

Part bijou Kiefer, part woozy Vuillard: the paintings of Andrew Cranston

This small, captivating show at Ingleby Gallery in Edinburgh is made up of ten melancholic paintings of great textural richness

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The ten vignettes that punctuate the white walls of the Ingleby Gallery invite us to step into the many-chambered mind of Andrew Cranston. These

densely textured and patterned figurative scenes of obscure meaning enthrall, drawing the viewer into a peculiar realm of fantasy where tortoises crawl for ever and infants abandon their toys to stare out of viewless windows.

Cranston's painting is the kind that provokes extravagant responses from observers uncomfortable with art that refuses clearly to state its purpose. Read profiles of the artist and you will find much pontificating about 'the despondent poetry of the creative process', and so on. To my eyes, Cranston's painting is about surface, colour and imagination. Narrative certainly lurks behind these scenes but it is never explicit. Spawned from diverse origins, it is open to endless interpretation. This is a good thing.

No supporting explanation is offered to help the viewer navigate these indeterminate images, although the gallery does say that Cranston is writing some explanatory text. Some will welcome this. Nevertheless, the works succeed without explanation, and may indeed be better off without it. Intense little interior scenes peopled by lonely figures, these paintings prompt emotional responses all by themselves and encourage the viewer to concoct a narrative of their own. Since Cranston's work responds to the stimuli of memory and imagination, as well as to literature and film, it seems an appropriate extension of his own approach to engineer a similarly imaginative response in the viewer.

Andrew Cranston:
paintings from a room
Ingleby Gallery, Edinburgh, until 26
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'I am two' is a haunting, and quite heart-breaking, painting. A small naked child sits on the floor, head turned to the pale window behind, through which nothing can be seen. Beside the child lie two toys — an elephant and a monkey. The walls and floor combine in a single plane of green and the scene resonates with loneliness. Some sadness lurks here, or so it seems. The gallery assistant told me it was a self-portrait and that the toys were Cranston's childhood favourites. Perhaps it should be a tender scene of childhood remembered, but these three isolated figures, the blank window and that swathe of institutional-green paint lend a desperately melancholic edge to the image.

Cranston's painting style is rich, textural and layered. His oil is either rough and scored, as in the decaying walls around the figure lying prone, etherised perhaps, upon a table in 'Another Cure' (a work that is hung, oddly, in an office off the gallery space), or smoothed into accumulated layers of thick varnish. The varnish paintings have a cloisonné aspect to them, the painted surface glossy and hardened. The technique allows glimpses into lower layers, with contrasting colours gleaming through to the surface. The end product has the gorgeous smooth, fused finish of vitreous enamel.

The works in this exhibition are small pieces, none larger than a sheet of A4, but each transports the viewer far afield. Interior environments are Cranston's trademark motif and here they are varied — gym halls, bedrooms and salons, all suffused with a haunting quiet. Some viewpoints are unexpected; I can't think of another painting that focuses on legs beneath a table, which is what we see in 'Silent Treatment', a baby's-eye view of home. A tortoise crawls interminably across the patterned floor in the foreground, nudging towards a foot, both comical and a memento of time.

Cranston is a captivating painter. In some ways a bijou, domestic Anselm Kiefer, in others the woozy, unreal inheritor of Vuillard, he has an ability to be suggestive and to shift the viewer between realms of reality. In this he also resembles Peter Doig, but Cranston's world is an even stranger place.