

## TACTILE TENDERNESS

### Philomena Epps

"I love to walk down the street and look at people," began Leisha.

"You love to walk down the street looking at people."

"People look at me when I walk down the street."

"You like it when people look at you."

"You like it when people look at you."

"I'm scared when people look at me."

"I'm scared when people look at me."

"But you like it."

"Do you like it?"

"It makes me nervous and I pull my earrings."

"You pull your earrings all the time."

"I hate to pull my earrings."

"I want to pet your earrings."

Mary Gaitskill, 'Connection,' in *Bad Behaviour* (1990)

In Susie Green's work, the complexities and nuances of life are available as raw material, to be picked up along with paint, and applied to large sheets of tissue paper, or interpreted through sculpture, performance and sound, as if putting a filter, or new lens on them. Her multifarious practice considers questions around intimacy, vulnerability of feeling, and the imaginative ways in which we might adorn ourselves or our environment, as an escape from or extension of bodily space, and as a means to encourage joy and pleasure. Clothing and decoration—visceral embellishment—prepare us for our daily rituals, or for our desires to be met, akin to Divine's exclamation in *Pink Flamingos* (1972), "I'm all dressed up and ready to fall in love!" Invested in notions of personal utopias and dream spaces, Green creates worlds in which feelings might be inhabited through the physical properties of materials. Staging a relationship between the soft, fleshy nature of corporeality and the potential hardness of objects, her economic use of materials enmeshes with a preoccupation with fetish and form, frills and fishnets. Simultaneously impermanent and decadent, her installations often seem to revel in excesses of desire, the gallery space offering an opportunity to realise her Elysian dreams. There is something romantic about Green's emphatically handmade works, the tacility of the materials she uses, and the development of ornamental environments, which are both sexy and sincere.

Green's two recent solo shows—*Pleasure is a Weapon* at Grand Union (2017) and *Interior Report* at Workplace Gallery (2018)—were connected by two works: an ash wood 'Kissing Seat' and 'Gift of Tongues' (both 2017), a 50 minute looped recording featuring three of Green's past and present collaborations, with artists Rory Pilgrim (*The Brilliant State*), Dawn Bothwell (*Charm Offensive*), and Simon Bayliss (*Splash Addict*). Based on the 'tête-à-tête' sofas from the Victorian era—also known as a lovers' seat, courting chair, or gossip couch—the 'Kissing Seat' is designed to encourage platonic or sexual familiarity. Its inherent structure invites two people to sit next to each other, facing in opposite directions, but so close that simply turning their

heads together would invite a kiss. With its emphasis on bodily pairing, the seat establishes a dichotomy between either having contact or the lack of contact with another person, highlighting the potential consummation or failure of an embrace. If you are visiting the gallery by yourself, you sit by yourself, perhaps triggering an acute awareness of an absence or loneliness. If you sit with a partner or friend, perhaps you kiss, perhaps you feel awkward, perhaps you still feel lonely. A sculptural work—an S for Susie—it is also a functional object, providing a space to sit and contemplate the installation, and encouraging one to stay a little longer. This invitation to view the work at a slower pace encourages a sense of relaxation, allowing one to settle in, and listen to the wandering soundscape 'Gift of Tongues', a mixture of music, spoken and sung lyrics, and field recordings (the sound of heels on a train platform; singing in spaces with high acoustic properties; the drum of rain on glass windows mixed into a repetitive dance beat), which is played on a loop. Green wants the gallery experience to be engaging, welcoming, joyous even, and sound allows it to become less sparse, developing another layer of ornamentation, or aural envelopment. It adds an additional strata to the space—filling the room up—alongside the objects and paintings. The loose rhythm creates a wash of sound which presides over the viewing experience, the spoken lyrics converge with the other works, allowing for an intersection between listening, reading and seeing.

The motif of layering is mirrored by 'Slow Burn' (2017), a polychromatic painted rope work—a sculpture, drawing and expanded painting—that wove its way throughout the gallery at Grand Union. It gathered across the floor, around the walls and ceiling, moving through the space like a circuit, akin to a coiled tendril of hair or a knotted necklace chain at the nape of the neck, tying up the space like a body in bondage. The rope is certain and uncertain, interrupted yet whole, suggestive of a burning fuse. In tandem with the soundtrack, it looks like an abstracted score, a reference to the rhythm, undulating slowly like an irregular breath or a heartbeat. Like much of her practice, it is a work that is sultry, architectural, fantastical, and real. For Green, the desire to create an atmosphere is all-encompassing. Inspired by the low budget, high saturation interiors of John Waters films, or historical, grandiose techniques like trompe l'oeil, her process of material accumulation often results in decorative backdrops that cover the walls. 'Relief Relief' (2017) at Grand Union took on a homogenous acidic yellow hue, whereas Workplace's 'Your kiss flares, a match struck in the night' (2018)—a line borrowed from Derek Jarman's *Blue* (1993)—included pink, blue and black washes of colour swirling into each other. There is an emphasis on touch. The process of making these backdrops is an embodied performative experience—working on the studio floor—Green transforms these crisp, white sheets of gift shop wrapping into large prepared panels. Through a wet, loose painting process, textured bubbles form, and inadvertently the pigment dries to look like veins, cells, synapses, or the structure of a leaf. The work isn't stationary: it floats gently away from the wall, responsive, open to the elements or the movement of a gallery visitor.

Green only included three paintings on paper at Grand Union—'Adam', 'Bruno', and 'Oliver' (all 2017). Unframed, tacked simply to the wall, these warped portraits of three lovers, never to meet, were held within 'Slow Burn'. At Workplace, painted works became the central focus, hung in a neat series of white frames, like a storyboard. This way of working is soothing to

Green, the process made manageable, a way to contain unwieldy experiences or images through a logical system, a formula. All the works are the same size, the repetition of an idea becoming a work in itself. The paper is prepared in advance, piled up in a stack on Green's desk, cutting decisions down. This process of containment offers freedom; the work becomes more essential, edited, direct. A whole series of possibilities emerge for how to fill the prepared surface. The exhibition title—*Interior Report*—surmises the experience of being both inside and outside the body, either looking down, as if floating over a scene, or looking up, to surrounding architecture or the horizon. At times, Green renders her experiences as a type of painted diagram, as a way to find a language for the multiple ways in which we rationalise and replay our memories and thoughts. Acting as vignettes, these paintings (all 2017) describe moments of intimacy and encounter, either sustained or fleeting, from online communication to face-to-face companionship. Green starts with words—written in pencil, arranged on the paper intuitively—often mined from notes in her sketchbook. From this, a quick painting process follows. Using the words as anchors, Green shapes her imagery and forms around them. The resulting works feel live. The edges of the paper are rough. The paint—a watered down acrylic—leaks and seeps. Everything is smooth, fluid, curved. The repetition of certain phrases and words mirror the melodic soundtrack. There is an overt sensuality to the work, with muddled organic and sexual forms. However, pictorial references to the body remain abstract, the shapes are semi-figurative, vague, reduced to subtle symbolism.

Despite their simplicity, the language of her painted line is animated with physical and somatic presence. 'The sex shop ceiling in Cannes' is a visual response to Green looking up at the ceiling of a sex shop, and being struck by the pictorial nature of the home-made interior, with red floating hearts, yellow and white clove shapes. In 'The cut out ass fitted fine', a pair of ass-less tights become a compelling object, a way of framing, elevating, and accentuating the bottom, particularly due to the contrast between fabric and bare skin. 'The space inside your mouth is entirely yours, except when it is mine' was a phrase taken directly from Green's notebook. Inspired by an exploratory BDSM relationship, the body as an abstract image or object, is again brought to bear, one's form being encased in synthetic, glossy materials, the fetishism of latex, the ball gag as form and object, and the recess of the mouth, all filled up. The colours in the painting, grey and yellow, are inspired by the décor of the home in which these situations took place. The frilly edges in the painting are decorative too, suggestive of gathered finishes on clothing, or something more internal, guttural, akin to intestinal drawings. In 'Falling out of us' and 'Your hair, the sky', pink and green folds and curly blue springs all fit together like a puzzle, or an orbit of interlocking shapes. 'Knees to the screen' represents the closeness of a sexual interaction conducted over Skype, masturbating in unison with a partner, knees literally to the laptop screen. In contrast, 'Up by the church in Lisbon' represents a real life, sexual encounter between four people in Portugal. The figures are portrayed through the bare essentials, three cocks and a floating head, with a more extensive written narrative. By proxy of it not being explicit, or pornographic, it becomes even more vulnerable, trusting. These frank, sensitive, honest images have the potential to be more radical than a performative or sensationalised representation of sexual intimacy. Some of the paintings are produced in pairs, the first one being pared back, perhaps more censored. In 'Up by the church in Lisbon (II)', the

memory becomes zoomed in, less diluted, a second attempt at resisting this self-censure. The mind is unreliable, one can play back memories in different ways. Similarly, sometimes there is a level of synaesthesia, with certain colours engrained within our recollections, bringing to mind point 49 in Maggie Nelson's book *Bluets* (2009): "There is color inside of the fucking, but it is not blue." Grey is the predominant colour for all three versions of 'Watching, pissing, arousing for both'. The paintings are like short stories, confessional vignettes of experience, however their potential readings are open-ended, their own grey areas.

In Gaitskill's short story 'Connection', the narrator Susan expresses, "at times she had thought this was the only kind of connection you could have with people - intense, inexplicable and ultimately incomplete." She thinks about her absent friend Leisha, feels the "ache of futile tenderness", and impulsively strokes her own earrings. This poetic notion of intensity, inexplicability, and incompleteness—the circular experience of optimism and anxiety—feels analogous to Green's subtle oscillation between humour and sincerity in her work. Her paintings, specifically, offer an honest and direct way to think about sex and relationships, and an open understanding of how entangled our internal and external worlds are. However, tenderness is never futile. While bodies may become abstract, blurred into the fuzzy matrix of our memories, the corporeal ache of the *tête-à-tête* becomes a productive force, refigured into static and sonic objects. A new interior.