

FIONA RAE
VISTA
30.01-23.08.25

Curatorial text. Carolina Grau

Fiona Rae is very particular and precise with words; she studied English at university before leaving to go to art school. When we started discussing the title of this exhibition, she wanted to find a word with the same spelling and meaning in the three languages of English, Spanish and Catalan, so that the likely audience would all feel that the word belonged to them. There were only a few possibilities, and the word ‘vista’ was chosen to convey the spirit of this exhibition. All three languages share two meanings of ‘vista’¹ – on the one hand, the enjoyment of an especially beautiful view, usually from a vantage point, and on the other, the imagining of a possible future or outcome. The exhibition “Vista” with its open plan galleries provides the opportunity to discover multiple views and new connections between the sixteen large paintings brought together for the exhibition. The selection of paintings from 1997 to the present day also offers a chance to contemplate the evolution of Rae’s pictorial language, her explorations into what is possible in the realm of the abstract whilst holding on to a notion of the figurative.

Over the last three decades, Rae has developed a distinctive body of work, full of restless energy, humour and complexity, which sets out to challenge and expand modern conventions in painting. Her large canvases stand out for their compositions, their elegant disorder suggesting an instability clearly inspired by the contemporary experience and the evolution of art and culture. Her contemporary influences range from graphic design, fashion, music, calligraphy, animation and video games. Each series of paintings thoroughly explores the possibilities of creating and combining images inspired by both the surrounding cultural environment and the emotional and intellectual questions of inner life.

In 1987, Rae graduated in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College which was known as markedly conceptual, encouraging an experimental approach to creativity and a democratic approach to material and meaning. Students were encouraged to make work that had something new to say, that engaged with the contemporary world², and which did not merely repeat what was already familiar. They were also required to be able to discuss the work they had made in seminar groups led by practising artists such as Michael Craig-Martin and Richard Wentworth. In 1988, Rae participated with fellow Goldsmiths’ students, in the much-celebrated “Freeze” exhibition organised by Damien Hirst in an abandoned building in London’s Docklands. This

1 It has also the main meaning of sight and eyesight in Spanish and Catalan.

2 Maloney, Martin. “Everyone a Winner! Selected British Art from the Saatchi Collection 1987–1997”. In: *Sensation: Young British Artists from the Saatchi Collection*. London: Thames and Hudson - Royal Academy of Arts, 1997, p. 26.

was the defining moment which began the story of the Young British Artists (YBAs)³ who became widely known for their open attitudes towards materials and process, their use of found objects and shock tactics, and their entrepreneurial outlook.

Almost a decade later in 1997, the now famous exhibition of new British art, “Sensation”, opened at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. It was a selection of works from the Saatchi collection and reflected an exciting and dynamic time in the UK with the rise of ‘Cool Britannia’, the celebration of British youth culture which combined the YBA artists with the Britpop musicians, the club music scene and the youth culture magazines. At the private view, I vividly remember Rae’s painting *Untitled (Sky Shout)* (1997), which encapsulated the energy of that time with its sense of constant movement and reconfiguration. This painting, which is included in “Vista”, belongs to the “Black & White” series, large paintings which feature brightly coloured discs punctuating a black-and-white ground, whilst black-and-white brush marks activate and unsettle the surface. The other painting in the exhibition from this series is *Bird House* (1997), which reveals more of the vivid stencilled ground and moves the eye constantly across its unsettled surface. Both titles make reference to altitude and its open spaces; at that time, the artist was living in a high rise flat at the Barbican Estate with London at her feet. She has described it as “a bit like living in a spaceship...it seemed a truly contemporary experience and I wanted the paintings I was making to reflect something of that.”⁴

Rae works in series, each beginning with an idea or element and explored through the marks and gestures of abstraction. Her compositions are improvised, juxtaposing unlikely paint marks and elements, with Rae giving herself the freedom to radically modify her components and inspirations. The painting *Creature* (1998) belongs to the “Black” series, characterised by dark and dense grounds which take us to a dark space, a view to the intergalactic void. The painting contrasts and melds the floating hard-edged rectangles with brush marks that are laden with sensuality and movement. The title suggests the possibility of monsters lurking in a science fiction scenario such as *Alien* or *Predator* and confronts us with a disturbingly sinister painting.

In the 2000s, the artist began to use Photoshop to plan the composition of the geometric shapes, opening up a new way of working. The resulting “Fufanu” series presents a painterly world connected to the computer screen, reflecting in pictorial analogues many of the new visual conventions familiar to the digital generation. The grounds are monochrome, soft dark blues or purples, whilst the ambiguous letters and symbols of a contemporary font, sometimes with a three-dimensional appearance, float on the surface and interact with relatively few but distinctive brush marks. The painting space is illuminated by airbrush sprays in pink or white, suggesting the neon light of an advertising hoarding in a moody chiaroscuro atmosphere. *Angel* and *A Matter of Life and Death*, both 2000, remind me of futuristic cyberpunk film *Blade Runner* with its gliding vistas of a foggy, grey city, seen from inside one of the ‘spinners’, the flying cars.

Rae pursues further the idea of letters used as compositional shapes in the next series, the “Font” series, with her humour and playfulness present in *Rodeo* (2001). The word “rodeo” is Spanish in origin, initially meaning to round up cattle and evolving in time to mean a show which displays the skills of the North American cowboys. This painting has a white ground with white glitter circles defined by grey shadows and scattered amongst large-scale fonts suggestive of Americana in pale greens and oranges. Red stars, trailing crayon lines and black calligraphic and cartoonish drawing interact dynamically and could be seen as an ironic take on the vista of a rodeo. Rae has acknowledged the influence of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger with their reexaminations and subversive representations of language and the power of advertising⁵.

3 The first use of the term ‘young British artists’ to describe Hirst and these other young artists was by Michael Corris in Artforum, May 1992. The acronym ‘YBA’ was coined later in 1996 in Art Monthly magazine. Artistic terms sourced from the Tate Gallery website <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/y/young-british-artists-ybas>

4 Interview with Simon Wallis, Fiona Rae, Carré d’Art – Musée d’art contemporain de Nîmes, 2002, p. 69

5 Video interview, *Fiona Rae: From Art School to Artist*, Christie’s, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QFfCOYEuz05g>

In 2004, Rae's lexicon expanded to include cartoon images which intermingled in a universe of abstract painting and remained intriguingly ambiguous. The resulting two series, "Font, Image, Pour", and "Panda", stand out for their striking colour palettes that run riot across the surface in lyrical and yet joyfully iconoclastic compositions. It is an explosion of vitality, combining fluid brushstrokes with drips and stencilled shapes that could be children's stickers of pandas, flowers, stars and Bambi. The dense paintings have the feeling of an exotic and comic tropical space, with layers of different painting languages. In *Look!! Look!! Look!!* (2006) some of the Bambis are connected to each other by bursts of dashed lines like laser beams, whilst surrounded by paint explosions. On the other hand, in *Shifting sands dusts its cheek in powdered beauty* (2010) dark and rainbow coloured brushstrokes camouflage what could be cursive script hidden in the painting. The title of *Touch your world* (2013) borrows a phrase from drama improvisation where the performer is urged to imagine their world so strongly that they can touch it and hence make it real to the audience. It also refers to the Xie Cheng manga story of a boy unable to see colour until he meets a girl who helps him. In this painting, the dark blues and the grey drips provide an aquatic environment for pink stars with orange lines, tiny dotted lines outlining a panda, and possibly the scattered features of more pandas, insinuating a vista full of hope, fear and colour.

"The appeal of painting," Rae has said, "is that there is no solution. It always eludes you... it's a process with no possibility of arrival."⁶ After nearly three decades of using colour in painting, in 2014 Rae challenged herself, just as she had done since her days as an art student, and rebooted her practice. She devoted herself to making charcoal works on paper, followed by the "Greyscale" series of paintings made with a palette consisting only of white, black and tones of grey. We are displaying three of the charcoal works on paper, inspired by the artist seeing Chen Rong's 13th century Chinese scroll, "Nine Dragons", with its black ink depictions of dragons and clouds drifting in and out of visibility. Rae's charcoal drawings contain a notional figure, seemingly in a state of auto destruction with the hectic energy of a cartoon. While executing the drawings, Rae had in mind Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning Drawing* (1953) with her intention being to simultaneously embody both de Kooning's act of creation and Rauschenberg's act of destruction⁷. Like *Figure 1g* (2014), all the paintings in the "Greyscale" series are improvised, using only the marks that it is possible to make with a brush and painted 'wet into wet'. The vertical canvases suggest a figure whilst remaining resolutely abstract.

In 2017, the artist eliminated black and its derivatives from her palette, beginning the "Pastel" series and using colours which in themselves suggest artificial and magical tones. This work on chromatic gradation became the basis for a theatrical choreography of forms and pictorial gestures which teetered on the edge of the figurative world. *Snow White changes into something rich and strange* (2017) presents what might be a fragmented figure with pointed arrows, fairy wings and ribbons in clouds of light: a vista of a fantastical fairy-tale scenario.

The "Abstracts" series started in 2019, with gouache and watercolour works on paper which served as plans for the large paintings. *Abstract 9* (2019) presents a set of brush marks, each gesture intended to present itself as itself and not seeking to suggest a figure or a landscape or something else entirely. However, as Rae writes "if there are references and associations beyond the actual presence of each mark, then that is the inevitable leaking, and delight, of our language systems..."⁸. She also adds that "an Abstract painting also simultaneously pulls the viewer away from the contemplation of vivid mental images because it insists on its immediate presence in the world."⁹

6 Kent, Sarah. "Fiona Rae", *Shark Infested Waters: the Saatchi collection of British Art in the 90's*. London: Zwemmer, 1994, p. 77.

7 Martin Herbert in conversation with Fiona Rae, "Fiona Rae". London: Timothy Taylor Gallery, 2015, p. 3.

8 Fiona Rae statement and press release for *Fiona Rae: Abstracts* at Galerie Nathalie Obadia, Paris, December 2019. https://www.nathalieobadia.com/usr/documents/exhibitions/press_release_url/18/cp-uk-fiona-rae.pdf

9 Ibid.

Following her passion for written language, Rae has been working on the “Word” series since 2021 which experiments with phrases and words from poetry, songs or films that are captured on canvas. Rae sees these paintings as an ongoing investigation into the possibilities of abstraction and writes that her intention is not to illustrate the meaning or emotion of a particular quote, and nor is to ensure that the words and sentences are intelligible. By running the language systems of abstraction and literature side by side, Rae produces playful and intriguing paintings which slip in and out of legibility and pure abstraction. Four paintings from this new series are displayed chronologically on a long wall, allowing viewers to take an overview of the development of this new hybrid language. Each one is from a different year and the four titles which are encapsulated on the canvases are taken from a play, a film, an animation and a poem respectively. The final and newest painting, *Your shadow at morning striding behind you* (2025) has the densest composition, with rectangles, circles and triangles anchoring each painterly word. We have selected a detail of this last painting as the image of the exhibition, with its brush marks behaving as objects in space, as sculptures or landscapes, clouds or wind. Rae makes pictures within pictures, representing our contemporary world as full of real and unreal spaces, and opening up exciting vistas full of movement, colour, optimism, and most importantly, creative freedom.

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