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Bridie Lonie

In this article, I outline briefly Anita DeSoto's twenty-year career as a figurative painter; taking as my starting points her understanding that her interest in art stems from a fascination with the tableaux her parents' friends performed at community events; her young adulthood within the Pentecostal community, where transcendence was understood as embodied and individual; her Master of Fine Arts research into the sensuality of women's religious writings spanning the periods of the late Medieval to the Counter-Reformation; and her experience as a resident artist at the Leipzig Academy of Fine Arts, where the figuration of socialist realism had morphed into an ironic negotiation between the collective politics of socialism and the aspirations of neoliberal capitalism's focus on the self. These elements coalesce in an oeuvre centred on the roles allocated to women in the histories of the depiction of their bodies.

DeSoto was brought up in a rural neighbourhood where theatrical tableaux were a feature of Countrywomen's Institute entertainments. As a child, DeSoto saw her friends' hardworking mothers performing as if in stills from movies.¹ She remembers how their transformation through makeup, clothing and gesture gave her the sense that women's lives depended on role-play. Indeed, writers such as Lauris Edmond, who knew rural life at that period, describe the spice amateur theatricals added to the gendered routines of daily life.²

At nineteen DeSoto joined a Pentecostal Christian group, marrying and having children within that community. In her mid-thirties she turned away from both the community and its belief systems, taking her sense of life as a performance informed by passion to the rite of passage offered by the study of art. For DeSoto this entailed engagements with ideas she had previously thought not simply immoral but likely to lead to a future spent in a hell she'd believed in. Her imagery both retained the passion of her previous belief system and challenged its patriarchal nature. Her graduating works at art school were paintings on black velvet, explicitly decadent and difficult to make anything but visually satisfying. The paint is always hard and tacky, though the velvet is soft and immersive: the very style performs a contradiction between invitation and rejection, reflecting an ambivalence that she retained in her later painting.

DeSoto's postgraduate study focused on the ways that women's spiritual desire played out in the medieval thinking of Hildegard of Bingen and the baroque approaches of the Counter-Reformation. Once the political and legislative changes driven by First Wave Feminism had ensured women were not trapped by systemic barriers, the intransigent nature of ideological barriers became more apparent. DeSoto engaged with the rich theoretical field of post-structural feminist understandings of desire as a force with its own volition, and the consequent destabilization, or extension, of the notion of the self. This period, roughly dating from the 1960s to the 1990s and now characterized as second-wave or cultural feminism, encompasses both theoretical feminisms that were sometimes inaccessibly academic in nature, and performance art conveying public sexual acts as liberatory. Art's role in the production and dissemination of ideology became the subject of women's studies and courses in art schools; DeSoto's postgraduate studies were produced in this context.

DeSoto was already aware of the complexity of the notion of desire in theology. An obvious example can be found in the *Ecstasy of St Teresa* (1647-52) by Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598-1680), a work which is able to represent physical ecstasy with impunity because of the overlap between body and soul in medieval and early Modern European Christian theology. In her 2003 Master of Fine Arts dissertation, DeSoto quoted St Catherine of Siena (1347-1380), who wrote: "And I would, Lord, for your love, be laid naked on a hurdle for for all men to wonder at me for your love – so long as it were no danger to their souls".³ The ambiguous entanglement of desire and provocation offered the kind of paradox loved by post-structuralist thinkers, the lie that reveals the truth, the statement that undermines itself as soon as uttered. DeSoto's thesis *Desire Drapes Everything* (2003) was in the form of a parallel text. She juxtaposed passages from feminist theorists such as Elspeth Probyn (1958-) and medieval scholar Caroline Walker Bynum (1941-) with her own poetry, submitting it as a small book bound in red leather as if it were designed for religious meditation. In it, DeSoto wrote:

The desire to become more than what we are provides movement, convergence and entanglement. It is ever-changing and emerging. Desire is movement; it is an energy that enables us to get, or go where we want.⁴

Throughout her work desire and its implications are interrogated.

DeSoto's paintings consistently explore the ties that both nourish and constrain. After art school, she adopted narrative, exploring the implications of her now past Christianity, the moral and affective context of her life. Increasingly, her subjects and models came from her community, a project made explicit in the title of one of her exhibitions: *A Jesus of My Own*. These works were painted in a limited palette, suffused with umber and grey, that seems to draw from the somewhat doleful painting of such artists as Guido Reni (1575-1642); but the women surrealists such as Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) can be discovered here also, in their inwardness and fantasy. In this limited palette and anatomical precision, suited to thin, abstemious bodies, she drew on the surrealists' approach to persuasion: make it plausible and it will be believed. DeSoto's work in this period seeks the uncanny valley of the virtual through anatomical and tonal precision, establishing live actors in a coloured field detached from any specific referent. In *Away, Away* (2007) a small, thoughtful boy child, a putto as in Italian painting, holds in one hand scissors and in the other the ends of a woman's plaited hair; extended as if a placental cord, while she floats above and to his left, moving in his wake.



Figure 1. Anita DeSoto, *Away, Away*, 2007, oil on canvas, 1060x1980mm.

DeSoto's capacity to portray the figure is central to her work and has developed in parallel with her career as a lecturer in life drawing and painting. Life drawing reflects changing attitudes toward the depiction of the body. During the 1970s the representation of the nude female form was understood as indicative of the subordination of women within capitalist and patriarchal systems, and life drawing classes were often the locus for the verbal and physical sexual abuse of women. Ethical protocols were developed by among others such representational and Christian artists as Allie Eagle.⁵ Art students continued to learn to represent the ways that the body's movements reflect and convey expression, and the relationship between these movements and the postures, clothes and wider contexts that surrounded them. DeSoto, in tandem with her colleague the sculptor Michele Beevors, also concerned with feminist challenges to the figurative, applied to her programme the notion of the tableaux, introducing students to pre-modernist art histories through such iconic images as Michelangelo Buonarroti's *The Last Supper* (c1495-1498), moving through lavish baroque ceiling frescos toward more targeted and historically significant works that represented power imbalances through grouped bodies, such as Théodore Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* (1819) and its colonial representation in Louis J. Steele and Charles Goldie's *Arrival of the Maoris in New Zealand* (1898). Students critique, mimic and mine them for the representational, symbolic and iconographical messages they convey, and recognize that the naked human body cannot be regarded abstracted from its context: it is always inflected by its siting in race and gender.

With the decline in the genres of both religious and historical painting in the late nineteenth century, representational and figurative art had been left largely to the portrait, the nude, the still life and the landscape; genres where symbolism was actively discouraged, either because of a modernist concern with formal language or a disdain for narrative as kitsch. However, in the period following World War I, the newly formed states whose political constitutions sought a re-enchantment of domestic and political life in different forms of socialism, adopted representational painting with a zeal similar to that of the sixteenth-century Counter-Reformation period that had turned the Christian narrative into theatre. Utopian visions of family and rural life, or of engagements in the rebuilding of damaged infrastructure and economy through industrialization, flourished in the Soviet countries in particular, where art schools continued to deliver skills-based learning through the vehicle of the human form in settings exemplary of approaches to the proper way to live, but informed now by explicit political rather than religious ideology. By the 1990s, after the dissolution of the Soviet state, both history and figurative painting were studied almost exclusively only in those countries that were dealing with the legacies of socialist realism.

It was for this reason that in 2010 DeSoto gained a residency at the Leipzig International Art Programme, where the artists Neo Rauch and, particularly relevant for DeSoto, Rosa Loy practiced; Rosa Loy's studio was close to DeSoto's. In the demise of the socialist states, the strictly articulated subject matter of socialist realism had become revealed as ideological fantasy, both demoralizing and de-stabilizing, just as had the religious realism of the remaining strands of the Counter-Reformation (indicated in the Vatican's current insistence that it is not an art gallery but an educational museum). The Leipzig artists deconstructed the rhetorical gesture, in a mood both melancholy and satirical, both consistent with spatial realism and challenging of it, while still requiring the disciplines of representational realism.⁶ This mood was suited to DeSoto's enduring concern with role-play's capacity to express beliefs and experiences. She returned from Leipzig with a new interest in colour and a desire to engage with metaphors broader than those of Christianity and the family, though retaining the understanding that if something was valuable its wellspring could be found in everyday life. She held the exhibition *Come Back* (2012) at Milford Galleries Dunedin. In these works we can see perhaps the community she remembered from her childhood, of women enacting neighbourly rituals with teacups and conversations. Both men and women develop tree-like limbs, as in Ovid's account of Daphne becoming a tree to avoid pursuit, and they are enclosed in glass-like bubbles that prevent communication. DeSoto's colours are bright, sharply contrasting, the style still intensely descriptive. Both the smooth surfaces and the references to bubbles suggest that this is a defensive femininity, impenetrable yet challenging.



Figure 2. Anita DeSoto, *Other Worldly*, 2011, oil on canvas, 1830x1370mm.

Then, DeSoto's work changed dramatically. She turned to the historical photograph. While her work drew on that of the Leipzig realists, she had not yet engaged with their gestural qualities. Dissatisfied with the constraints of her approach to brushwork, modelling and chiaroscuro, which located the affect of the work in its verisimilitude rather than its painterly qualities, she adopted the approach of another ex-socialist-realist, Gerhard Richter (b.1932). Richter's painterly erasures of the photograph shifted his source material from the empirical document to the sensual subjectivity implied by the gestural mark, getting rid of, at the same time, the photograph's capacity to act as objective evidence. The figures in DeSoto's exhibition *Our Frocks like Mountains* (2018) are first painted and then almost erased by parallel strokes and smears of plain colour, sometimes referencing the dresses worn by the original subjects, as if their costumes or performances had taken control.

DeSoto's next step was to develop a significantly more painterly style by appropriating the pagan pleasures that the Counter-Reformation strategy had cunningly allowed itself. The late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century artists she mimicked moved happily between the radically sensual scenes of the classical writers and the sumptuous depictions of the Christian narrative, as though no contradiction existed between them. Counter-Reformation artists such as Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Jacob Joseph Jordaens (1593|678) were commissioned by the Roman Catholic church to make works that challenged the iconoclasm of the Lutheran Reformation, which saw the depiction of the Christian narrative as distracting and the theatrical as sinful. In Southern Europe and Flanders, the Church saw the representation of the Christian narrative in terms of sensual experience as a powerful way to re-engage with its community; thereby also retaining the depiction of lavish and sensual environments. These extraordinarily skilled graphic artists conveyed movement and form through gesture, drapery and full tonal and chromatic registers. Yet for women, the period of the Counter-Reformation saw the most excessive misogyny of the Christian era.

The *Malleus Maleficarium* (*Hammer of Witches*) (1486), advocating the burning of witches, though not accepted by the Inquisition, was revived during the time that the Counter-Reformation artists flourished.⁷ DeSoto read Sylvia Federici's Marxist argument that this appalling rise in misogyny stemmed from the delegation of the literal production of the labour force through procreation to women, who should have no autonomy.⁸ Federici connects the enclosures of the commons with the witchhunts, pointing out that the women identified as witches were able to live outside the system of the procreative labour force of capitalism: their accusers were the land-owning people whose authority this independence challenged.⁹

The perilous double-bind women had to negotiate was evident in their symbolic representation in art as both seducer and trophy, the producer of sensual pleasure, the prize of the victorious god, or the paragon of moral restraint represented by sainthood. Their bodies, in art, were plainly understood as the source of sexual pleasure, but this pleasure was not one they could own themselves. The question posed by second-wave feminism is significant here. Freudian theories of the gaze suggest that distance and the impossibility of reaching conclusion provide erotic pleasure, while notions of abjection suggest that pleasure lies in the dissolution of the self in an entropic cascade into nothingness, often represented in art by excess in pigment and the blurring or dissolving of form, as in abstract expressionism. Hilary Radner has pointed out that "DeSoto's brushwork recalls the masculinist energy of mid-twentieth century abstract expressionism, another stylistic appropriation".¹⁰ Absent the male/female dialectic, where is women's pleasure? Intersectional feminism has moved this question to a focus on identity, but painting keeps returning to another but related intersection, the visual and the sensual as located on the flat but deceptively haptic field of the canvas, a location that both continues to generate and reference sexual desire.



Figure 3. Anita DeSoto, *The Grass Was Golden*, 2017, oil on signboard, 1000x750mm.

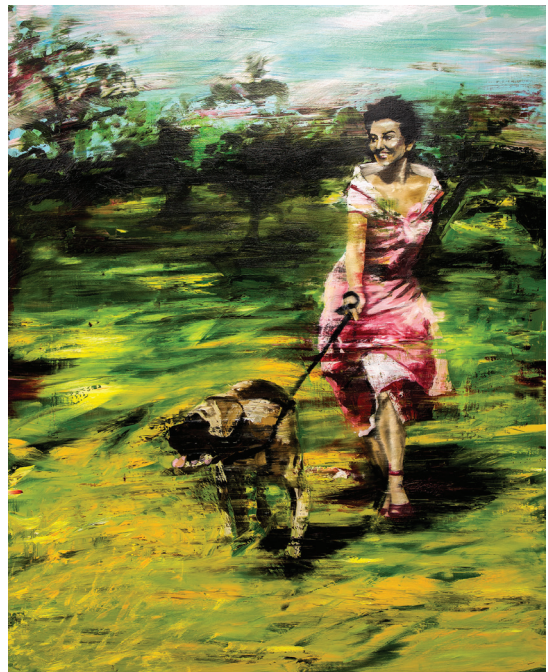


Figure 4. Anita DeSoto, *Violet at the End of the Day*, 2018, oil on signboard, 1200x1200mm.



Figure 5. Anita DeSoto, *Her Fertility Turned Him into a Tree, after Jordaen*, 2023, oil on canvas, 1980x1675mm.

In her most recent exhibitions DeSoto seeks to answer this double-bind by reclaiming pictorial pleasure as the possession of its subjects, the women depicted, along with all the accompanying allegorical flourishes of flower and fruit. In *I don't want your Golden Apple* (2022) she explores the allegorization by male painters of women as prizes. The strength of the genre is reinforced by the addition of the artist Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757), who, along with others of her time, offered themselves or other women as objects of pleasure. DeSoto heightens the colour afforded to the female protagonists and dims that of the males to indicate the gendered dialogues within the works by tonal difference. At the same time, the flourishing of colour dissolves the clarity of the forms, replacing the body's representation with the full affect of gestural abstraction. In recent re-workings of two allegories by Jaques Jordaens, she has increased that difference. Jordaens, like the other painters of this period, doubled morality tales with a delight in sensual excess.¹¹ In *Allegory of Fruitfulness* (2022) and *Her Fertility Turned Him into a Tree, after Jordaen* (2022), the dissolution of form and body by only a small extension of painterliness results in a sensual array that almost spills into the formlessness of abjection, with here a toe, a hand, a limb emerging from the swirling colours. Yet, also clearly visible, we see a menstrual red running down the women's legs. As in the previous exhibition, the male figures are diminished into greys and browns, the mud colours of the underpainting of the period. While the male protagonists lose the dramatic force and agency they held in the original works, this tactic allocates to them women's role in the original dyad of abjection: they become the substrate that holds things together. The ever paradoxical nature of the dialectic generated by the division of labour through sexual dimorphism is inverted, but remains, a constant difficulty.

DeSoto's trajectory as an artist has entwined two major concerns: the roles played by women as assigned to them by gender, as wife, mother, object of male desire; and the role of figurative painting itself in this situation. The idea of the tableaux she identified early as a focal point, has retained its significance for her in its capacity as exemplar, allegory or test case. Her approach to painting has moved from austerity to abundance, but continues to deliver the problematic she began with. Representational drawing remains central to her practice, reinforcing through moments of figurative accuracy her negotiation with raw paint as the conveyer of affect.

Bridie Lonie, Emeritus Member, Otago Polytechnic|Te Pūkenga was a founding member of the Wellington Women's Gallery in 1980. She has a BFA in painting. Her MA in art history was entitled "Word and image in the production of meaning in art therapy" (1998). Her PhD "Closer Relations: art, climate change, interdisciplinarity and the Anthropocene (2018)" led to the curation of the exhibitions *The Complete Entanglement of everything* (2020) with Pam McKinlay and *Kapital* (2022) with Adrian Hall at the Dunedin School of Art.

Anita DeSoto is a Dunedin artist with 25 years of experience exhibiting her paintings nationally and internationally. She holds a Master of Fine Arts and has been teaching Drawing and Painting at the Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, since 2004. Anita has also been awarded several arts residencies, including one at the Leipzig International Art Program in Germany (2010), at the New Pacific Studios in Vallejo, San Francisco in 2014 and the Aratoi Fellow in Masterton in 2018.

- 1 Anita DeSoto, unpublished interviews with Bridie Lonie, April 2023.
- 2 Lauris Edmond's memoirs and the novels of Mary Scott convey the importance of theatrical performances in rural environments in the 1950s and early 1960s. Lauris Edmond, *An Autobiography* (Wellington: Bridget Williams Books 2001).
- 3 Quoted in Anita DeSoto, "Desire drapes everything", unpublished thesis, Dunedin School of Art, Otago Polytechnic, 2003, 70
- 4 Ibid, 30.
- 5 Sandra Chesterman, *Figure Work: The Nude and Life Modelling in New Zealand Art* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2002).
- 6 Boris Groys, "Haunted by Communism", in *Contemporary Art in Eastern Europe*, ed. Pheobe Adler and Duncan McQuorquindale, (London: Black Dog Publishing 2010), 18-25.
- 7 Heinrich Institoris and Jacob Sprenger, *Malleus Maleficarum*, edited by Christopher S. McKay (Cambridge, United Kingdom and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009, first published in 1486).
- 8 Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2004/2014).
- 9 Ibid, 171.
- 10 Hilary Radner, catalogue essay, in *I Don't want your golden apple – Anita DeSoto* (Dunedin: Otago Polytechnic Press, 2022), unpaginated.
- 11 Hans Vlieghe, "Flemish and Dutch painting in the seventeenth century: Changing views of a diptych", in A.W.F.M. Meij, with Maartje de Haan, *Van Dyck, Rubens, Jordaens and their circle: Flemish Master Drawings from the Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen* (Rotterdam: Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2002). 23-30.