



Andrew Cranston, *Vague feelings of dread*, 2022, oil and varnish on book cover, 16 3/4 × 10 1/4".

**Andrew Cranston**  
MODERN ART BURY STREET

An angry red pimple hums with volcanic intensity on the back of a pale, redheaded figure in Andrew Cranston's otherwise serene painting *Why can't I be you?* (all works 2022). The subject, who lies facedown on a white rug (rendered in fat feathery splotches) on a whitewashed wooden floor, wears only boxer shorts and has skin so pale that it glows green. This soft overall palette of washed-out tones only calls more attention to the zit, which is the swollen, pus-filled kind that you can find being popped and lanced on specialist YouTube videos. (In Scotland, where Cranston lives, they are called "plooks," a disgustingly evocative word that my Scottish father used to use despite yells of protest from my brother and me.) Get a little closer and you'll see, right in the middle of the spot, a raised yellow bump, the whitehead, curling upward off the surface like a minuscule piece of macaroni. It's a funny, vulgar moment in a work that otherwise has the dappled, rarified atmosphere of a light-filled room.

That was the most obvious gag in the midcareer artist's exhibition "If you see something that doesn't look right," yet many of Cranston's captivating paintings include hooks such as these that draw you closer to them. The four other large canvases displayed on the upper floor of Modern Art's Mayfair gallery depicted scenes positioned on thresholds—a terrace, a garden, a door, a window—each opening onto a landscape in which one glowering color dominated: yellow, red, blue, orange. The strong vibrato of these striated, speckled, and fragmented hues often concealed, at first, the presence of thinly rendered presences: wraithlike animals, people, teapots. Vuillard and Bonnard are the artist's most direct references and, like them, Cranston dispenses with linear perspective in favor of a shimmeringly decorative yet uneasy structure. Bonnard's influence was here most apparent in the painting *Those who hide well, live well*, a mustardy-yellow composition focused on a gigantic window with a table set right beneath its sill, at the bottom of the canvas. As we look out onto tall trees with trunks that resemble giraffe necks, it takes a moment to notice a figure sitting at the table. Painted in a thin red tone, this character, like the one in *Why can't I be you?* has no obvious gender and is barely discernible, a kind of wet red shadow, which itself almost threatens to drip off the canvas. In *Weird Light*, a scene set at *l'heure bleue*, two birds sit on a café table in a violet cage, highlighted by a pale-pink outline, the same glowing color that seems to flicker on a stem in a vase nearby like a rosy moonbeam. On closer inspection, one notices that the pink sections are cutaways, revealing a second canvas beneath the blue one. In *Stay with me, my nerves are bad tonight, the midges too*, a desert sky blazes with a radioactive red glow.

In the gallery downstairs hung a selection of Cranston's works painted on linen book covers, for which he often uses thick layers of varnish over oil to create gemlike scenes. Several of these staged uncanny encounters between people and stags or deer, while another, *Vague feelings of dread*, depicted shadowy fish swimming over a Bonnardesque tiled surface beneath a night sky. The spine of the book, a bright line that represents the water's surface, divides the halves of the scene into water and air. What if one of these dark harbingers of dread were to finally break through? "If you see something that doesn't look right" embodied a contemporary way of looking that is anxious and vigilant, even in pictures of relative calm. It also begged the question: *Then what?*

— Laura McLean-Ferris