

# Tender Ropes for *Queen Green*

– Dr Amy Tobin

Commissioned essay for *Queen Green*, solo exhibition by Susie Green, Woodend Gallery, Scarborough, UK (20 November 2021 – 27 February 2022)

Cloudiness what is cloudiness, is it a lining, is it a roll, is it melting.<sup>1</sup>

Grids are art's foundation, not clouds.<sup>2</sup> Grids rule perspective, naturalistic drawing, and the searching gaze of the picturesque. They are also the substance of abstraction, even if skewered, or present only as frame or weave. They are the matrices for sculpture, they map places for spatial design. Grids signal control in art as in life, as the substrate for beauty and expression, and as the mechanism for containing. Trellises are grids, used by garden designers to harness nature and particularly to train climbing plants and trees to create bowers, that screened parts of the garden from view. Bowers have associations with pleasurable seclusion and erotic relation. In Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* the decadent Acrasia holds court in her 'bower of bliss', a place occupied by women who 'wrestle wantonly' with one another exposed only by the Knight Guyon, who encounters the scene during his virtuous quest.<sup>3</sup> Guyon destroys the bower of bliss, but the phrase remains as synonym for vagina and vulva, replete with associations of dangerous sexuality and erotic pleasure beyond reproduction.<sup>4</sup>

The works assembled in *Queen Green* form a new bower of bliss, in a room that once was the verdant conservatory of Woodend, the residence of the Sitwell Family. Appropriately these works are the products of the inaugural Dalby Forest artist residency, an initiative that brings artists to engage with the Sitwells' historic house now Crescent Arts, with the collections of Scarborough Museums and with Dalby Forest. Green braids together referential threads from across these sites, including the characteristic architecture of the Observatory building, doubled, and made into a nymph's bra, or charms from the Clark Charm Collection, which inspired the trellis forms. Astrological and enchanted elements combine in this bower where *Nymph Guardians* appear as watercolour figures processing the room's perimeter, summoned like their mythic counterparts to capture mortal attention, and hold us in relation. Green's shimmering figures escape their papery confinement, pooled ink is stilled but still refracts the light. They mirror us so as we move, they do too, like partners in a dance. For the young Edith Sitwell it was this room, rather than any typical ballroom, as well as the grounds around Woodend at Londesborough Lodge and at Renishaw Hall in Derbyshire that captured her imagination. In her later poetry she wove together elements from an enchanted, natural world with folk tales and avant-garde abstractions. Like Green, Sitwell imagined figures through forms gleaned from the landscape. In 'Spring', she writes:

By a maiden fair as an almond-tree,  
With hair like the waterfalls' goat-locks; she

Has lips like that jangling harsh pink rain,  
The flower-bells that spirt on the trees again.<sup>5</sup>

Seasonal change, particularly spring, were important for Sitwell. They meant transformation in the natural world, and she summoned this power against what she saw as the static description of nature in the popular poetry of the early twentieth century. Sitwell wanted to elicit a new kind of

relationship to the world based on not knowing: 'I used the language of another, and by this means attempted to pierce down the essence of the thing seen, by discovering in it attributes which at first sight appear alien but which are acutely related.'<sup>6</sup>

One of the ways that Sitwell makes things relate is through rhyme. The couplets in 'Spring' are tied together by those end-line rhymes, like a pattern of sound. In poetry metre often serves to bind things together, Sitwell used it to connect the animal, with the vegetable and the human, but never to hold the natural world in abeyance or in thrall to the human. As in Sitwell's *Façade*: 'The maid sighed, 'All my blood/ Is animal. They thought I sat/ Like a household cat;/ But through the dark woods rambled I'.<sup>7</sup> Here the poetic pattern – sat/ cat – does not contain the maid's animal blood but intensifies its release. Transposed into the visual world, Green's work is also about relating, training, binding and holding, it also about containment and release. Figures are often made of component parts: high-heeled boots, long whip-like braided hair, patterned or brightly coloured bodysuits, frilly gloves, geometric glasses, defined and rouged lips. These glamorously clad figures suggest other ways of being 'in imagined spaces that might allow for fantasy'.<sup>8</sup> In previous works, these figures have manifested in the social world of parties and nightclubs as transcendent Goddess-beings, 'defiant decorated bodies' who are 'weightless, free, unbounded'.<sup>9</sup>

Green's figures are sometimes delineated by the paper or canvas edge, framed by a watercolour box like a playing card, they also appear in relief against diaphanous clouds of paint, bodies merging with another or with their environment. Her more recent articulated figures, made of coloured paper and shaped into bodies, seem to have escaped their support, attached directly to the wall they enter our space. Their curvy edges, rippled surfaces, link lips, chain and ribbon bindings imagine, almost contradictorily, how embodied feeling can be enhanced by clothing, by impossible or restricted movement, and by other body parts. These figures limbs, lips, breasts and phalluses merge and multiply or are held in suspension in as if in felt or fantasised euphoria. Green has an avatar linked to this series *Susie Unbound* (2020), with leopard print legs and frilly elbow-length gloves, whose body has merged with a puffed-up, cloud-like form that lends her the power to float atmospherically. She expands transcendently to be more and to feel more, like a Queen she goes beyond the limits of the fleshy body, empowered if not masterful.

The art historian Hubert Damisch argued that a theory of clouds – or /cloud/ as he stylised it – offered a lens to write a history of painting.<sup>10</sup> For Damisch the cloud, as a 'surfaceless body', proved a challenge to the ordering principles of Western perspectivism that met their apotheosis in the grid.<sup>11</sup> Damisch writes that the /cloud/ 'seems to call into question, thanks to its absence of limits and through the solvent effects to which it lends itself, the coherence and consistency of a syntactical ordering' or in other words representation.<sup>12</sup> Clouds cannot be manifested in 'schemata of celestial perspectives', Damisch suggests, but they might appear to confuse rational ordering, and to signal the fantastical.<sup>13</sup> In *Queen Green*, Susie Green's cloud motif appears again, on one of the trellises that holds her majestic figures. Rather than contain the cloud form, or the tree, or the flower, these structures bind bodies to nature, portals for becoming cloud-like, tree-like, flower-like. They are thrones for queens, earthly figures, assuming new positions, bound by tender ropes shaped by nature.

Queen Green is not one person. She is the artist, she is Sitwell, she is a reimagined Mother Earth. These queens are Sitwellesque 'changelings', who wear a crowns like the poet's own headpieces, one element of her self-presentation aimed to mark her out as 'existing on the periphery of human society', an 'eccentric', like her friend and fellow writer Gertrude Stein.<sup>14</sup> Sitwell invited Stein to come to England in 1926 to lecture at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. The effect was as Sitwell wanted it; Stein caused a sensation.<sup>15</sup> Despite its many differences Sitwell's and Stein's poetry shares an aversion to naturalism in favour of a new kind of attention to the surrounding

world. If Sitwell turned to the power but familiarity of the natural world, then Stein looked to the everyday, bringing everything into the poem in new syntactical relations. In her book *Tender Buttons*, which is made up of three poems 'Objects', 'Food' and 'Rooms', Stein recounts the world around her as seen and sensed, rather than as known.<sup>16</sup> Stein's 'word-systems' state the 'impossibility of arriving at "the meaning" even as countless meanings present themselves to our attention'.<sup>17</sup> Her writing also offers up new ways of feeling, new ways of relating to rooms, food and objects, where buttons are tender. The sensorial possibilities that Stein opens in her poetry, are evident in Green's figures who present different ways of being on vertiginous heels, or as part-cloud, or tied up with rope. In *Queen Green*, these figures are transformed by a majestic ecology, in which bodies are parts tethered by tendril-like ropes and breasts, genitals and bottoms become cloudy or vegetal, no longer solely human. The artists Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens have described this way of being in relation to nature as 'ecosexual'. Their 'Ecosexual Manifesto' reads:

The Earth is our lover... In order to create a more mutual and sustainable relationship with the Earth, we collaborate with nature. We treat the Earth with kindness, respect and affection... We make love to the Earth through our senses.<sup>18</sup>

Sprinkle and Stephens' ecosexuality offers a vision of non-human relationship turned toward the politics of protecting the planet. It is an invitation to rethink how we relate to the earth, how we care for it, as well as how we might take respectful pleasure from it, in the face of the violent exploitation of resources. Take their definition of 'windplay' for example: 'Enjoying the wind blowing on your body, such as a gentle wind blowing through your hair on a spring day'.<sup>19</sup> But it is also a way to rethink sexual pleasure beyond normative sex acts and roles, they encourage us to experiment with an 'ecosexual gaze', which means to 'look at the world with the awareness that sex is happening everywhere'.<sup>20</sup> This invitation to level love making and pollination returns us to Susie Green's bower of bliss where pleasurable sensation circulates not only between secluded figures, but also the trees, and flowers and clouds.

- Amy Tobin

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- <sup>1</sup> Gertrude Stein, 'Food', *Tender Buttons*, 1914. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15396/15396-h/15396-h.htm>, last accessed 7 Nov 2021.
- <sup>2</sup> See Rosalind Krauss, 'Grids', *October*, vol.9 (Summer 1979): pp.50–64.
- <sup>3</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Thomas Roche (London: Penguin, 1978): 2.12.63.
- <sup>4</sup> See Sonya Freeman Loftis, 'Reconstructing the Bower of Bliss: Homoerotic Myth-Making in *the Faerie Queene*, *Renaissance Papers* (2012): pp.1–12. Also Amy Tobin, 'Bower of Bliss: An Improper Architecture: Structure and Transgression in a New Performance by Linder', (Kettle's Yard, Cambridge 2020), <https://stories.kettlesyard.co.uk/bower-of-bliss/>, last accessed 7 Nov 2021.
- <sup>5</sup> Edith Sitwell, 'Spring' in *Edith Sitwell: Collected Poems* (London: Duckworth Overlook, 2006): p.14.
- <sup>6</sup> Sitwell quoted in Elizabeth Black, 'Edith Sitwell', *The nature of modernism: ecocritical approaches to the poetry of Edward Thomas, T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell and Charlotte Mew*, (London: Routledge, 2017): p.150.
- <sup>7</sup> Sitwell, *Collected Poems*, p.149.
- <sup>8</sup> Susie Green quoted in Philomena Epps, 'I'm All Dressed Up and Ready to Fall in Love', *CARF 03*, (Champagne-Ardenne: FRAC, 2020), pp.70–85: 72.
- <sup>9</sup> Green quoted in Epps, 'I'm All Dressed Up': p. 72.
- <sup>10</sup> Hubert Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/: Toward a History of Painting*, trans. Janet Lloyd (California: Stanford University Press, 2002).
- <sup>11</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*: p.185.
- <sup>12</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*: p.185.
- <sup>13</sup> Damisch, *A Theory of /Cloud/*: p.193.
- <sup>14</sup> Sitwell quoted in Black, 'Edith Sitwell': p.159.
- <sup>15</sup> See Susan Hastings, 'Two of the Weird Sisters: The Eccentricities of Gertrude Stein and Edith Sitwell', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 4 no.1 (spring 1985): pp.101–123.
- <sup>16</sup> Stein, *Tender Buttons*.
- <sup>17</sup> Marjorie Perloff, 'Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein', *The American Poetry Review* (September/ October, 1979), pp.33–43: 35.
- <sup>18</sup> Annie Sprinkle and Beth Stephens with Jennie Klein, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position: The Earth As Lover*, Minnaeapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021: p.14.
- <sup>19</sup> Sprinkle and Stephens, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position*: p.27.
- <sup>20</sup> Sprinkle and Stephens, *Assuming the Ecosexual Position*: p.26.