

Jen Thatcher

Milly Thompson

*The Moon, The Sea & The Matriarch*

A tanned, middle-aged woman sits at a café table. She grows increasingly agitated, alternately smoking, sipping her drink and checking the contents of the (empty) bottle in front of her. Her male companion ignores her, appears unruffled. Are they waiting for someone or something? Is this display of acute self-consciousness particular to women in public, to women of a certain age?

This vignette of the anxious woman features in Milly Thompson's video, *Basking in the melodrama of my own self-consciousness* (2008), a montage of seductive images that include ceramic artefacts, gemstones and Isadora Duncan swirling hypnotically, accompanied by the melancholy soundtrack of 'Wild is the Wind' (made famous by Nina Simone). But the video returns repeatedly to the café scenario, as if channel-hopping back to an episode of a daytime soap opera. The viewer is put in the uncomfortable position of a voyeur, judging the woman, justifying her paranoia.

Thompson cites this video as marking a turning point for her work, and the start of her ongoing interest in the psychology and status of middle-aged women, and how they are represented in our culture. The ambiguity of the video suggests an attempt to make sense of the relationship between older women, beauty, youth, culture and luxury. It was first shown at Peer, London, in 2008, in an exhibition called *Late Entry* – an apt title for Thompson's first one-person show since leaving the collective BANK with which she had been associated for a decade (1994-2003). What did it mean for her, Milly Thompson, to make a late solo entry into the art world? How to reconcile this increased professional visibility with the moment in life when women tend to become less visible, less represented in the media? Was the woman in the video an omen, a warning from the future about how she would be scrutinised, exposed as an older woman?

The work that Thompson has made in the wake of this video puts the middle-aged woman centre-stage. Instead of stoking up anxiety and paranoia, however, Thompson's work venerates female pleasures and fantasies with humour and generosity. 'Pleasure is a Radical Value' reads one of the posters she has flyposted around the village of Helmsdale as part of a summer-long project for Timespan art centre. The project is titled *The Moon, The Sea and The Matriarch* – a tribute to the matriarchal culture of Scottish fishing communities like Helmsdale, where women ran business on land while the men were at sea. In the opening night performance, *Call to the Sea*, members of Helmsdale women's choir, dressed in vivid sunset-coloured clothing, performed the defiant men's fishing song 'The Fish of the Sea', about being 'all together boys' against the perils of the sea, as well as the traditional lullaby 'O Can Ye Sew Cushions', in which a mother wonders whether her 'wee lammie' knows 'its daddie's no here?' Singing aboard a fishing boat moored in Helmsdale's harbour, these women effectively adopted the male roles. This had the effect of cutting through the bravado of male solidarity implied in the fishing song, and inviting the audience to reflect on the trickle-down effects of seafaring life on all members of the community.

The exhibition title has been rendered graphically as a kind of logo. The image features a moon that looks a bit like an ultrasound of a foetus; a wave that resembles a Hokusai woodprint; and a woman (the 'matriarch'), wearing pirate-style hoop earrings, and crossing her arms firmly across a bare torso that is concertinaed with rolls of fat. This logo has been reproduced all around Helmsdale, branding the village: it is lino-printed on banners (that look a bit like pirate flags) and printed on the poster works. On one poster it takes the form of a tattoo on a woman's chest, just above her pink boob-tubed cleavage.

Thompson works across many media, including gaudy glitter and crystals for her playful make-over of Timespan's geology garden, titled *Finally the Rock Garden Glimmers*. But painting has a particular resonance for her. In 2016 she wrote the manifesto 'I choose painting', in which she admitted both guilt at 'accepting the hegemony of male materials' but ultimately the pleasure – the 'escape, simplicity, sensuality' – she finds in painting. This manifesto provides the context for an ongoing series of luscious, sensual paintings of her middle-aged female friends. Pictured with their eyes closed or turned towards the sea and sand, they appear entirely self-contained and satisfied in their own company. The titles of the portraits further emphasise this independence and give the women a classical air: *Nimmi surveying the days catch*, *Livia reading* or *Helian in her Garden* (all 2016).

The women bask, naked or near-naked, on beaches or in luxuriant natural environments. But, like sharks, the basking suggests an ominous, unpredictable edge to these women should you disturb them. Nimmi wears a fierce sculptural choker that in attitude matches her facial expression. *Rafaela in her lair* (2018) is more surreal: Rafaela's naked torso lurks among cacti and foliage, two baby crocodiles sidling next to her in the shadows, one placing a webbed foot – affectionately? – on her thigh. The netting behind her suggests she is in a cage or sanctuary: too dangerous or wild to be set loose. Before being shown at Timespan, some of the paintings were displayed in an exhibition called, somewhat tongue-in-cheek, *Cougar* (2016) – contemporary slang for a middle-aged woman who pursues younger men. While Thompson takes women's right to pleasure seriously, it doesn't mean that pleasure needs to be depicted seriously.

The paintings evoke references to the female nude in art history: the Mediterranean blues and swirly bold brushstrokes of Henri Matisse (*Worship the sun*, 2019); the lush island exoticism of Paul Gauguin (*Yumi under the palms*, 2018). But Thompson's paintings are female fantasies. The women do not offer themselves up to be consumed as delectable objects for the male gaze but rather are depicted as lusty consumers themselves. Food and drink are abundant in the paintings: wine, coffee, lobsters, mussels, various fruit and a sorbet. *White wine Lanzarote* (2015) features a close-up of a hand lifting up a full glass of wine juxtaposed against the woozy turquoise and gold swirls of the sea – an ode to holiday indulgence. The painting's title acknowledges and playfully subverts the stereotype of the trashy female holidaymaker: a white wine for the lady; a cheeky drink with the girls at a beach resort. The contrast between the warmth of these locations and Helmsdale, on Scotland's North Sea coast, only accentuates the fantasy element.

As they refuse to restrain their appetites, so the women in Thompson's paintings do not hide the markers of age and experience on their bodies. Thompson treats the contours of wrinkles, stretchmarks, stomach rolls and cellulite on their bodies tenderly, as if they are

continuous with other textures and patterns in her paintings: jewellery, clothing, forest, sea and beach. Pattern often extends beyond object-borders and spills across the works, giving them a surreal, hallucinatory quality. As we are all aware, these kinds of women's bodies are not usually represented positively in contemporary media.

For us middle-age women, women's magazines exert a push-pull effect. We can't pretend that they represent us at this age – if they ever did – but it's still hard to resist the seductive imagery. In 2012, Thompson collaborated with Alison Jones on a spoof of *Vogue* called *VUOTO* – 'empty' in Italian. The magazine featured a series of fake fashion adverts by Nicole Wermers, all monochrome grey and thus visually 'empty' aside from plagiarised logos such as Dior and Miu Miu. But the 'empty' also suggests the empty promise of change; the fact that magazines have been so slow to respond meaningfully to feminist pressure to expand representations of women. *VUOTO* also contained adverts (created by Alison Jones) for female art provocateurs like Andrea Fraser and Tracey Emin, as well as the script for Martha Rosler's seminal video *Martha Rosler reads Vogue* (1981). Is *VUOTO* suggesting that these artists' critiques of female oppression have also largely been in vain, empty too? After all, *VUOTO*'s editors describes the project with bitter irony as 'high-end self-objectification ... where opposition nestles in co-dependency'.

More poignant cultural references for Thompson's paintings might be found in literature rather than glossy magazines. For me, these lush, dense paintings have their literary equivalent in the work of female writers like Marguerite Duras, Anaïs Nin and Jean Rhys, all of whose tumultuous love stories are set against symbolically-charged descriptions of tropical locations. In these stories, the female protagonists must constantly negotiate their position as women within a dominant male, colonial society. In Nin's *Seduction of the Minotaur*, for example, Lillian is paternalistically told by Doctor Hernandez to put on her shoes after she is seen to dance barefoot with the Mexican 'natives'. The description of her sensual pleasure at this dance explains why her reaction to Dr Hernandez's instruction is so 'fiercely rebellious':

The dirt floor was warm and dry, and just as the night she had danced on the beach with the sea licking her toes, she felt no interruption between the earth and her body, as if the same sap and rhythm ran through both simultaneously, gold, green, watery, or fiery when you touched the core. [p122-3]

Thompson's work often attempts to capture the multi-sensorial experiences of the middle-aged woman. Heat is a motif in her work, referring not just to ambient heat but also internal body temperature. At Timespan, Thompson has added the soundscape *My Body Temperature is Feeling Good* to accompany her paintings. The music (by Cliff Charles) is in the style of 1990s Balearic chill-out music. Sounds of water gently lapping the shore and twinkly piano music seems to have a metaphorically soothing effect on Thompson's lyrics, which chart the menopausal temperature flux of a woman on holiday in such lines as: 'hot flush/middle age/Monsoon sarong/mid life glory'.

The chorus of *My temperature is Feeling Good* is simply the word 'Shatavari', repeated like an incantation. It is a reference to an Indian herb (from the asparagus family) whose roots are used as an Ayurvedic tonic by many menopausal women to alleviate their symptoms. Etymologically, it is derived from the Sanskrit 'shat' (100) and 'vri' (root or husband) – from

which it has gained the exuberant nickname 'she who has a hundred husbands'. In the soundscape, Shatavari takes the place of that 1990s chill-out drug ecstasy, promoting a blissful serenity and feeling of being at one with the world. Shatavari has been Thompson's drug of choice since her own menopause began, and has literally fuelled many of her recent works. For Thompson, Shatavari 'resuscitates, smoothes and protects' – a bit 'like Ready Brek in a bottle', she adds.

For Timespan, Thompson developed three new perfumes, whose names should resonate particularly with menopausal women: Volatile, Proposition and Invisible. Traditionally, mainstream women's perfumes – through their advertising and suggestive names – claim to enhance the wearer's sex appeal. To wear them is to send subliminal messages that you are sophisticated (Chanel No. 5), exotic (Shalimar), dangerous (Poison), youthful (Miss Dior). Thompson's perfumes avoid these sexual associations and instead celebrate those moods and sensations that menopausal women have often felt they ought to suppress. Volatile celebrates hormonal mood swings, when you don't know what you might do or say. Volatile is for women who don't want to 'calm down, dear', but would rather revel in their unpredictability. Proposition is for when you feel powerful and purposeful, and you don't care what people think about it. Invisible makes ironic reference to the cliché that women over 50 are 'invisible' in public, no longer attractive enough to warrant attention and are thus ignored. Only this year, French author Yann Moix recently claimed he could not love a woman over 50, that they were 'invisible' to him. Thompson's perfume Invisible, however, proposes invisibility as an active strategy. Her perfume is for those days when you don't feel like interacting with anyone, when you are happy to be cocooned in your own bubble.

Thompson worked with perfumer Eliza Douglas's company the Art of Fragrance to translate these concepts into scents. Douglas was the ideal choice, having experience in creating olfactory responses to artworks (often for those who are visually impaired), such as *Swing*, that takes Jean-Honoré Fragonard's eponymous Rococo painting as a starting point for a perfume that evokes the 'fresh scent of box hedges, grasses, a breeze and pink ruffled dresses and flowers'. (Coincidentally, the painter already inspired the name of French perfumery Fragonard, founded in 1926.)

If romance can be translated into perfume, it can also be translated into food. As part of her Timespan project, Thompson created a special Barbara Cartland-themed dinner at La Mirage, the queen of romance's favourite restaurant when holidaying in Helmsdale (which had initially been created as a homage to Cartland by her friend Nancy Sinclair). The menu was selected from Cartland's cookbook, *The Romance of Food*. The cookbook – the cover in Cartland's signature pink – is a lavish celebration of French cooking and 1980s food styling. The recipes are illustrated with line drawings of flowers and cherubs, and the dishes are photographed against coloured backdrops, surrounded by elaborate and sometimes surprising props that include china figurines and flowers. 'Cooking is an art!' declares Cartland in her introduction, and indeed some of the photographs, such as for *Lobster Amourette*, share uncanny similarity with Thompson's paintings of decadent food fantasies.

Food, for Cartland, is also an aphrodisiac. She writes: 'Every Frenchman chooses his food with the same care, and the same concentration, as when he chooses a woman to love.' Cartland has in fact written appendices to all the recipes (which are her by chef Nigel

Gordon), offering a range of historical, anecdotal and poetic musings to support her belief in the stimulating properties of her food. For example: 'This dish has a reputation among Hungarian women of helping to attract men when one is no longer young.' And, for *Fleur-de-llys d'Amour*, a vaguely phallic-looking construction of lily-shaped meringues and pastel-coloured sorbets in a melba sauce: 'This should be eaten with a man who, like a Frenchman, can charm a bird off the tree with his words of love.'

It is too easy to parody Dame Cartland's old-fashioned and idealised approach to romance, which seems so far removed from Thompson's bawdy and honest representation of modern middle-aged women. Yet Cartland and Thompson share the belief in the importance of female desire, at all stages of life, and in harnessing the alchemical effects of what we consume. And, perhaps, Cartland's flamboyant presence in Helmsdale over many decades has in some way paved the way for Thompson's provocations.