

JHANA MILLERS

Ruby Wilkinson

Forward Song

If I were to unframe *Starter*, the stormiest of Ruby Wilkinson's new paintings, her studio would fill with water. It would sluice from the walls in great big storm cloud drops and fill up the floor like a lake. Eels and fish would pour out the door and down the stairs. Some oceanic current might wash me away too, to begin my new amphibious life. Who can say. Whatever happens, I know one thing for sure: spilled water doesn't flow backward.

Water. Paint. The tea, the truth, our guts, our heart. This is what we tend to spill. Our bodies overflow into the moment after we've spoken the sentence that can't be unsaid. They give us away. Wilkinson, in *Forward song*, paints into moments like this, uncertain moments, where an ending and a beginning might blur, where we realise the universe has quietly rearranged itself while we weren't looking.

Of the ten paintings in *Forward song* nine are blue. Though blue is too simple an adjective, like using the word love for all the things that *that* word means. Alongside the winter ocean, Wilkinson has poured into her paint pot late dusk, last night, old ink, clouds, bruises, your ex-boyfriend's nicest jeans, lapis lazuli, a pile of teal jewels, face wash and the ashy sunrise on a Sunday morning. Blues both sacred and profane. "It's funny," she said to me recently, "last year I would have been super upset if even a speck of blue turned up in my paintings." But like something from a fable, one day Wilkinson was just struck while mixing her oil paints. Man, how vibrant was blue. A colour that once felt limited and repellent now seemed open-ended, expansive. The shade had hatched like an egg.

Despite their consistent blue, Wilkinson's paintings vary hugely in style and mood. Their titles are small verb-filled poems and I read into them stories of how two people could orbit each other. I pin them to my life. *Off book* is slow and tranquil yet slightly menacing. My first relationship in it's comfortable but complacent autumn days. My boyfriend's off mood, scarcely contained by his silence, as he stirs the dhal. *Beat chat* is intense and chaotic but is also siphoned from deep, harmonic currents. Me, just last week even, walking my crying baby around the house at four in the morning. My slow steps, my aching arms. My voice whispering her name softly, over and over, into her short fluffy hair. Daily we face the ambiguity of beauty.

Forerunner, *Runtime (Eddy)* and *Applaud* are sublimely big, asking to be gazed at from across the room in a meditative trance. In *Runtime (Eddy)* and *Applaud* Wilkinson's gestural marks drift across a diffuse pool of paint, in places deep and still, elsewhere barely even lapping over the canvas. Despite these works' ethereal qualities, Wilkinson's practice is fiercely physical. She paints the marks and scrubs at them, dissolving the paint, drawing it out, using the rhythm of her hands and arms to create those deep pools. As I look at *Applaud* questions bubble up. What is it to be soluble? To be washed away? To surrender?

A confession: I am also tempted to see these paintings as figurative. My brain wants to superimpose landscapes and seascapes onto them. This is possibly because *Off book* contains the faintest impression of a horizon line, while *Cold reading* and *Forerunner* flirt with the idea of a vanishing point. But stable representation always evades me. Every work could equally be sea or sky or fish or clouds or cities, and as Wilkinson consistently reminds us, is definitely just paint. In *Forerunner*, *Runtime (Eddy)* and *Applaud* the pressure of Wilkinson's scrubbing embosses the canvas' stretcher bars into the painting, a barely discernible yet truth-telling grid.

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What we're witnessing each time is the afterglow of painterly movements. Mixing. Gesturing. Scrubbing. Perhaps I will go so far as to call them rituals, drawn from the well of ordinary human motion. And whatever spirits these rituals conjured, they are now suspended in the paint. Like a dancer, Wilkinson is interested in what movement conveys while our words catch up. I think of even the smallest actions—me turning the page of a book or smiling at my mother—and all the years they contain. Each of Wilkinson's gestures is the same, the sum of memories, emotions, experience and intent. All cast in blue paint. As viewers we don't necessarily have access to Wilkinson's life, but we sense our own resonating from the wall.

Imagine me looking at *Post mas*, for example. It's small painting, best peered at close-up, maybe even scrutinised with a set-level and ruler. It feels dense and textured, almost sealed. If the larger works explore the possibilities of dissolution, this work explores the possibilities of accumulation. Instead of transcending earthly concerns, it wears its effort clearly. I think of *Post mas* later as I wade through my afternoon, the same as every afternoon I've had for the last seven months, measured out not in minutes but in the near-constant ways my body moves—changing nappies, picking up toys from the carpet, feeding the baby, laughing and singing. Maybe there's even a kind of divinity in these rituals, I wonder. Each repetition another act of devotion.

And finally, then, what of the exception? *In-flight (lovers)* is the only painting that's not blue. It's a celestial tangle of wings—the colour of dirt and sand. Not water, but wind and land. It still contains much of the duality I love in Wilkinson's work, though, as it glides between being transcendent and grounded, representative and abstract, lyrical and restrained. Also: is *In-flight (lovers)* of the natural world or the somatic world? Knowing Wilkinson, likely both. And like all her work, it's dignified too. It respects what our bodies do better than our brains: tell the truth.

Flora Feltham, 2023