

Angus Cook introduction to *Celia Paul, Paintings and Drawings*,
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The paint is a matrix of longing. When in 'Kate by the Window' light bounces off her hair, the palette forgoes its sullen tones and the sombre mood lifts. The glow of her profile suggests that the unseen side of her face is suffused with light, giving to the figure a sense of mass and of grace. The joy of seeing light, and of painting it, are related to a spiritual optimism, and to grief. The dread that *what is lost is unrecoverable* is overwhelmed by the revelation of *what must not be relinquished*. Ephemera warrants scrutiny. Nothing is incidental.

When she very first of all asked me to sit, I thought I would use the time to meditate and to pray. Such a lot of my life has gone by just sitting. And I thought – I know it sounds corny – if I can just spend this time to send out, somehow... I'll just say it: Love, in whatever way, then I'm not wasting my time, that it is a positive thing.

The paragraphs in bold type were spoken to me by Celia's mother, Pamela Paul. Celia can hardly ever even make a sketch without people in. Incidence of light is the significant event in her work: its play on the surface of the paintings finds an echo in the subtle ways in which it is made to fall on each subject. The attainment of likeness in 'Kate' – that mournful expectancy – looks like plain sailing, but something leaden and prosaic persists in the condition of the paint, something refractory or entrenched in its application. There is pathos in the feeling that maximum life is being bought at the expense of lovely rendering.

Light, for all mystics, not only in Christianity, is used as a signal for the closeness of God to someone. And warmth too. And dark and cold is when God is far away, though real darkness isn't when God has gone and dropped you. Darkness is only farness from God. Think of Jesus on the cross saying "My God, my God": the sense of desolation in darkness is a basic Christian experience.

Through all her work the sense of sight is associated with a world of potential, within. This is how a sense of the ineffable is able to be communicated. Integrity of sentiment underwrites the substantiation of each subject – a curious detachment slips through the net of concern in 'My Mother with a Necklace' (illus.1). By the management of pictorial tensions, the painting

is saturated with feeling, but remains uncommiserative. The expressive control is such that the feeling occasioned in the onlooker is not confusable with the emotional situation of the sitter. The ray at the top of 'My Mother and God' is connected to the face below; but only by similarity of tone and texture: it does not illuminate her; it is of a

different order to that of the bulb detected overhead in 'Linda', which is spilling light onto the figure.

In certain forms of Christian contemplation, with the flame, say, or the flower – and in Buddhism too – the act of looking is a means to God. For me, when I was very young, there were blossom trees by Van Gogh that made me feel transfixed and in the presence of God; they were saying something to me about beauty going on even when the human eye is not perceiving it.

The encompassing darkness of 'My Mother and God' is at once vista to the sublime, and a void. The generation of such mystery is jeopardised by the insistence on a kind of profane detailing. In 'My Mother in front of a Mirror' (illus.2) this ranges from the missing bed-knob, to what I think of as a comical expression on Celia's face, to the ink-drip running down the paper. In otherwise succinct compositions, where the



2. My Mother in front of a Mirror, 1984



1. My Mother with a Necklace, 1982

focus is on the essential, such inclusions complicate the moment of rapture. It is as if Celia is testing the robustness of what is recondite, whether it will survive in the unrefined atmosphere of the here-and-now. The radiator, in the drawing 'Linda', becomes suggestively specific: drawings and

paintings are perceived in time. The sudden noticing of a cigarette, or the tread on the sole of the shoe, in 'Cerith and Angus', momentarily nonplusses.

I thought: 6 hours silence – well this is a gift for a Christian, a time to give myself to God, I thought. But also a lot of the time is spent worrying or planning meals. She can sense the differences of thought too. She says, 'You're looking glazed', if I'm getting too comfy, and so I have to come to. When I am rapt or still, there is no fidgeting or ache, I am really in prayer, and time goes easily, and so this is a double advantage of prayer, (especially with that ghastly standing position). Prayer has its practical side.

A relish in the ordinary subsumes – but without constraining – the inference of something extraordinary. There is, in the ways these overtly social elements are articulated, something unsettling and wondrous. By how they are actualised in paint, the gas-fire of 'My Mother Standing', the mirror's angle, and her corpulence acquire a real mystery; this mystery is pleasing, and that very pleasure mysterious. That the location of the dreamer in 'My Mother as St Brigid, dreaming' (illus.3) is also a depiction of the thing dreamt is established neither by ambiguity nor conventional trope: the interpenetration of the apparent and the psychic convinces, because it is rooted in observed surfeits of meaning, within the visually actual.



3. My Mother as St Brigid, dreaming, 1983

I was taken aback when I found out the title [of 'My Mother and God']. It is to do with her idea of my relationship to God: that vast amount of dark and only a ray of hope, a promise in the offing. I don't feel that. But you don't argue with painters! God is a real, personal part of my life; but that crushing load of darkness...

In 'My Mother and God', what was on initial encounter a face engulfed in darkness, progressively becomes more particularly a person, wearing a blouse and pleated skirt, sitting in a daylight room, on a buttoned sofa. But the image is volatile and abundant enough not to stay fixed like that: as our eye ascends the wall which is materialising behind her, what had seemed a flat brown plane acquires depth and air; colours of red and blue are noticeable, while yet the reflective glass impedes the apprehension of what it is we are actually looking at, and it becomes hard to say even what colour is being seen. Then when you reach the top of the canvas there is a de-escalation. The feelings of awe stop: is *that* meant to be God?

Celia is so concerned with the truth. I now don't care if I look fat or old or ugly. All truth is of God, and if she is capturing truth it will communicate, and people will think: this is true, this is offering truth and utter being. And just as it is doing so to God, without defence, it is also doing so through God to those who are going to look at it.

The band of creamy, brazen downstrokes seems to be declaring nothing but its own literal substance. It is as if the leap of faith necessary for belief in God's existence is re-enacted in the perception of such a phenomenal matter of fact. I take this passage of light to be a part of, not symbol for, something beyond the edge of the canvas. The lastingly explicit in her art is not located instantaneously.



4. Family Group, 1984-86 (detail)

Truth emerges. The canvas reflected in the mirror of 'Family Group', (illus.4) looks like a shaft of light. You never get over the fact that the image has to be unpacked from the paint. The astonishment I feel at the conveyance of movement in 'Conversation at Riverside' intensifies the sensation: the breezy tree and clouds, reflected in the flow of the lapping water, are felt exactly because of the clotted viscosity of their painting.

Kate can say things and Celia will listen; there is a relaxation to Celia when Kate is there, and I think that that must have been present when we were all together, for the Riverside painting. She needs to keep painting me. Kate is wise and loving; it was their closeness that changed the mood.

Because Celia's mother, in 'Conversation at Riverside', is against the light from the water outside, an aura of blue radiates from her, as if in exaltation. Even when not actually depicted, the source of light in the paintings is felt: windows can usually be imaginably located – this opens the pictures out, and connects to the sensation of longing: it evokes a feeling that things absent might be near. In 'The Little Tin Picture' (illus.5), the close heed paid by the artist is at odds with the subject's own gazing at something *else*. It reminds me that you can be the target of someone's longing, as well as the agent of your own. The conviviality – talking, drinking, holding – evident in the pictures with two people in, is undercut by a sense of the fleeting moment; 'Frank with my Mother' is fed by this urgency. Its composition reminds me of a photo-booth picture, and the reassuring smile of Celia's mother is affecting, like a smile in a photo can be. Conversely, in a single portrait, like in 'Lucy Astor', the pervasive melancholy is held in check by the demonstrable pleasure taken in its actual painting, the wondering at another, a gladness at her presence.



5. The Little Tin Picture, 1980

When she was 13 or 14 she suddenly fixed her mind on painting from all other things, and dedicated herself to this. It wouldn't have been possible were it not for her art teacher who sent her to Lawrence [Gowing] at 16 – she had to do her A-levels all on her own. She homed in on art and gave her life to it. She is obsessed by it. I remember this even early on, and we were clergy, living in a religious community, and didn't even know what kind of canvas to buy her as a present.

The special is fully operative within the confines of the ostensibly mundane: an intensification of reality results. But still, how is it that the orangey light from the blanket in 'My Mother with a Ring' can be made to matter so much? or the fact of the shirt-sleeve being short in 'Cerith' seem moving and strange? or, in 'My Mother Reading to Frank', the colour of tights, or the particularity of the shoes, or the cadmium yellow speck that makes a ring, be beautiful and painful? Art bypasses thought. All attempt at explanation is doomed, is to deny the fact that one of the best things about seeing paintings like these is that they make you ask yourself, again and again: *how is this possible?*

The only thing was when she'd go and be alone and stand in the garden among the Hibiscus trees and butterflies. I thought of that when she was very ill and going to die; (it's a miracle really she survived, so many people prayed)... I said to a friend: 'Well she's 5 and she's looked more at things than many people of 80 have.' I so remember the butterflies gathering on her because she stood so still – it sounds so stupid – but India meant she could take in what she saw in that beautiful garden. She would really look at it all. All India did was have tremendous beauty of nature and offer her the chance in that kind of place to just stand and stare; no-one would think it odd that anyone, even a child, might just stand perfectly still and look, in India – but she wasn't old enough to absorb any of Indian culture.

Angus Cook