



**Shani Rhys James** is rightly celebrated as one of the most talented artists working in the UK today. Her paintings are uncompromising, her huge canvases full of life and colour.

This exhibition includes both new and now timeless Rhys James pieces. 'Black Chandelier', for example, is very much in the mould of the feminist work created by Rhys James over the last decade, while the containment of women through clothes and costume has also been an abiding interest for her since she first watched her mother take to the stage ('Inner Room'). The visual representation of costume in James's work depicts the serious constraints still experienced by women the world over, while 'Black Chandelier' calls to mind Charlotte Perkins Gilman's short story 'The Yellow Wallpaper'. Shani's painting on this theme has certainly stood the test of time.

As for her rich cultural heritage, Rhys James frequently emphasises her Australian as well as her Welsh roots, and the complex influences which have hovered over her from both sides of the family. A central moment in Shani's life and work remains her removal by her mother from Australia to London, an exile which would never be reversed.

Very often, she says when we meet to discuss her work, the faces that she paints come from nowhere. They could be her children, or her grandchildren, or her late mother, even, who was such a strong influence on her talented daughter. It's also worth remembering how often Shani makes significant changes to a painting. Strong, imaginative elements are painted in and then painted out, all in turn: parents, babies, elderly family members. 'They all go', she says quite simply. 'Just as they came.'

Words too have always fed into Shani's work, and for the purposes of this exhibition she has drawn on the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins: *Give beauty back, beauty, beauty, beauty, beauty, back to God, beauty's giver, beauty's self and beauty's giver*. While Manley Hopkins' poetry denotes a withering of beauty and power with age, Rhys James's paintings re-assert these aspects. This exhibition sees James bring flowers to canvas in her most adventurous mode yet, featuring drooping stalks made by what looks like the artist's finger running green lines through the painting. Shani's flowers are absolutely wild, especially in the way in which they explode across the canvas, dominating everything else – plates, jugs, heads. They cannot be contained.

Finally, one of the strongest symbols in the paintings exhibited here is the re-occurrence of the nitrile glove. When we meet to talk about the exhibition, Shani highlights the neediness of everything and everyone who surrounds a woman artist – how one's hands are constantly fully occupied, with children, with art, with life outside the studio. The gloves referenced here are both the nitrile gloves used for painting, and the kid gloves worn by the characters played by Shani's mother during her theatrical career – Nora in Ibsen's 'A Doll's House', for example.

Some of the paintings here are easier to 'read' than others. It's not always straightforward to identify at which stage of life Rhys James's characters find themselves as they peep through



the foliage curtain between painter and viewer, and that's a good thing, in my opinion. It makes it more difficult for us to label them, when they are not meant to be labelled.

Even at this later stage in her career, Rhys James is continually dealing with recurring themes, unafraid of revealing a mixture of strength and extreme vulnerability. In 'Afternoon House II,' for example, her mother is reduced to mere costume. This isn't actually so very different from Shani's treatment of the stylized flowers and gloves applied to a dress in 'Nitrile Gloves II'. The female characters are powerless, there for the taking: are they going to be devoured by male desire?

On the canvases of other artists, yellow is just a colour. On the canvases of Shani Rhys James, however, yellow is actively alive, almost a character in its own right. Different kinds of yellow represent new beginnings. Through it all runs the 'golden echo' of Indian yellow, and indeed many other yellows, until we reach a self-portrait in which Rhys James reigns supreme over her painted self, with her black paintbrushes standing tall in a jar just next to her: 'Figure Against Yellow'.

In previous shows, Shani has shown herself to be completely fearless. Now, in this latest exhibition of work both old and new, she adds passion, power and her own 'golden echo' to what promises to be an unforgettable series of paintings.

**Francesca Rhydderch**

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