

Deborah Poynton

STEVENSON | JOHANNESBURG



ABOVE Deborah Poynton, *Land of Cockaigne 1*, 2011, oil on canvas, 200 x 250cm. © Deborah Poynton and courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg

There's something ungenerous about Deborah Poynton's paintings. They pretend to be big, to welcome you. They seem to invite you – to join her, to enter her meticulous u/dys/heterotopias, to lick them, to buy them – but at that last moment, when you are close enough to see her brush strokes, to smell the oil, ready to pull out your wallet, they close like a flower anticipating the snow.

I remember being a student and seeing Poynton at Stevenson when the gallery was still in De Waterkant. I was young and stupid enough to not be worried about The Painting Debate that would later occupy me. Unconcerned about the meaning of them having-been-painted-at-all, I was in awe of her technique but nauseated; the paintings seemed sick, silly even. I decided that I didn't like them. When I was older and smart enough I thought the reason I hadn't liked them was because my repulsion was an intuitive, precocious awareness about the "death" of painting (whatever that means).

Poynton's latest exhibition *Land of Cockaigne* was

inspired by "a vision of the sea in turmoil ... without a horizon." She recalls the painted image from her children's bible – kitsch and terrifying – of Moses parting the sea. The double-page spread showed tiny people precariously walking into shadowy oblivion. "I was so scared of this picture," she writes, "which depicted the threat of total annihilation, that I glued the pages together so that I would never accidentally see it." I'd like to suggest that thinking about Poynton's paintings as "glued together" highlights the centrality of containment in her work.

There's only one image of the sea in the show, and it really is beautiful and foreboding. The ten landscapes and nudes are meticulous, effortful, exhausting, exhibiting the "bad behaviour" of "Sunday Painters ... who believe in the progress of their craft." It is however the landscapes that are for me the most unnerving: each scene is surrounded by an unpleasant vignette, a painted frame, like an amateur Instagram border, ugly but serious. These shadowy edges seem like a slip in

taste – Poynton taking her flirtation with kitsch too far – but if we consider the painting as "glued" then this leitmotif is a sign of that closure. They, along with the painting style, cut the images out of their landscape and off from the viewer. Poynton explains that, "the tiny brushmarks gently stroke the surface, sealing it like a skin so that each image is its own universe, an entity with its innards hidden ... the finished surface is an annihilation of the self."

Poynton's need for containment is embodied in her breathless paintings. The nausea I continue to feel is part awareness of her striving for closure and part disappointment at being drawn in by folds of red velvet only to be turned away by paintings that, despite their power and seductiveness, seem to hold so much back.

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