

Fiona Rae

By Barbara A. MacAdam | November 2022

At play in the fields of abstraction, British artist Fiona Rae forces us to consider what indeed is abstraction. Could it be a part removed from a whole, or a piece used to construct a form? Can it stand alone? While this might appear to be a simple and overused trope today, it remains a provocative one, sitting at the core of anything we call art, and Rae's works are truly art about art.

Abstraction can be the assembling and then disassembling of forms that, in the case of cartoon characters, may remind us of something real but they are not. The same can be said of brushstrokes, a foundation of form, and about calligraphy for the information it bears. Playful and bookish, Rae punctuates her paintings with alphabetical triggers, using different fonts that she stretches out into bumpy, Disney-esque landscapes pocked with high and low associations. She plumbs time and space through a wilderness of symbols and references. Her palette over the years has segued from dense and dark to light and airy, with the newest work being pastel-hued, spacious and gestured, and set against a white ground. The paintings—oil and acrylic on linen and gauzy-toned works on paper—consist of stray forms, words, and cartoon characters in the act of becoming.

These barely defined shapes turn into things, gestures, thoughts, and sometimes poetic utterances. Images take us from the backyard to the cosmos, and to the computer screen. And even her titles course through a universe of literary references, taking us back and forth in time to connect the fragmented objects and gestures in the images. The references extend from the words of metaphysical English poet Andrew Marvell lamenting the fleeting nature of time, to pop culture allusions such as,



Fiona Rae, *All these moments will be lost in time*, 2022. Oil and acrylic on linen, 60 x 50 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York. Photo: Antony Makinson, Prudence Coming Associates Ltd, London, United Kingdom.

All these moments will be lost in time (2022), the title of one of Rae's paintings that is a line from the film *Blade Runner*. We strain to capture and connect the elusive images while we sense the rhythm and potential for free-association. And not to be forgotten are the wit and absurdity of Dr. Seuss. Rae told interviewer Martin Herbert in a 2015 interview for Timothy Taylor Gallery that one of the inspirations for her charcoal drawings was Dr. Seuss, along with Chen Rong's thirteenth-century *Nine Dragons* at the Victoria & Albert Museum. Talking about using photoshop and erasure as part of her process, she told Herbert, "There's something about representing human experience in cartoon form that to me seems meaningful and bathetic; not real but attached to the real."

It's difficult for a viewer to know where to begin and what to follow in these recent compositions. The passages are quite diffuse. That's where the dreams emerge—a stream of consciousness with interruptions. Art historical allusions include Philip Guston's dotted lines as guides to following the paintings' internal evolution. There is magic in the gesture as Rae brings a brushstroke to objecthood—in effect, an indefinable structure that can be perceived as sculpture. These component images in the paintings appear as if they could be picked up from above and transported elsewhere in the work. She maintains a cauldron of associations, including her own images from the past and her materials. She keeps samples of her gestures and paint colors laid out on canvas for future reference. Rae seems to be figuring it all out as she goes along, sweeping over the work of artists such as de Kooning, as she reaches out for light in these recent paintings and drawings, abandoning the Victorian fathomless darkness in her paintings of the 1990s. She accumulates and lets the pieces establish relations to the world and to one another. "Source imagery," she revealed to *The Guardian*, "can come from anywhere, although I'm still hooked on Dürer's 'Apocalypse' woodcuts for the way he uses line so inventively to describe dragons and demons, patches of grass and cloudbursts." Who could guess?

For some, these newer paintings on white grounds may come off as slightly uncomfortable, unresolved and hard to place. The nostalgia that pastels may evoke can seem too lyrical or dated, but as she noted in an interview for the Tate museum, anything that has existed has the potential to feel dated or out of time. "Is poetic always old-fashioned? I hope not." An apt conclusion, indeed.



Fiona Rae, *Last night I had the strangest dream*, 2022. Oil and acrylic on linen, 60 x 50 inches. Image courtesy the artist and Miles McEnery Gallery, New York. Photo: Antony Makinson, Prudence Coming Associates Ltd, London, United Kingdom.