

Guy Allott, *Frankenstein and Everything Else*

by Paul Carey-Kent

The Belgian artist Mark Manders famously regards his whole body of work from age 18 onwards as making up a 'Self-portrait as a Building' – a fictitious place filled with his work. The echo of that title suggests that Guy Allott is also making a self-portrait of sorts, using self-characterisation as a building to allow him to shift between the objective and subjective states of structure and occupant. In that case the studio stands in for the artist through paintings which show the place, equipment and materials of his practice as well as embodying that practice in their form. Moreover, Allott regards buildings more generally as reflecting the society that builds them: monuments are normally constructed after a person dies, but – says Allott – 'We build monuments to ourselves in our lifetimes – to get an idea of society or a person, look at buildings'.

That might make a sensible account of *I Am a Building*, were the paintings untitled. But the titles reveal that there are other layers. That's entirely appropriate to Allott's painting technique, for he loves to build up a thickly textured surface – often by painting over a previous painting so that a mystery remains as to where the textures came from. He also tends to sew together more than one old canvas to make a 'new' one: turn round any of the big paintings in the show, and you'll see they're made from at least three and in one case as many as twelve separate pieces of canvas, most of which have now-overpainted works on them. If the paintings were all untitled, that would extend the self-portrait by making explicit how an artist's current practice is built on what came before.

What did precede this show? Allott has tended to show bodies of work linked by more directly consistent subjects. I think in particular of chemical experiments, trees, aliens, robots and spaceships. Experiments make for a neatly novel twist on the still life – the shapes of containers and the colours of their chemical contents come with far fewer expectations and precedents than a vase of flowers. They also stand in for artistic experiment. Many of Allott's trees have large see-through holes in them, so that they reveal another landscape as well as constituting the nearest one – and that far landscape may not be the one which logic suggests. The forest becomes magical in the folkloric manner of the Brothers Grimm: not so much surreal – all the trees and views are taken from Allott's own observations and photographs – as combining realities in a new way. The aliens, robots and spaceships are all in the realm of science fiction, which acts as a modern equivalent of myth and provides an apparently unfettered licence to invent. As Allott says, 'an alien can be anything'. But we tend to imagine the future in our own image, and a consistent anthropomorphic tendency runs through this work: not only do the robots look like people, so do the aliens and rockets. And their style tends towards the retro: they aren't forecasts of the future, they're portraits of the here and now, dressed up as the past yet reimagined as the future. It's as if we look through a hole in a tree in the forest and see our own back garden.

None of those subjects are the main ones in *I Am A Building*, but there are continuities. There is an experiment. There may be no room for trees, but there is a potted plant. There are walls made from planks of wood, typically anthropomorphised by the visual pun whereby knots become eyes, suggesting

surveillance – 'the walls have eyes'. And *Alien IX* (2020) makes a guest appearance.

Ah yes, the titles. Most of the paintings I've been discussing come under the subtitle 'The Building', which consists of ten paintings. Two depict windows on a wooden wall, though we are granted no views through them, one being shuttered and the other overpainted. Rather oddly, they are called *Monster I* (2018) and *Monster II* (2019). That suggests that this is the view into the room in which – in Mary Shelley's 1818 novel – the scientist Victor Frankenstein creates a sapient creature through an unorthodox scientific experiment. In which case the painting *Experiment (The Black Candle)* (2018) becomes another reference. If they are the monster's windows, then it must be his studio – or *Swiss Chalet Hideaway* (2020), his walls, tools, ladder and furniture.

The second part of the show confirms that *The Building* consists of paintings through which the artist observes and learns the character of the monster – and that the monster is a painter, too. 'The Progress' consists of two sets of five paintings, with each group hung in a vertical column with a tondo at the bottom. The effect is to make two exclamation marks. We must pay attention to the monster's paintings! We're told one is *The Monster's First Painting* (2020), another his second; a third is called *Large Early Painting* (2020). These indicate that the untrained monster landed on an abstract expressionist style somewhere between childlike splurges and staining à la Helen Frankenthaler. Looking at it another way, Allott has found a reason to produce some rather attractive paintings, quite a distance from his usual thickly-layered figurative style. The monster seems to be a quick learner: he's soon painting still lifes of the tools used to measure out canvases and construct frames – some of which may also have been used to make the monster himself (e.g. *Screwdrivers* (2020) and *Pliers Grips Adjustable Spanners* (2020)). His work seems to evolve, appropriately enough, towards Art Brut – for surely the monster is the ultimate outsider artist. Yet *Protoplanet I* (2020) is another abstract, though more thickly painted. Perhaps it marks a return to abstraction in the light of what the monster learned from his figurative work.

If, then, the monster is making art, he is engaging in a peculiarly human behaviour. What are the distinguishing features of the human intelligence as opposed to Artificial Intelligence? That's a controversial question, but three plausible candidates are: humans are creative, they have feelings, and they are self-conscious. Artificial Intelligences, many would argue, don't and never could be like that.

Some of the Frankenstein's Monster productions do suggest emotion. Indeed, one painting is titled *Monster Emotions* (2020). It shows an abstract pattern made up of disconnected letters which it is easy enough for us to read as the constituent characters of 'LOVE'. The monster, though, is illiterate so the letters are presumably mere patterns to him: he is learning the language of painting as his means of communication.

He Remembers He Found It In The Forest, But Didn't Remember If He Had Made It (2020) evokes a possible dawning of self-consciousness, as the monster struggles to remember what he has done. And there is another work with text, spelling out its title: *I Am a Building* (2020). That would definitely make the monster self-

conscious, passing the third of my putative tests – and he seems a promising artist, if a little lacking in originality ... Yet if the monster, at least in his post-abstract stage, is copying Allott's style, then it becomes more natural to say that the monster is actually Allott. Or, rather, that Allott is the monster: he had to think himself into the monster's state of mind in order to paint what the monster would have painted. We're closer to the nature of Allott and his interests than we are to defining the differences between man and machine.

Frankenstein, then, is Allott's primary reference. That makes it natural to interpret the show in the context of 'monster theory', which reads societies through the monsters they create – influentially summarised in by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's *Monster Culture (Seven Theses)*. The most relevant here may be 'Thesis VII: The Monster Stands at the Threshold... of Becoming'. Consequently monsters 'bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, human knowledge – and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to re-evaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, our perception of difference and our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them.' [1]

How do we perceive the world? Two other references touch on that. First, there are birds – somewhat hidden – in the paintings. They are derived from those in Giotto's 13th century depiction of St. Francis giving the sermon in which he enjoined the birds to beware of the sin of ingratitude, to be grateful to God for their liberty to fly, their preservation on the ark and the benefits of the natural world. Second, the 'immovable ladder' from the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem appears, as if relocated in the monster's studio. That unexceptional wooden ladder has stayed unused for hundreds of years because none of the six Christian churches governing the building can agree on who'll take possession of it. It has become a symbol of division. So, on the one hand a paean to freedom and the physical ascent of flight; on the other hand, the metaphorical ascent represented by a ladder is stymied by human dispute. That is the ambiguous context of the world as the monster must seek to understand it.

Allott's idea of inventing a painted fiction as a spin-off from Shelley is a strikingly original one, with parallels to a literary rather than visual art predecessor: Jeanette Winterson's *Frankissstein* [2]. Winterson reanimates Shelley's characters through modern day equivalents and mixes genders at will – transgender doctor Ry Shelley and Victor Stein, a Professor working on accelerated evolution, are her lead characters, invoking Cohen's Thesis III, whereby the monster is a 'harbinger of category crisis', a hybrid which undermines binary thinking.

All of which – playing on who did what, how the world is and how we might read and classify it – comes together to form a complex but lively scenario. Even so, the fictionalisation may not be Allott's main concern. The 'love' that seems to be forming in the letters of *Monster Emotions* (2020) may actually be for colour and materials: what is loved is, self-referentially, what is used. Having been diverted by the narrative and associated theory, it could be that what the monster – whether as itself, or as Allott – is really interested in is what paint can do. The artist passes on his love of painting: to the monster, to the viewer. Certainly, that's what makes

'I Am a Building' – and, indeed, Giotto's frescoes - immediately enjoyable.
Everything Else is just everything else.

— Paul Carey-Kent

[1] In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture*, edited by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen,
University of Minnesota Press, 1996

[2] Jeanette Winterson: *Frankissstein: A Love Story*, Jonathan Cape, 2019

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