moving to the Country

2017-2018

oil on canvas

122 cm H x 122 cm W.

Moving to the country was an ambition, an aspiration, an attempt to have a happy life.

The Country is a place that has almost managed to retain a world view of the 1950s.

Time moves slowly. Most things are too far away to visit on a whim. Cars wait at roundabouts for years. Crows build nests and the cars wait their turn to join the stream of work or home-bound traffic. It's a routine.

Where is home?

Where you can play tennis all day and the Magpies only come in pairs.

Champagne air, spotless tarmac you can eat your dinner off, gardens full of self-seeded flowers, days of sunshine, less rain, and silence.

I tried to show things that made me feel OK.

Blackcurrants used for Ribena are grown in Essex.

Matisse stands on his stepladder.

The cast concrete steps contain the coastline.

The house is green.

@janeostler



SUPPORTING MATERIAL
on the floor of Gallery One.

The works here explore the artist's process of mark-making and using materials. These allow the artist to experiment with layering of different surfaces, some appearing in later paintings. Works on paper can act as preparatory studies for larger watercolour works or developed further as paintings.

Jane is interested in the landscape around her such as coastal towns, but from the material element, whether this is a network of interconnected plants or patterns connecting humans and nature. Upon these she begins layering figurative images to act as metaphors for feelings, delving into more conceptual subject matter.

@edvardoshadalow

The Disappearing Dinner Lady (incomplete)
2006
watercolour and pencil on paper.

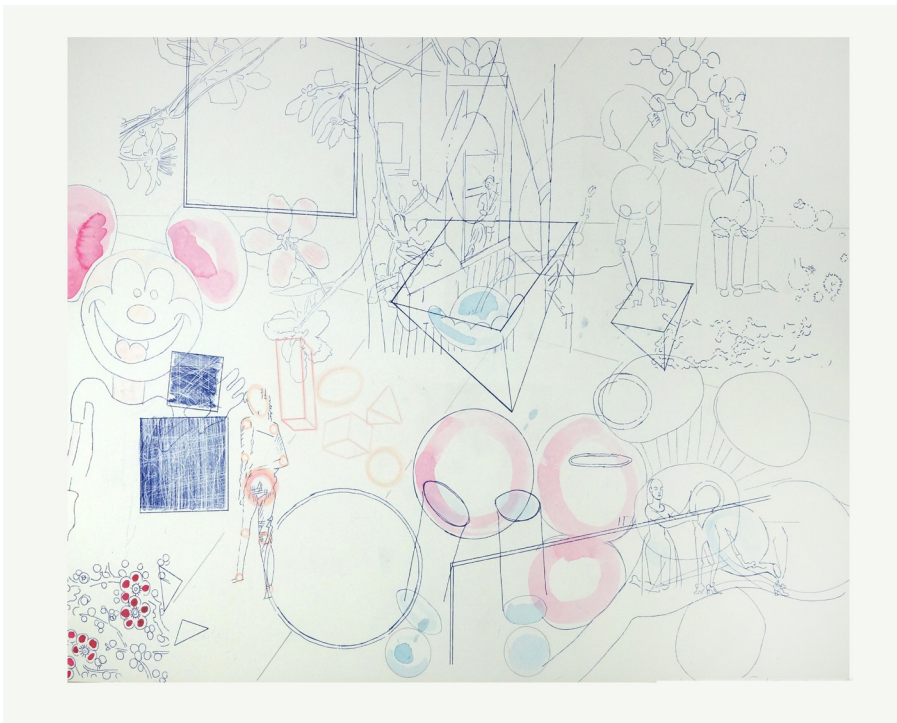
Cracklin' Rosie
2006
watercolour on paper.

The Camouflouse
2009
mixed media on paper

Cork Tiles
2017
wax free transfer paper and post-it note

Tea Cosy
2006
photographic print

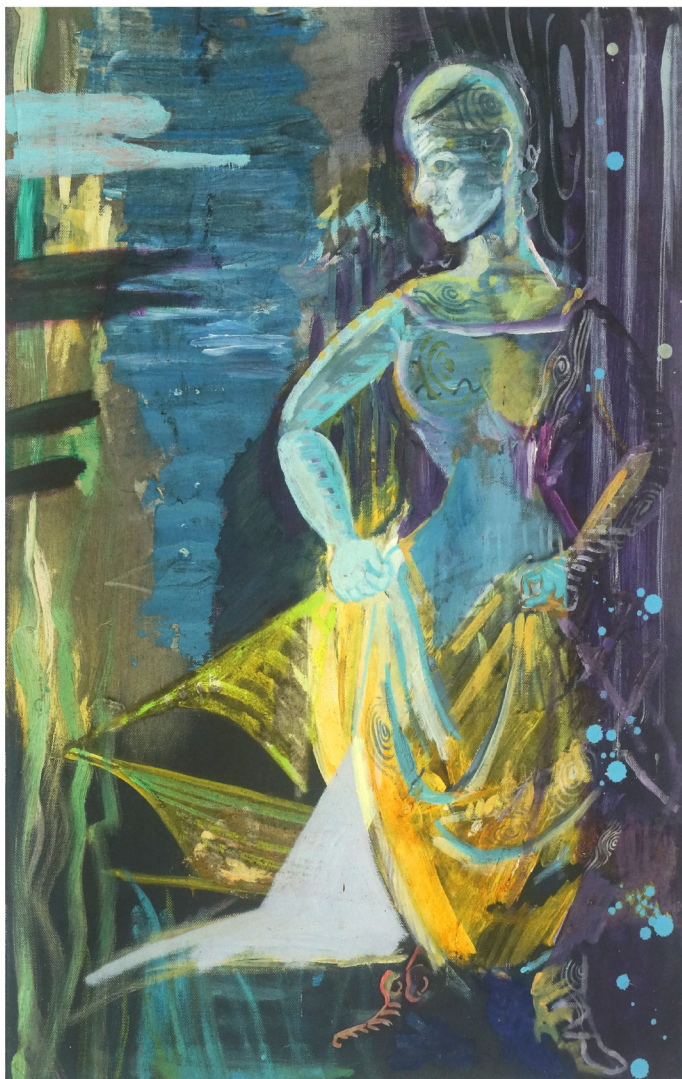




Circle Time, Fainting in the Science Lab
2023
watercolour and carbon on paper
76.2 cm W x 58.5 cm H.



Girl riding a dolphin
2023
oil on canvas
76 cm H x 51 cm W



Wooden role model
2013
oil on canvas
76 cm H x 51 cm W



Two Figures on a Sunken Dinner Plate
2008, watercolour on paper, approx.
80 cm H x 35 cm W.



Bonus Ball

2008

Watercolour on paper and digital print

26 cm H x 38 cm W



Fool for love

2007

Watercolour on paper and digital print

26 cm H x 38 cm W



View of gallery one

Sunshine

In the garden

La Pecheuse

Acting

on the floor

Teacosy

La Camoufleur - what is a woman?

The Disappearing Dinner Lady

Cracklin' Rosie

Cork Tiles



Gallery one

World leaders, diplomats and experts
She saw the world and wanted it all, in the audience tonight, lost for
words
Sunshine



Gallery one

La Pecheuse
Acting
Don, doff, sleep, repeat



Gallery one

World leaders, diplomats and experts
 She saw the world and wanted it all, in the audience tonight, lost for words
 Sunshine
 In the garden
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 Acting

on the floor
 Teacosy
 La Camafleurs - what is a woman?
 The Disappearing Dinner Lady
 Cracklin' Rosie
 Cork Tiles



Gallery one

Don, doff, sleep, repeat
 Moving to the country

on the floor
 Teacosy
 La Camafleurs - what is a woman?
 The Disappearing Dinner Lady
 Cracklin' Rosie
 Cork Tiles



Gallery one

Moving to the country

on the floor

Teacosy

La Camoufleur - what is a woman?

The Disappearing Dinner Lady

Cracklin' Rosie

Cork Tiles



Gallery one

World leaders, diplomats and experts

She saw the world and wanted it all, in the audience tonight, lost for words

Sunshine

In the garden

La Pecheuse

on the floor

Teacosy

La Camafleurs - what is a woman?

The Disappearing Dinner Lady

Cracklin' Rosie

Cork Tiles

“Part of me intends that the work should be as well constructed as a reliable car, and as a child of the 60’s I idolised the American dream. As this dream came undone in the later part of the 20th century, I have settled for making work that reflects my current local weather, reliably sunny, or not.

Post Minimalism* required me to find the starting point for a series of pictures, using the fundamental (yet arbitrary) structures of the circle, stage-platform and central rectangle, with a standing figure to its’ right, and an array of backdrop panels hanging from the top of the canvas.

Having this structure to work from, numerous possibilities opened themselves up to me, and it was more a case of what not to include to make a satisfactory picture, than what to include.

If figurative elements force their way back into the work, having been taboo*, invite them back with alacrity. Love colour and drawing. Be stylistically whimsical.

Be Rococo.

Be Mannerist.

Be Post-Modern.

Be Decadent.

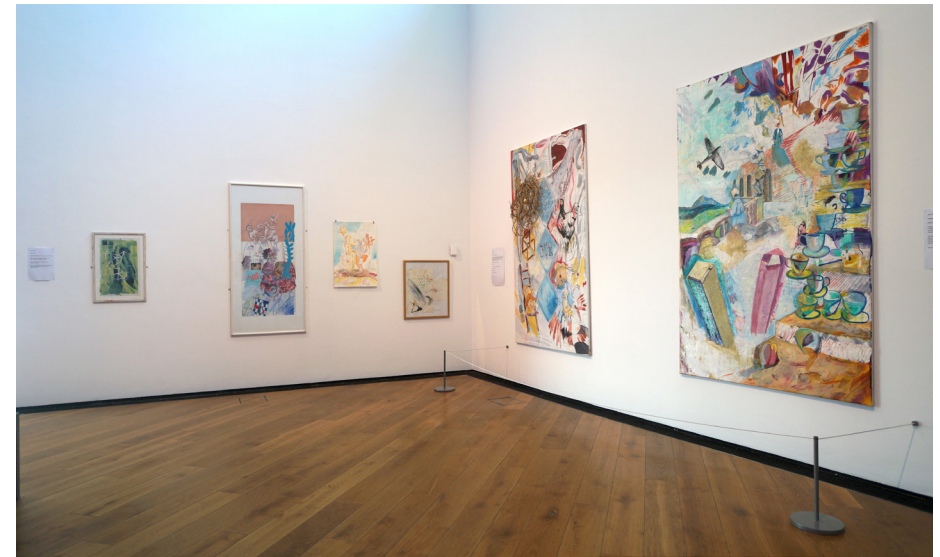
Be Figurative. Be Abstract.

Be Descriptive.... of 1978-2024”

@janeostler

* Postminimalism is an art term coined (as post-minimalism) by Robert Rauschenberg in 1971 and used in various artistic fields for work which is influenced by, or attempts to develop and go beyond, the aesthetic of minimalism. The expression is used specifically in relation to music and the visual arts, but can refer to any field using minimalism** as a critical reference point. Wikipedia.

** Minimalism is an extreme form of abstract art developed in the USA in the 1960s and typified by artworks composed of simple geometric shapes based on the square and the rectangle. Tate.



Lightwell one

Distributed network (C)

Baby squirrel finds hand of kindness

The dancing squid and the coy carp

Discus-throwing superhero hurls breakfast plate (egg, sausage and peas)

Chicken

Anatomy of nonsense (Yet to go)



Lightwell one

Chicken

Anatomy of nonsense, (Yet to go)

Raspberry Sor Beret, Bobby Shafto

Mops, mums and Mickey

CATALOGUE OF ART WORKS, in visual order,

Lightwell One

- 1 Distributed Network(C), 2006, watercolour on paper
55.5 cm H x 46. cm W
- 2 Baby Squirrel Finds Hand of Kindness, 2006-2009, watercolour
and collage on paper, 200 cm H x 100 cm W
- 3 The Dancing Squid and the Coy Carp, 2008, watercolour on paper,
76 cm H x 57 cm W, Kindly lent by BEH Archibald.
- 4 Discus-throwing Super Hero Hurls Breakfast Plate (Egg, Sausage & Peas),
1978, ink and goache on paper, approx. 80 cm H x 35 cm W
- 5 Chicken, 2004-2007, oil on canvas, 230 cm H x 140 cm W
- 6 Anatomy of Nonsense (Yet to Go), 2004-2007, oil on canvas,
230 cm H x 140 cm W
- 7 Mops, Mums & Mickey (Mme. Matisse wearing Marigolds), 2022-2023,
watercolour and collage on paper, 58.5 cm H x 76.2 cm W
- 8 Raspberry Sob Beret, Bobby Shafto (Great Expectations), 2013,
acrylic and oil paint on canvas, 76 cm H x 51 cm W

Gallery One

- 9 World Leaders, Diplomats and Experts, 2009-2012, oil on canvas
76 cm H x 100 cm W
- 10 She saw the World and Wanted it All: In the Audience Tonight, Lost for
Words, 2013-2015, oil on canvas, 76 cm H x 151 cm W, (two panels if Lost at
Sea is adjacent)
- 11 Sunshine, 2024, oil on canvas and silk, approx. 76 cm H x 51 cm W
- 12 In the Garden. 2024, oil on canvas, 76 cm H x 51 cm W
- 13 La Pecheuse, The Fisherwoman, 2013, oil on canvas, 76 cm H x 51 cm W
- 14 Acting, (what is real and what is true), 2012, oil on canvas,
60 cm H x 40 cm W

- 15 Don, Doff, Sleep, Repeat, 2023, oil and acrylic paint, rubber glove and
catheter bag on canvas, 78 cm H x 100 cm W
- 16 Moving to the Country, via Weeley roundabout. 2017-2018, oil on canvas,
122 cm H x 122 cm W

On the floor of Gallery One

- 17 The Disappearing Dinner Lady (incomplete), 2006, watercolour and pencil on
paper.
- 18 Cracklin' Rosie, 2006, watercolour on paper.
- 19 La Camoufleur, 2009, mixed media on paper
- 20 Cork Tiles, 2017, wax free transfer paper and post-it note
- 21 Tea Cosy, 2006. photographic print

Appendix, works related to but not included in, the show

- 22 Wooden Role Model/Figure Head, Fishing by Moonlight, 2013, oil on canvas.
76 cm H x 51 cm W
- 23 Girl riding a dolphin, 2013, oil on canvas, 76 cm H x 51 cm W
- 24 Fainting in the science lab, 2022-2023, watercolour and carbon on paper,
58.5 cm H x 76.2 cm W
- 25 Fool for love, 2007, watercolour on paper and digital print, 26 cm H x 38 cm
W
- 26 Two figures on a sunken dinner plate, 2008, watercolour on paper, approx. 80
cm H x 35 cm W.
- 27 Bonus Ball, 2008, waterolour and digital print on paper, 26 cm H x 38 cm
W
- 28 Lost at Sea, 2013, oil on canvas, 76 cm H x 51 cm W



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