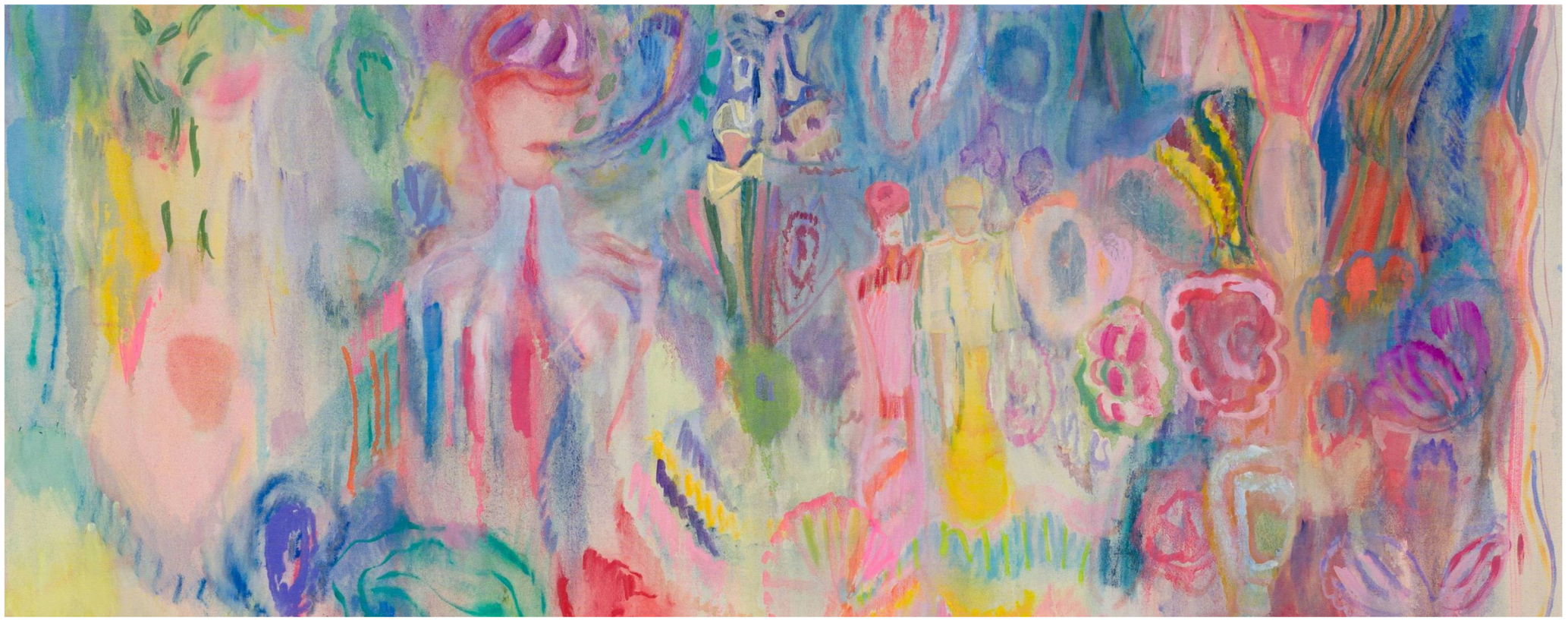

Advisory Perspective

# Paintings Give Lorna Robertson Somewhere to Go

*By Annabel Downes | London, 8 July 2024*

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Every morning, Lorna Robertson swims in the Arlington baths in Glasgow. After plugging in her earphones (David Bowie, Sinéad O'Connor, Erik Satie, Claude Debussy), she'll head to the studio, clean her brushes, and start painting.

Hers are paintings with no clear certainties, firm beginnings, or endings. Rather, her soft-hued oil and watercolour combinations curdle across the canvas. Robertson's work has over time been informed by the solidity of Paula Modersohn-Becker, the bold inventiveness of Pablo Picasso and Max Beckmann, the gentle lyricism of Gwen John and David Jones, the dreamlike qualities of Odilon Redon and Kai Althoff, and the musicality of Alan Davie and Chaïm Soutine.



Lorna Robertson, *Suzanne's career* (2023). Oil on canvas. 81.3 x 53 cm. © Lorna Robertson. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

In her eponymous London debut at Alison Jacques (28 June–3 August 2024), Robertson's fantastical narratives take centre stage. The paintings on show are a corrugation of mark-making upon clippings of vintage magazines and scraps of textiles, while the smaller works on paper—some framed, others not—offer quiet impressions into her intuitive language.

Ocula met with Robertson to discuss her love of Modersohn-Becker, the importance of swimming in her life, and her most recent body of work.

**What was your first experience of art?**

I grew up in a house on the seafront of Prestwick, a town on the west coast of Scotland. I had lots of freedom and space for my imagination to grow—I would draw on the sand and make things on the beach which, of course, would get washed away. Maybe that made me less precious.

Seeing Max Beckmann's paintings in Munich, aged 19, had a huge impact on me. That felt like my first encounter with serious art.

**What do you think makes a good painting?**

A painting should read like a good book; it holds enough back to get you thinking while allowing you to take something of yourself into it.

**What led you to art school?**

I flunked school, and after a brief stint at a design school in Carlisle, I studied fine art at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design in Dundee, where I was taught by Scottish artists Ian Howard, Will Maclean and Dennis Buchan. It was an encouraging and empowering experience—I remember being told, 'You're going to paint until you're 80 years old,' and 'you don't know how lucky you are.'



Lorna Robertson, *The song of home* (2024). Collage, oil, linseed oil, and varnish on paper. 17.4 x 17.1 cm; 23.5 x 23.2 cm (framed). © Lorna Robertson. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

**And now you've got a show at Alison Jacques! Can you introduce the show?**

My paintings are always made in relation to my last body of work. With this exhibition, there's a closer relationship between the smaller works on paper and the larger canvases—not that any of the small works are 'studies', but the abstract qualities are more prominent. The figures have become more hidden and integrated into a whole.



Lorna Robertson, *An autumn afternoon* (2024). Collage, oil, linseed oil, and varnish on paper. 22.4 x 29.7 cm; 28.6 x 35.9 cm (framed). © Lorna Robertson. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

There are certain emanations coming out of the mouths. There are varying scales of figures vying for the same space, escaping a certain logic. The motif of hats become a way of extending, emphasising, or changing the shape of heads; the hats hold the thoughts in.

The paintings are a bit more fantastical somehow. There is a greater abstraction in them and a greater intuition. The heightened drama and accepted artifice of cinema has a freeing effect and there are influences brought to me by my son, Lewis, who is a filmmaker. Conversations about processes, about constructing a situation—all the particularities of concrete decisions made about location, sets, costumes, casting, et cetera.

**You've spoken about how paintings are similar to music in that they give you 'somewhere to go'. What role does music play in your life?**

Music, like painting, makes you feel. My more drastic paintings are drawn from big feelings—they're rough and quite physical—but I don't like them getting too pretty. I mean yes, they're pretty colours, but that physicality is why I keep working big.

**Do you find yourself exploring new colours?**

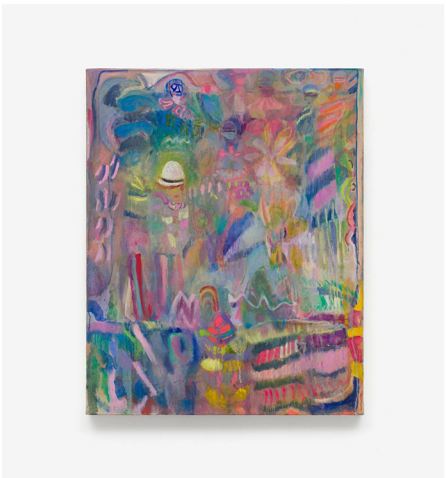
I also love exploring new relationships between colours, the proportions and placement of colour, and how colours react together. For me, colour is very particular. When I have an idea of the colour I want, I'll spend ages mixing it or rummaging around the studio looking for it.



Lorna Robertson, *Your young voice* (2024). Oil on canvas. 240 x 210 cm. © Lorna Robertson. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

**What do you treasure most in your studio?**

I love shutting the door. Anything could happen and you're completely in your own world. When I was younger, before I had children, I used to paint deep into the night—until three or four in the morning.



Lorna Robertson, *The home and the world* (2024). Oil on canvas. 100 x 80 cm. © Lorna Robertson. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

**When the kids were younger, did they ever sit in the studio with you?**

A studio is not the place you'd want to bring a child to because of the strong turps and paints. You also need to concentrate 100 percent. There was one exception: a memorable couple of months in 2006 when Andy and I were on a residency in Dusseldorf. We had this big studio flat in the city and the children were in the studio with us painting and playing. On lunch breaks, we would head out to visit local museums. We loved it.

**What enabled you to uphold belief in your practice and style during earlier years when you weren't receiving so much attention?**

Being surrounded by people as committed as you, who believed in what they were doing, and really valued the act of making art—simply doing it—helped. Painting has always been a part of my life.

**What do you do for fun besides painting?**

Halfway up in Glen Rosa on the Isle of Arran, there's a lovely deep pool. I like to go there and jump in. You feel alive in every nerve ending in your body. —[O]

Main image: Lorna Robertson, *The taste of cherry* (2024). Oil on canvas. 140 x 180 cm. © Lorna Robertson. Courtesy Alison Jacques, London. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.