

Eileen Cooper: A Woman's Skin

This exhibition is dedicated to Professor Sir Richard Evans and Dr Christine Corton, Lady Evans, for their generous support of the Fine Arts during Sir Richard's tenure as President of Wolfson College.



Eileen Cooper OBE RA, Alayrac, France, 2016

Eileen Cooper: A Woman's Skin



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Curator's Introduction

10 Eileen Cooper OBE RA was trained at Goldsmiths College and the Royal College of Art. Her works can be found in museums, galleries and private collections from Birmingham and Manchester to Nuremberg and New Haven. Cooper became a Royal Academician in 2000 and in 2010 was elected Keeper of the Royal Academy of Arts, the first woman to hold the post since the Academy's foundation in 1768. As Keeper she is responsible for guiding the next generation of artists admitted to the Royal Academy Schools, the oldest established art school in Britain. Cooper attends the Schools during the week and produces her own art in her private studio space in the RA.

Cooper's role in the Academy is significant. Although two women, Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser, were amongst the founding members of the Royal Academy, they did not share all the privileges accorded their male counterparts. In Johann Zoffany's painting, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy (1771–72)*, Kauffman and Moser appear only as portraits hanging on the wall of the Life Drawing Room whilst male academicians engage in the study of a nude male model. Drawing from the nude was deemed fundamental to an artist's development but Kauffman and Moser, as women, were excluded from this practice. It was not until 1936 that another woman, Dame Laura Knight, was elected a full RA. Such institutional bias, combined with societal expectations and biological imperatives, made the path of women artists particularly challenging. The German Expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker, for example, postponed motherhood until the age of thirty in the interests of her art and tragically died of an embolism shortly after giving birth to her only daughter, Mathilde. The experience of motherhood, partnership and the tensions between one's creative life and family life all feature prominently in Cooper's work.

In organizing *Eileen Cooper: A Woman's Skin* and producing this catalogue I had three primary goals: to explore key themes in Cooper's work; to examine her processes of artistic production; and to historically situate the 'woman painter'. In the first essay, 'Eileen Cooper: A Woman's Skin', I consider the following themes in the works exhibited: the monumental female figure, symbolic space, and totemic nature. I associate her paintings with art produced

in the early years of psychoanalysis, when intuition and dreams were primary source material for the artist and human experience was elevated to the realm of myth. Phillip Lindley's essay, 'The Cutting Line', provides a detailed examination of new and important changes in Cooper's artistic production in three media – paint, collage and sculpture. This is the first detailed analysis of her recent life-studies, bronzes and the Luna collages, which Eileen produced in 2016 especially for this exhibition. Simona Dolari, in her essay, 'Women Painters in the Renaissance and Baroque: Artemisia, Sofonisba and Lavinia', provides an art-historical context for our consideration of women artists by reflecting on the challenges faced by Eileen's earliest precursors, the first secular women painters, in the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

11 I am most grateful to Eileen Cooper for her enthusiastic support of this project. I would also like to thank the individual lenders for their generosity and the private sponsorship that has made this catalogue possible. We are grateful to the Royal Academy for publishing this catalogue and to Malcolm Southward whose fine design has ensured that it will be an enduring record of the exhibition. Finally, I gratefully acknowledge the support of my colleagues at Wolfson College: Christopher Lawrence, Bursar of Wolfson, Owen Edwards, Chair of the Fine Arts Committee, Margaret Greeves, Anthony Green RA, Sheila Betts, Frieda Midgley, Anna Dempster, Emma Adlard, Mike Wignall and Neil Newman.

Dr Meredith M. Hale
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Eileen Cooper: A Woman's Skin

Meredith M. Hale

13 *Eileen Cooper: A Woman's Skin* is a group of seventeen works – paintings, collages and sculpture – that exemplify some of the most important themes in Eileen Cooper's oeuvre. Dating from 1989 to 2016, these works feature monumental figures – women doubled, mirrored and framed; women in confined interior spaces and/or merging with an expansive nature. Cooper's art has long been described as 'having a strong autobiographical core'¹ and of being 'firmly rooted in her personal experiences'². Though this is undoubtedly an important aspect of her work, this exhibition focuses on the ways in which the subjects of her paintings are dramatically projected beyond the biographical, the biological and the temporal. Indeed, none of these scenes is straightforwardly quotidian or comfortably familiar; each speaks to an associative and oblique internal dialogue that recalls art produced in the early years of psychoanalysis, when intuition and dreams were taken as primary source material for the artist.

Cooper has cited medieval and Indian art as visual sources for her work and critics have likened her paintings to those of colourists such as Matisse and Gauguin, and expressionists such as Kirchner and Nolde.³ Echoes of Picasso, particularly in her figures, have been noted, and it has long been recognized that 'naturalistic truth does not meet Eileen Cooper's purpose'.⁴ Cooper has herself identified *Woman Examining Her Shadow* (1989–90) as a key work, and it suggests three themes that are traced in this exhibition: the monumental female figure, symbolic space, and totemic nature. In this essay I have divided the paintings into three groups according to these themes but they all feature in various forms in each of the works displayed. These themes are fundamental to Eileen Cooper's art and they offer strategies for navigating past, present and the realm of dreams.

i. The monumental female figure

Cooper's women fill the 'frame' both compositionally and thematically. As in *Woman Examining Her Shadow*, they are always dominant within the composition and they are often entirely absorbed in their own activity, thus maintaining the fiction of the pictorial space as discrete from our own. Although

The Two Gardeners, 1989, oil on canvas,
167.5 × 106.5 cm. Collection of Ian Rosenblatt.
Not in the exhibition



the title of this painting suggests a single subject, the viewer is confronted with two women, both of whom examine the shadows cast by their bodies from an unseen light source under the sliver of a crescent moon. The heavily outlined figures dominating the large composition recall the concept of the Jungian archetype; together with the flowering plant at the upper left they create a stable triangular shape within the rectangular frame. Upon closer inspection, the viewer sees that the single woman of the painting's title has not only doubled, she has quadrupled, the thickly painted shadows articulating another separate pair of faces. These shadows are not reflective; they are constitutive.

15 The women inhabit a generalized night-time landscape, the contours of their bodies reflecting that of the hill rising gently in the background from left to right. The flowering plant, the only landscape element included in the composition, mirrors the pose of the woman on the left, bending as if curious to examine its own shadow. The colour of the earth reflects that of the women's skin – on a spectrum from red-brown to red-orange – as if they are constituted of the same material. The woman on all fours holds both hands to the earth as if shaping it, her work evidenced by the clear manipulation of the paint making up her shadow, which she faces nose to nose. This gesture introduces a significant aspect of Cooper's art that features throughout the works in this exhibition: the association with the 'primitive' or even the primordial, which is articulated in the figures' monumental stature, the stasis of their poses and mask-like faces, and the blurring of boundaries between earth and flesh, limbs and trees, hair and leaves.

The theme of woman's relationship to nature is addressed by another work painted the same year, *The Two Gardeners*, in which a woman and a man have abandoned their rake and spade at the trunk of a tree and have climbed into its spare branches. Their flesh is similarly earth-coloured but here their monumental size dwarfs the tree in which they take refuge from a snake that encircles the trunk. The inevitable biblical associations of this subject – its suggestion of the Garden of Eden after the Fall – explicitly places *The Two Gardeners* in the realm of the archaic.

Perpetual Spring (2016), the most recent painting in the show, produced twenty-seven years after the earliest work exhibited, brings the themes raised by *Woman Examining Her Shadow* full circle. Here two women appear in a similarly generalised landscape. They too dominate the composition and their relationship to one another – entangled, combative, intensely connected – is also reflected in the nature of the landscape they inhabit. They are situated amongst green plants and before two trees placed at the outermost edges of the composition. The thick, arcing leaves and tangle of delicate branches fill every space not occupied by their bodies. The colours comprising sky and earth – blue, yellow, orange – complement one another, the combination above the horizon line emphasizing the light.

The two women in *Perpetual Spring* are clearly differentiated from one another, most dramatically through their dress. The woman on the left wears a transparent white gown and stands solidly on the earth with bare feet whilst the

woman on the right is more fully covered by a long-sleeved black dress, and brown shoes which mediate her relationship to the earth. Their postures are fundamentally different – taut straight limbs versus bent rounded ones – but remain complementary and, though clearly separate, their facial features and hair colour mirror one another. As in *Woman Examining Her Shadow*, the woman on the right observes the woman on the left, who in both works is directly connected with the earth, (she is literally more ‘grounded’). The outstretched hand of the standing woman in the earlier work, however, has become two firmly grasping hands in *Perpetual Spring*, and the contact between the women has increased in intensity. We are unclear whether we witness a dance or a struggle. In spite of their differences, the yin-yang quality of the figures suggests complementarity and even duality – two sides of an individual – a concept made explicit in *Woman Examining Her Shadow*. However, whilst the outcome of the deeply contemplative moment in the earlier work remains ambiguous, *Perpetual Spring* suggests the fruitfulness of even violent engagement, which is evidenced by the buds just emerging on the branches of the trees.

ii. Symbolic space

Eileen Cooper’s conception of nature is generalised, animated and closely associated with human activity. Her treatment of space is similarly designed to serve narrative ends. As Norbert Lynton has suggested, Eileen Cooper is not interested in naturalistic space; for her it serves a symbolic purpose. In *Studio with Tiger* (2002), she presents the interior space of an artist’s studio. The artist herself appears in the upper right quadrant of the composition, kneeling and holding a brush to an empty canvas, yet to make a mark. Her gaze is directed slightly upward and to her right, her eyes unfocused as if in thought. As with *Woman Examining Her Shadow*, her flesh is a rich clay red, reflecting the wood of the studio’s floor and the fur of the tiger at her feet. Seemingly unrelated objects – an umbrella, a pair of shoes, a hammer and an orchid in a pot – are placed on the floor to the left of the tiger. Crumpled tubes of paint frame the scene on the far left, and cups with brushes stand on the floor behind the artist on the far right. Both they and the unfinished canvases against the far walls suggest the act of painting, but this particular moment is dominated by the stillness of waiting.

A man who is significantly smaller than the artist – even though she is placed further back in space – appears on the left looking out at the viewer. He stands behind, or perhaps holds up, an object that looks like a window or a canvas on a stretcher seen from behind. The ambiguity of this object suggests a range of readings. A window would provide a view and the proximity of the potted orchid suggests a conventional still life. A screen would separate his space from hers. However, if the object is a canvas it has either been completed or waits to be filled with the painter’s marks. A related drawing entitled *Moving a Picture* (2002) presents the same studio space. Here nails can be clearly seen around the frame, suggesting that, in this case, the object is a stretcher and the man faces forward, putting one foot in front of the other as he moves the canvas out of the studio

Moving a Picture, 2002, charcoal and pastel on paper, 76 × 112 cm. Collection of Charles and Mandy Irving. Not in the exhibition



space. However, the suggestion of a window is not absent from the drawing. In a picture on the wall, a second man puts his head through a rectangular opening into a small interior space where a woman kneels and looks up, holding her hand to her mouth. The woman's space is enclosed and the 'window' offers not a view for her but a point of entry for another. In the drawing, the artist's skin has not yet taken on the colour of the tiger's fur and her gaze is firmly set on the orchid.

18 Although the nails along the stretcher are not included in *Studio with Tiger*, their presence is suggested by the inclusion of a hammer in the immediate foreground. Here the umbrella is revealed as a studio prop, for it appears in a painting in the background, but the shoes and the ladder (which appears in many of Cooper's paintings) appear to have no direct application. This unusual collection of objects is made meaningful not primarily through narrative means but via pictorial ones. Cooper's deliberate placement of these elements within the foreground and her isolation of them from one another – despite close proximity, their contours never touch – marks each individual object out as significant, though it is left to the viewer to determine what their specific meaning might be. Another key passage is that of the empty canvas above which the painter's brush and the tiger's claws almost meet. These compositional elements are *not* kept studiously separate but overlap, suggesting a fundamental relationship between them – both brush and claw as primeval mark-makers.

In *Desire*, of 2008, the tiger has migrated from the studio floor to the panels of a painted folding screen. This 'painted' tiger is in some ways more animated than the recumbent tiger in the studio, for it crouches, lifting one paw and baring its teeth and claws. The arrangement of the folding panels, which zigzag into the background, suggest forward movement and though we know the unseen panels must interrupt the form of the tiger, we accept it as complete – an unfolding automaton tiger that nonetheless seems more vigorous than the woman at its side. She stands on a long plank that hovers over open space, holding her hands stiffly at her sides and focusing her gaze forward.

Here the walls of the painter's studio have become transparent and its floor is reduced to a platform upon which the plank rests and the woman stands. The limited space of the platform is divided by the painted screen and on the other side of the screen a woman much like the one standing before the screen appears; we see only her eyes, forehead and hair. The upright ladder from the studio appears on its side as a kind of bridge but we have no sense of where it comes from or where it leads. The complex space of *Desire* at once conceals (screen) and reveals (transparent walls), and though it articulates separation – of the women from each other and of the platform from any specific spatial context – it suggests potential connection. The woman is elevated to dizzying heights but she is not alone. The flowering branches below the platform and blue sky beyond indicate at once a great height and deep-rooted support, though what she faces and whether she will take another step into possibility is unknown.

A similar platform features in *Dwelling*, which was also painted in 2009. However, rather than projecting up into the clouds above the trees, it is entangled

within the tree's branches, which have grown around the platform's supports. Here the platform supports a tree house, complete with roof and glazed windows; however, unlike the second house below the platform, its windows are not transparent. The tree and its platform occupy the entire composition, which is as dense as *Desire's* is conspicuously open. The position of the figure reflects the nature of the composition. Whilst *Desire* faces outwards into a vast unknown, *Dwelling* turns in upon herself. She appears on all fours as does the figure in *Woman Examining Her Shadow*, gaze downwards facing, hands intertwined with the tree's branches and the pattern of the tree's leaves mirrored on – or emerging from – the skin of her back.

19 The woman in *Dwelling* is outsized, monumental. She would fit in neither of the houses and the ladder, which here serves a distinct function – that of climbing up into the tree – rests against her side as if she belongs to the space of the tree house towards which the viewer will climb. Although the ladder suggests access, we read the house as belonging to the woman, a place from which she cannot be seen; indeed, the figure below appears to search in vain. In this case windows conceal rather than reveal and elevation leads to a separate, entangled and private space akin to that described by American Surrealist artist Dorothea Tanning (1910–2012):

Very young I felt myself to be a deer around dogs barking, and I created for myself another place. It is this other place that I occupy since then. These are the places where I take the signs, those which don't come all on their own up to the surface where I pool these signs or symbols, which then inhabit my canvases.⁵

iii. Totemic nature

Metamorphosis is an important theme for Cooper and, for her, it is fundamentally related to the proximity between woman and nature. The classical associations of the theme resonate with the 'primitive' quality and monumentality of her figures, and in certain works she depicts the very moment of change. In *Dilemma* (2000), for example, a woman flanked by two children who pull her in opposite directions begins to transform into a tree as does Daphne to escape Apollo; and in *Enchantress* (2000), leaves worn as a mask activate the blurring of the woman's bodily boundaries as skin, earth and sky begin to merge. However, it is not just the vegetal that symbolizes the proximity between woman and nature. For Cooper, as for Surrealists such as André Breton (1896-1966), Max Ernst (1891-1976), Leonora Carrington (1917-2011) and Dorothea Tanning and their modern magic-realist counterparts such as Ken Kiff, human and animal also exist on a continuum.⁶

At first glance, the final paintings in the exhibition may seem more removed from the natural world than some of the works discussed above. The women in *Mermaid* (2007), *Second Skin* (2007) and *Paper Doll* (2012) all exist within finite realms that contain few spatial cues and no indication of the world beyond. I have argued that intimacy and entanglement often define the relationship between



Dilemma, 2000, oil on canvas, 92.5 × 122 cm.
Private collection. Not in the exhibition

Enchantress, 2000, oil on canvas, 168 × 91.5 cm.
Private collection. Not in the exhibition

woman and nature in Cooper's work, as exemplified by *Dwelling's* hands and hair becoming entwined with the branches and leaves of the tree and the leafy pattern that appears to emerge from her skin. In *Mermaid* and *Second Skin*, the merging of woman and animal is the subject and it is dramatically engraved onto the sitters' flesh.

21 Skin, the biological purpose of which is to contain and protect the body, but which has long been associated in the history of art with revelation and vulnerability, is prominently displayed in many of Cooper's works. With *Mermaid* she alludes to traditional art-historical conventions with the sitter's demure pose, facing away from the viewer and looking back over one shoulder. However, far from revealing her flesh, it is concealed by the elaborate tattoo that stretches across her back. The Japanese-inspired fish is barely contained by the contours of her body and shapes representing the seaweed and swirling water that constitutes its environment spread up the backs of her arms and across her shoulders. With this work Cooper presents a different relationship between woman and animal from that seen in *Studio with Tiger* where proximity is key but boundaries are conspicuously maintained. Here the woman and the fish have become one.

André Breton adopted the fish as a totem animal in the 1920s (as his birth sign was Pisces), explaining the concept of the totem as an effective image for the way rational identity gets dissolved in the automatic process and becomes something non-rational and animal.⁷ Lop Lop the Bird Superior was Max Ernst's totem animal, which served both as his personal symbol and the medium through which he presented his interpretations of the world.⁸ The bird was the artist's mask that allowed him to conceal his 'real' identity while mining his own depths 'in order to find more potent truths and myths'.⁹ For Breton the mask embodied transformation and the impact of wearing a mask – or adopting a totem animal – resulted in exchanges between the self and the 'other' embodied in the mask. Leonora Carrington and Dorothea Tanning also adopted totem animals; Carrington's was the white horse Tartarus, an anagram of the word 'art' that recalls Tartarus, the Greek underworld;¹⁰ and Dorothea Tanning's a thoughtful dog.¹¹

In *Second Skin* two phoenixes feature in the tattoos along the woman's left shoulder and chest. Both are presented almost as heraldic devices – wings spread and heads seen from the side. Their plumage covers her lower chest and upper back and long sinuous tail feathers trail to her hips almost meeting the flowering vines tattooed the length of her legs. Although thematically *Second Skin* can be seen as a companion piece to *Mermaid*, significant compositional differences result in a radically different mood. The woman in this work does not present her tattoos to us nor does she acknowledge the viewer's presence. She is deeply engaged in a particular moment.

As in *Woman Examining Her Shadow*, the woman in *Second Skin* is multiplied by her reflection in the mirror and the shadow that is cast across the floor. However, here the woman exists in an ambiguous internal space. There is

little distinction between the space of the floor and that of the wall; the mirror is the only object that provides any context for the scene, though we may read the variation in the yellow background tone as spatial distance or abstracted sunlight. The focus of the composition is on the relationship between the woman and her reflection but her lack of engagement with her own image is disconcerting. She looks not at herself but to her left, to a space outside the picture plane and she lifts the heel of her left foot as if about to move. The combination of her shifting pose, her left arm held tightly to her side, and her alert sideways gaze suggests that her birds, in addition to mediating her interaction with the outside world, also serve to protect her from it. The birds etched into her skin serve both a totemic and an apotropaic function.

iv. Conclusion: A Woman's Skin

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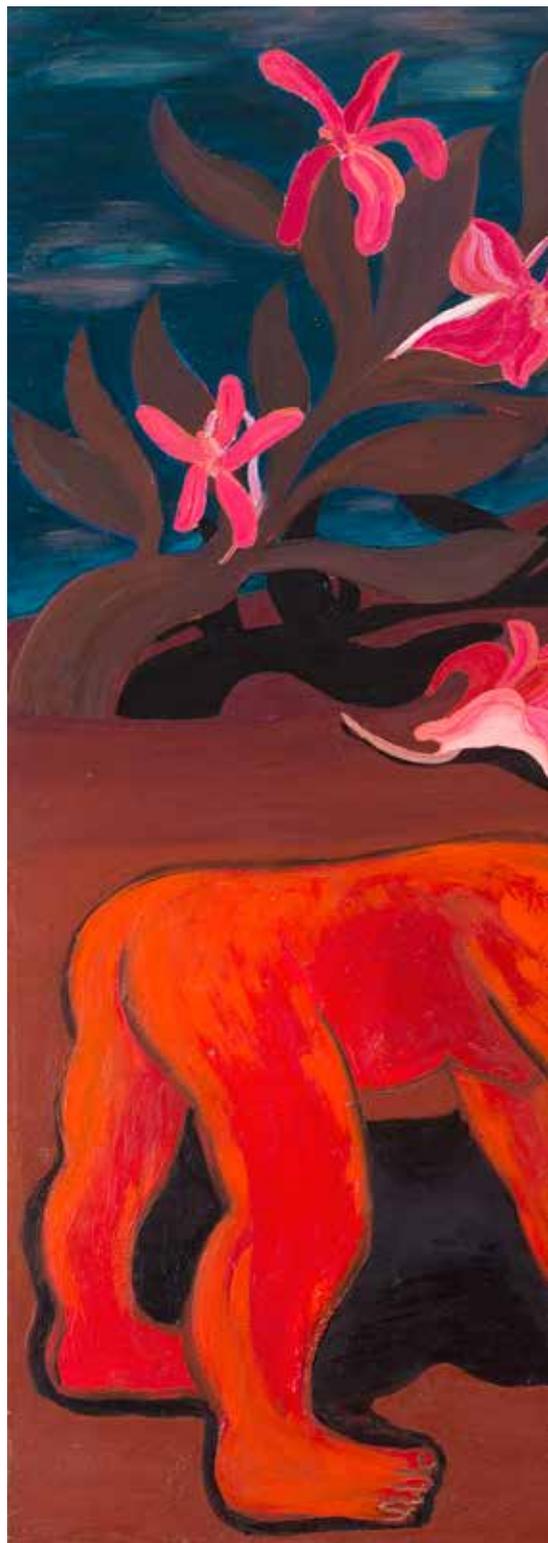
This exhibition presents a group of works that speak to key themes in Eileen Cooper's oeuvre: the monumental female figure, symbolic space and totemic nature. In considering these themes, other perhaps darker ones have emerged, among them safety and privacy, as seen in *Studio with Tiger* and *Dwelling*, and violence – actual violence as in *Perpetual Spring* and implied violence as in *Second Skin*. If *Perpetual Spring* presents a necessary and ultimately productive struggle between two equal parties, the violence of *Paper Doll* (2012) is easy and even whimsical. Here a woman seated with crossed legs holds a paper doll around one leg as the blades of her scissors close down over its paper-thin neck. The doll's feet are bound together with a stick and its arms are thrown high above its head as if in protest. But the cutter, staring into the middle distance, seems entirely unaware of her actions. She will complete the cut without a second thought.

Paper Doll overtly thematises a subject that features throughout the works in this exhibition: the subconscious. Cooper's 'primitive' figures, ambiguous dream-like settings and metamorphoses suggest another reality in which woman, animal and nature exist on a continuum, reflecting one another, approaching one another and sometimes merging into one another. In *Paper Doll*, however, we do not see the subconscious as a symbolic structure, as we do in *Desire* and *Dwelling*, or an elemental gesture as in *Woman Examining Her Shadow* or *Perpetual Spring*; rather, the subconscious is presented as action.

In the course of this discussion I have alluded to a range of concepts associated with Surrealist art. This does not constitute an effort to position Eileen Cooper as a twenty-first-century Surrealist or Magic Realist. Rather, I have tried to illuminate her work by considering its association with some of the defining features of Surrealist art, foremost among them the elevation of human experience to the realm of myth. As Ernest Schonfield has argued, the Surrealist conception of myth was removed from what they regarded as the defunct 'gods on their heights'; it referred instead to a specific category of experience, a realm of metamorphosis and becoming.¹² Myth was to be found in contemporary life and should be defined as a manifestation of the unconscious mind, as articulated by Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron: 'the meaning of the Surrealist quest is that

dreams and myths must stimulate daily life to give it the dimension of destiny'.¹³ Cooper's works achieve this 'dimension of destiny' in part through the strategies discussed here. However, such strategies do not – and never could – generate meaning; that emerges in the 'dialogue' between viewer, work and artist. It is perhaps appropriate to end this discussion with a warning from Leonora Carrington. When asked about the meaning behind her work, she responded: 'You're trying to intellectualise something desperately and you're wasting your time. That's not a way of understanding ... [you can only understand] by your own feelings about things'.¹⁴ This sense of feeling or intuiting meaning, as opposed to thinking one's way to it or excavating it, resonates. Indeed, the 'woman's skin' of the exhibition's title refers as much to the internal as the external for Cooper's art invites not just the consideration of the women in her paintings, but the experience of inhabiting a woman's skin.

Woman Examining Her Shadow,
1989–90, oil on canvas, 152.5 × 167.5 cm.
Private collection





Studio with Tiger, 2002–03, oil on canvas,
123 × 137 cm. Collection of Ross Cattell and
Vicky Unwin

Desire, 2008, oil on canvas, 122 × 91 cm.
Private collection

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Dwelling, 2009, oil on canvas, 137 × 107 cm .
Collection of the artist

Mermaid, 2007, oil on canvas, 102.5 × 76 cm.
Private collection

28





Second Skin, 2007, oil on canvas, 137 × 107 cm.
Collection of the artist



Perpetual Spring, 2016, oil on canvas,
122 × 152 cm. New Hall Collection, Murray
Edwards College, Cambridge



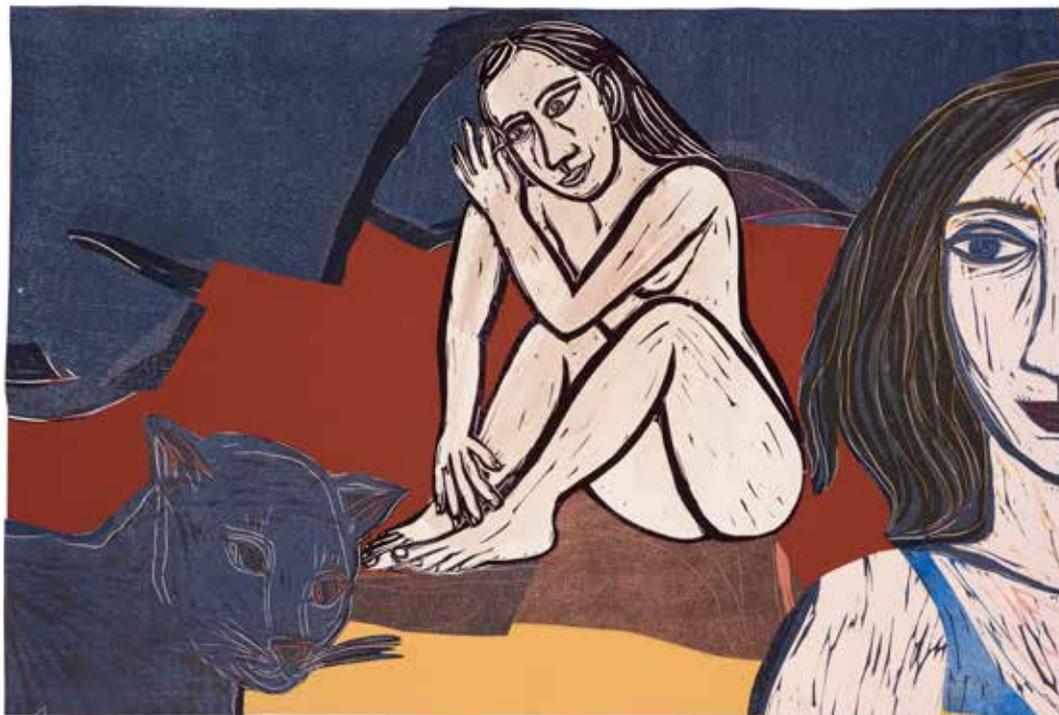




Luna 4, 2016, collage, 37 × 55 cm .
Collection of the artist

Luna 2, 2016, collage, 37 × 55 cm.
Collection of the artist

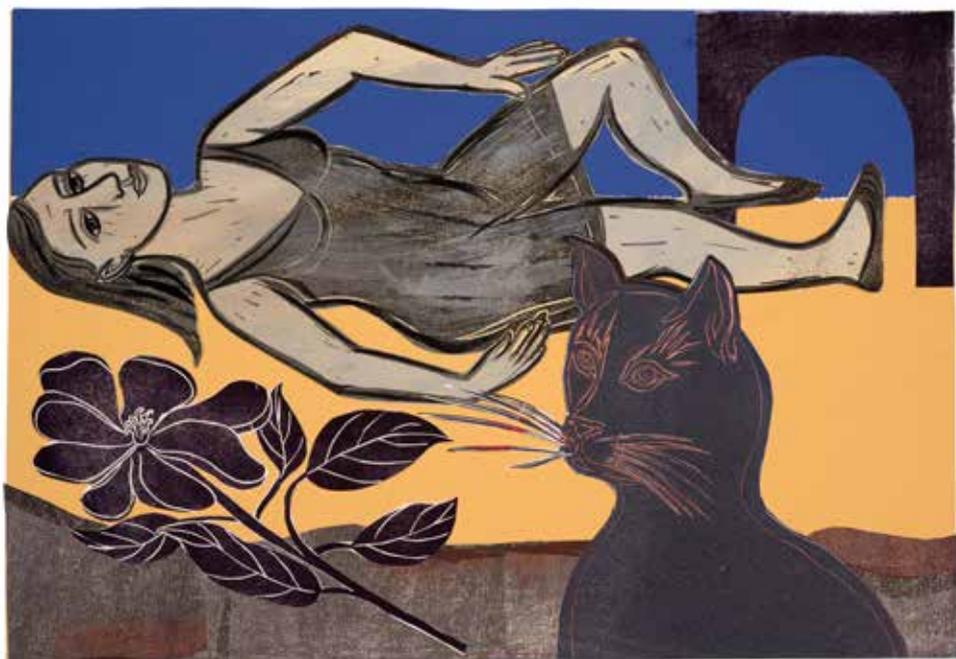




Luna 5, 2016, collage, 37 × 55 cm.
Collection of the artist

Luna 10, 2016, collage, 37 × 55 cm.
Collection of the artist

Luna 9, 2016, collage, 37 × 55 cm.
Collection of the artist





M.K. Dancer, 2016, charcoal on paper,
56 × 76 cm. Collection of the artist.
Not in the exhibition

Study at Rehearsal, 2016, pencil on paper,
38.5 × 28.5 cm. Collection of the artist.
Not in the exhibition

The Cutting Line

Phillip Lindley

39 This essay focuses on Eileen Cooper's current processes of artistic production in three media: painting, collage and sculpture. It is well known that almost all her creative work takes place within Eileen's studio on the first floor of her house in South East London, her principal artistic workplace for more than thirty years.¹ However, there have been some significant changes recently in her creative practices. First, from 2014, she has been experimenting with the medium of bronze relief sculpture. Secondly, she has created work away from her studio, most notably three series of print collages made in France, in Vindrac-Alayrac, Tarn, in 2010 and 2016.² In 2016, she produced two sets of collages at Alayrac, one called *Fragments* and a larger *Luna* series made specifically for this exhibition. The techniques Eileen Cooper employed for the *Luna* collages and for the production of the sculptures displayed here will be discussed below.

A third recent change to her normal practice was precipitated by a chance conversation at the March 2016 opening of Eileen's exhibition *Love-in-Idleness*.³ One of the English National Ballet's patrons asked about Cooper's fascination with the representation of dance and arranged an invitation for her to sketch the ENB dancers rehearsing for the choreographer Akram Khan's production of *Giselle*. Additionally, at Cooper's particular request, the dancer Madison Keesler, 'first artist' at the ENB, came to Cooper's studio and posed for her. This enabled Eileen to move from what were of necessity quick sketches capturing details during the rehearsals – such as the particular positions of dancers' hands and expressive movements – to more structured studies of poses held by the dancer. These occasions – in the rehearsal rooms and with a dancer posing specifically for her – constituted the first time that Eileen Cooper had drawn in such a sustained way directly from life-models for fifteen years (though earlier in her career she had, of course, a great deal of experience drawing from life-models and she sees her roots in 'objective drawing').⁴ There is, of course, abundant visual evidence in Eileen Cooper's oeuvre of her profound and long-standing interest in dance: for example, a drawing from a photograph of Fred Astaire dancing with his shadow developed into the woodcut *Barefoot Duet* (editioned in 2012), cut and first proofed in the Cornish studio of her fellow Royal Academician Ken

Howard.⁵ So, the circumstances which led to her sketching at ballet rehearsals seem less serendipitous retrospectively than they actually were.⁶

Eileen Cooper's drawings and sketches of dancers from the English National Ballet evidence a reinvigorated engagement with direct observation from the model, rather than from photographs or from Cooper's imagination, and this engagement informs her current paintings. This change in her work has accompanied a renewed scrutiny of her own earlier paintings – such as *Woman Examining Her Shadow* (1989–90) – where the imagery is primal and strongly expressive and her thick handling of paint was very experimental. This has helped to modify the spare elegance of Eileen's recent paintings in the direction of an increased modulation and modelling of forms.

i. Painting: the primacy of the female figure

40

Deborah Levy has remarked that Eileen Cooper's paintings ask us to look 'through the female subject's eyes'.⁷ The perspective is always a female one. Eileen's starting point for a drawing or painting is almost always a representation of the female figure, whether in movement – for example dancing, acrobatically swinging, walking or crouching – seated, or asleep.⁸ Sometimes she is paired with another female figure, and sometimes with reflections or shadows, or with a male partner, a child or children: her sons Sam and Will were born in the 1980s and babies and children appear a great deal in work of that decade and in the 90s. However, to view the paintings as essentially autobiographical and literal rather than as symbolic or metaphorical would be wrong: other features in the works may include, for example, a disembodied head, or an animal such as a tiger, stag, or fox. Features such as a swing or trapeze, a ladder (ladders are evident in her work from the 1970s onwards), paintings or canvases, a screen, or a boat also appear as do, very often, flowers, foliage or trees.⁹ Sometimes the figures inhabit a schematic three-dimensional space or structure. These spaces may be reminiscent of Giotto's early frescoes in their obliquely recessed constructions and sometimes have affinities with Giorgio de Chirico's paintings (which were themselves influenced by Trecento art), though Cooper's works generally do not have the portentously enigmatic titles and obscurely threatening strangeness of the *pittura metafisica*. They possess a quieter mystery. Sometimes, the space in her paintings is 'flatter', as it is in the later frescoes of Giotto, with a planar surface and less obtrusive recession, and with the spaces functioning as a short-hand stage set for the figures and their 'props'. Her many depictions of a woman actively painting or drawing, as well as the frequent representations of paintings and canvases in a studio space, show that Eileen Cooper's art repeatedly references the process of artistic creation itself. This is indicated by the titles she often gives to her works: 'Making a picture', 'Moving a picture', or 'Night studio', for example. The salient point is that the *subject* of her art is often the *process* of making art.

In her works on paper, she begins with charcoal outlines of the figure or figures, sometimes drawing flat on a table, but more often upright on an easel,

adding other details as the work demands, modelling by blurring lines with tissue paper and rag, then working over the lines, rebuilding, altering or reinforcing them. On occasion, she will make major changes even at a very late stage in the drawing, and quite a few drawings in the last decade have retained earlier configurations as visible *pentimenti*, which add a vibrancy to the composition: this is the case, for instance, with *Woman with Cats* (2013), a drawing directly related to the clothed figure *Luna* of 2016.¹⁰ When she paints a canvas on an easel, she again starts with painted outlines of the figure/s, adding colour with a brush. So, it is the line, drawn with charcoal, which is always primary in her work. Her colour palette has changed: in early years there were different shades of red, magenta and earth colours painted with thick impasto; in later years, the colours became more naturalistic and restrained, the paint thinner.¹¹ She frequently works on several paintings at a time, one essentially leading to another – and at the same time often cuts related compositions in lino – until a series is completed, when she has finished mining a particular seam of inspiration.

ii. Collages: making something a/new

The five impressive collages shown here were made at Alayrac (the second occasion on which she has made collages there), in 2016, specifically for this exhibition. The Alayrac collages are some of Eileen Cooper's most important new works. Although she trained as a painter at Goldsmiths and then at the Royal College of Art under Peter de Francia, Eileen has been involved in printmaking from early in her career; she first explored woodcuts, then worked with monoprints in 1988 and with multi-plate etchings in 1990.¹² Sara Lee, herself a distinguished printmaker, recently provided a thorough and insightful exploration of Cooper's career as a maker of different types of print and has also worked alongside her for many years. As well as Picasso's, German expressionist and Neue Sachlichkeit prints, especially those of Max Beckmann and Käthe Kollwitz, have also inspired Eileen's work. Lee relates that the exhibition of the work of the Japanese woodblock printer, Shiko Munakata, at the Hayward Gallery in 1991, was inspirational for Eileen Cooper. It is not hard to see how Munakata's folk art, especially the floating nude females representing Shinto *kami*, could have influenced her.¹³ Technically, Cooper has experimented with a very wide range of printing techniques, from hand printing inspired by Japanese students, using a traditional bamboo baren, to monoprints, woodcuts, linocuts, and silkscreens made with the Glasgow Print Studio. Much of her production of art is deeply influenced by the materials: for example, the papers on which she prints, the lino, or birch-faced plywood blocks she cuts, the ink palette, and the subtly textured surfaces of screen prints. Experimentation with prints and materials may themselves lead her in unexpected directions whilst she is at work, and influence what she adds or takes away.¹⁴ Recently she had a separate studio constructed at the house specifically for making prints with her 1908 Albion Press, purchased from the Royal College of Art. The cutting of the lino blocks

(sometimes heated on a commercial plate warmer to make them softer and easier to cut), and all the creative work normally takes place, though, in her drawing and painting studio.

42 Eileen Cooper's collages develop from two practices which she had explored earlier in her career: first, her tearing up and reconstructing large drawings to make new composite pictures; and, secondly, her use in the 1990s of several smaller blocks to make composite images. One of the technical features involved in print making can be the many different stages of proofing before the final print series is editioned. Eileen has frequently preserved prints that were unused, or rejected at proof stage because of some problem with printing a detail or colour. She has also kept lino blocks cut for printing, but which she has not employed. For her 2016 Alayrac collages she prepared by gathering her materials – inks, papers, rollers, lino blocks and cutting tools, as well as some older lino blocks already cut with figures she had not used before – and most importantly some rejected proof prints from her large woodcut of *Luna* (2016).¹⁵ The woodcut *Luna* depicts a woman wearing a red dress, seated on a wooden chair with two cats on her knees, one seated upright, the other standing. Details such as the outlining of the cats with thin lines and the blue blurring round the whole figure composition themselves almost suggest a series of images laminated one on top of the other in outlined layers.¹⁶ Analysis of the collages made with *Luna* as their starting point offer insights into Eileen's current working methods and, more tendentiously perhaps, how these methods shape the viewer's interpretation.

In France, Cooper took the rejected prints for *Luna* and cut them up. *Paper Doll*, painted in 2012, shows a seated woman cutting out a figure. In the painting, the cutting-out process is the subject: in the collages, cutting out is the necessary preliminary to making the artwork. For the 2016 *Luna* collage series, Eileen combined elements cut from the *Luna* woodcuts with separately screen-printed paper for backgrounds, some prints from previously unused linocut blocks, and some linocuts specially cut and printed at Alayrac. She also used wash to tone some components and paint to sharpen others. The process can be clearly seen in the first three collages I want to consider, all of which use *Luna*'s head. In the first (*Luna 4*), this is placed to the right of the print, with a linocut woman holding two large leaves which largely cover her, walking towards the left side of the print apparently in front of a blue (screen print) river which echoes the blue of *Luna*'s eyes. The linocut figure was originally made to be part of the *Wildwood* series in 2014 but was never used. The collage is a disquieting image because it appears to be part of a narrative and we wonder what we are witnessing.

The second collage (*Luna 2*) is more perturbing. *Luna*'s mouth is now covered by 'waves' of 'background' cut from the woodcut and the viewer registers carefully the deep furrows of her brow – in this proof there are additional ochre lines on the forehead – which one tends to interpret as evidence of pain and stress. The right hand of *Luna* in the original print is cut out and, now disembodied, seems to reach upwards; the figure holding leaves is tilted up and nearly 'leaving' the print. The spectator registers this figure's hands more,

Luna, 2015, woodcut, 96.5 × 66.5 cm.
Not in the exhibition

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because they strongly echo the disembodied one nearly in the bottom centre foreground and because Eileen has cut out more round the hands (and less at the feet and base than in *Luna 4*), so one sees the river behind, a deeply disquieting red. Separating out the different spatial planes is complicated but one tends to read backwards from the left-hand figure to Luna's head on the right. What is interesting here for the art-historian is the fact that the screen print covers Luna's mouth for the entirely pragmatic reason that this part of the woodcut print had been defective. Because the mouth is covered and the right hand is disembodied and used separately, the image appears – at least to this viewer – deeply sinister. This raises the difficult question of artistic intentionality and the viewer's interpretation. Of course, it is always important to know whether an artist intended her or his work to have a specific meaning (or range of potential interpretations); still, it is not obvious why artists' interpretations of their creations should always have priority over those of the spectator (except if one's objective is to identify the *artist's* intentions). Norbert Lynton once remarked of Eileen Cooper's art that it invites us to interpret the subjects ourselves and to speculate what the artist intended.¹⁷ In fact, as she has remarked to me, Eileen Cooper is happy to leave interpretation of the finished work to the viewer: her intention is to invite the viewer's involvement, not to insist on one fixed, particular meaning.

In the third collage (*Luna 5*), the tone seems much calmer and more positive: half of Luna's head is now visible on the right, cut by the frame. A seated naked woman, printed from a linocut made at Alayrac specifically for use in these collages, is in the centre, placed on sections of screen-print as if they were bathing towels, and seems to gaze at the head of a cat (the one from the cat standing on Luna's lap), also cut off by the frame; the red screen print background now appears unthreatening. The viewer tends to read the collage as three separate planes with the naked woman on one plane looking at the cat, which in turn looks at Luna. Eileen's partial use of wash on the linocut woman tones her down, and pulls her back into the collage. The cut-up pieces of the woodcut's background produce outlines which seem to enclose and protect her. At the lower plane, the yellow screen print is like a shore, overlapped by the cat and by *Luna*. In the fourth collage (*Luna 10*), Luna herself has disappeared, except for a disembodied hand which now appears to reach towards the naked woman – whose figure is not given wash shadowing and so is more foregrounded – perched on the upper part of both of Luna's cats, from outside the frame. Wash is applied over the yellow screen print, transitioning to the light purple. There is a tension between reading the composition as a formal balance and interpreting the possible action of the hand: is it threatening or protective? In the final collage exhibited here (*Luna 9*), a linocut of a lightly clad woman who was originally a dancing figure, is now shown recumbent, on a plain with an arched building to one side. She has been printed on a greyish paper which has been covered with wash and her features and other details strengthened in paint. The blue and ochre background are again cut from screen prints; the arch was cut from a flat piece of

paper on which she had cleaned her paint roller. Woodcut-derived foreground overlaps the yellow screen print. The section of the seated cat from the woodcut has been tilted more upright in the foreground and appears to contemplate her, or perhaps the flower – a linocut print retained from some years ago, but never previously used – in front. The collage has a surreal ambiguity, something like de Chirico's work, accentuated by the spatial ambivalence. What one sees in the collages is the way in which different formal juxtapositions of woodcut, screen print and linocut influence the spectator's interpretation of the image. What is not clear is whether Eileen Cooper herself intended to express a specific meaning prior to producing a collage, or whether the final result is the consequence of a primarily *formal* experimentation. If her own interpretation of a piece only follows her completion of it – meaning follows making¹⁸ – it might help explain her relaxed and refreshingly open-minded approach to others' interpretations of her images.

iii. Sculptures: thinking in layers

Cooper's collages remind us how deeply her work has been influenced by Picasso and Matisse, but they may also suggest much earlier influences, such as the cut-out dolls she possessed as a child, which were dressed with separate elements held on by folded tabs. Here, a change in the 'dress' altered the appearance of the figure. One effect of making collages is, of course, that the artist thinks in terms of physical layers of imagery: in *Luna 5*, the artist's placing of cut-out elements on top of one another can make the viewer see the individual components as organized on three separate pictorial planes: foreground, middle ground, background. Another echo of childhood toys, in this case pop-up books, where individual figures or elements can be moved in different vertical layers or shutters, may have influenced her recent works in sculpture and Eileen has told me that she was buying such books for her own children in the 1980s. Certainly, the fundamental constructional and aesthetic idea underpinning the four bronze sculptures shown here is of separate layers. These small-scale reliefs with figures and trees are essentially cut-out elements, arranged in different planes. They are very clearly connected visually and thematically with the collages and, in general, the sculptures' figuration employs the same formal language that she uses in her other works.

All the main elements of Eileen Cooper's bronzes are normally two-dimensional, constructed separately, and deployed on different planes. Eileen initially sought guidance in making sculptures from Cathie Pilkington, recently elected RA. After discussion, they felt that the most efficient way for Eileen to realise her ideas was to cut figures out of wax sheets, which could then be cast. The rectangular bases of all four of the reliefs shown here (each from an edition of seven) were also cast from wax sheets. Eileen combined this technique of cutting out figures with dipping elements of foliage in wax; and excavating figures or other components from clay, pouring in the wax, then peeling it off, so the bronze could be cast. These three different techniques are shown in three separate planes

on *Rural Myths* (2015) – the woman on the right is cut from a wax sheet, into which the details had been incised; the fox and most of the tree are cast from wax poured into clay, and a cast twig lies across the base, also serving to link the figures and tree to one another. Additional dipped and cast elements are used for the tree by the figure's knee. Chance can play a major role, as in *Cassandra* (2014), where the background above the reclining figure's head could have been cut off – it was not intended as part of the figure – but Eileen preferred to retain it, where it functions visually in a fashion analogous to the screen-printed backgrounds of the collages. This retention is interesting because in all Eileen Cooper's sculptural reliefs, the void matters, functioning as an equivalent to the background, emphasising the linear boundaries of the two-dimensional components.

46 In *Cassandra*, the figure, tree and flower are all made the same way: clay is rolled, pressed and excavated, then wax is poured in; after it has been gently peeled off, Eileen has amended and strengthened some elements, and then the wax has been cast. The tree in *Folklore* (2015) is made this way too, and has been patinated green. The reclining woman and seated male are cut out of wax sheets. The dancing male and female figures in the last piece to be considered here, *Serenade* (2015), are also cut from wax sheets, with a cast twig linking them compositionally; the twig also works structurally and is attached to a leg of the male figure which it helps stabilise. In this sculpture, the generally two-dimensional planes of both figures have been modified. The woman's head is emphasised by the daring line, cut almost to the back of her neck, and the head is twisted into a different plane. Her hair has been made by pouring wax into clay; this has then been joined to the wax sheet of the figure before casting, giving the hair and head an added three-dimensionality and energy. The male figure's upper torso is also manipulated into a slightly different plane and the figures are differently patinated, the woman's figure lighter than the man's in the background. Here, the two-dimensionality of the cut-out figures has been both accentuated and transformed by the additions to her hair, the delineation of her face by cutting into the neck, the alterations in plane of her head and his torso and by sensitive patination. The visual energy Eileen Cooper has thus given to the dancing female and male make this small bronze a sculptural counterpart of one of her greatest paintings, *Perpetual Spring* (2016) with its echoes of Picasso and resonance with Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*.

Folklore, 2015, bronze, 60 × 40 × 12 cm,
edition of 7



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Serenade, 2015, bronze, 35 × 45 × 19 cm,
edition of 7

Rural Myths, 2015, bronze, 30 × 35 × 12 cm,
edition of 7

Cassandra, 2014, bronze, 38 × 34.5 × 10 cm,
edition of 7

Paper Doll, 2012, oil on canvas, 122 × 92 cm.
Collection of the artist

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Women Painters in the Renaissance and Baroque: Artemisia, Sofonisba and Lavinia

Simona Dolari

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There are many figures of women in Eileen Cooper's works of art: some of them dance, some of them are mythical personages that remind the viewer of stories of thousands of years ago, some of them are in the act of painting or waiting and thinking. Most of them are nude, as opposed to naked, with no need for clothes apart from a very thin vestment that shows their bodies underneath. It is difficult to define in what age they live; these are universal women, like those figures in Gauguin's and Douanier Rousseau's paintings, characters out of time. All of them show a calm confidence and a serene femininity, in particular the beautiful lady in *Paper Doll* who in her elegant blue dress can be read as a modern version of *Judith and Holofernes*: a woman cutting off the head of a paper figure. The link with the powerful painting by Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–c.1654), *Judith Slaying Holofernes* (c.1612), in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples is natural given that both painters are women – two women artists living more than four hundred years apart, both representing a beheading. The sword has been substituted for a pair of scissors; the act of beheading is now more symbolical than physical. The scene is extremely controlled and rational, there is no trace of pathos or violence, but the result is perhaps the same because, as Julia Kristeva has written, when the head is cut off, both the public and personal identity is put in crisis.¹ For Artemisia the biblical story of the Jewish widow who frees her people by killing the Assyrian general was her eloquent way of expressing her desire for revenge against the man, the painter Agostino Tassi, who had raped her in 1611.² With this act Tassi had put her life at risk as, in that society, virginity was the main gift of a young girl yet to be married. The aspiration of a woman to be a painter, a 'dipintora', was considered a total extravagance, according to the rules of conduct designed by men for women.³

Baldassare Castiglione wrote in his *Book of the Courtier* (1528), the manual that shaped the 'figura' of the man and the lady of court in the Renaissance, that a 'woman of rank has to be competent in letters, music and painting together with dancing and being merry, being most graceful in conversing, laughter, playing games, creating mottoes and in everything she undertakes'.⁴ However, Castiglione did not advise that a woman should become a professional painter,

earning a living through the use of brushes and colours. Dishonor was associated with a lady in the workplace and it was not at all appropriate to a 'gentildonna'. Women had three main duties during the course of their lives: to be chaste daughters, devout wives and sober and prolific mothers. However, behind the fact that women were not supposed to work as artists there was a more subtle and substantial reason: the common belief among Renaissance intellectuals that the 'female sex' was not rational enough to perform such dignified activities. Painting, as Annibal Caro wrote, was only proper to the intellect of free men.⁵ Artemesia was, therefore, a pioneer in the seventeenth century.

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Renaissance theorists such as Leon Battista Alberti in his treatise *On Painting* (1435) had raised the status of the arts from the level of craft to that of intellectual activity.⁶ Despite the fact that painting and sculpture were concerned with the making of objects, they were both judged as the expression of concepts born in the mind, imagined by the intellect and fabricated by the 'idea'.⁷ In 1549 Benedetto Varchi wrote: 'Art is a process which begins in contemplation but demands expression through the "actualization" or realization of the inner potential which is hidden in the matter'.⁸ A long tradition that began with Aristotle had always recognized 'the matter' in the male: ideas and concepts were naturally 'conceived' by men, while women were considered to be the material cause, the passive flesh on which the male could work.⁹ If Aristotle had explained the reasons why women were by nature intellectually inferior to men, through the centuries writers and theorists initiated a serious debate on the qualities of women, often reinforcing the belief of their biological and intellectual inferiority.¹⁰ Even when writers wrote books in praise of women such as Boccaccio's *De Claris Mulieribus* (c.1365), the belief was that 'art is very much alien to the mind of women, and these things cannot be accomplished without a great deal of talent, which in women is usually very scarce'.¹¹ Even later in the Renaissance when some women demonstrated exceptional talent in poetry and music – among them Cecilia Gonzaga, Isotta Nogarola, Cassandra Fedele or Vittoria Colonna¹² – many male theorists wondered about women artists. Paolo Pino in his *Dialogo* (1548) declared: 'it does not please me to hear women equalled to the excellence of men in painting; and it seems to me that art is debased by this, and the female species is drawn outside what is proper to it, for nothing suits women save the distaff and the spindle'.¹³

In this social and cultural context it is surprising that some women – for example, Properzia de' Rossi (c.1490–1530), Sofonisba Anguissola (1532/35–1625), Lavinia Fontana (1552–1614), Fede Galizia (1574–1630), Barbara Longhi (1552–1638), Artemisia Gentileschi (1593–1654), Elisabetta Sirani (1638–1665) and Giovanna Garzoni (1600–1670), not to mention the nuns Caterina Vigri (1413–1463) and Plautilla Nelli (1523–1588), were able to find their place as artists.¹⁴ Most of them – apart from the exceptional case of Sofonisba Anguissola, who was sent by her father, Amilcare Anguissola, as an apprentice first with the local painter Bernardino Campi from 1546 to 1549 and then with Bernardo Gatti to serve – were the daughters of artists. All of them, especially those who became famous

and successful, were the 'product' of clever fathers who had understood the economical potentialities of their female offspring.¹⁵ Extraordinary though they were, each had to find her specific route to becoming a painter. Unfortunately, it is only for the baroque painter Artemisia Gentileschi that it is possible through her letters and writing to understand her continuous struggle to find credibility as an artist.¹⁶ Writing to her patron in Messina, Don Antonio Ruffo, she complained about the fact that she still had to convince him of the quality of her paintings 'because a woman's name raises doubts until her work is seen'.¹⁷ She writes: 'I will show Your Most Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do';¹⁸ because in her female soul there was 'the spirit of Caesar'.¹⁹ Despite the fact that some scholars have contested the proto-feminist interpretation that Mary Garrard built around Artemisia Gentileschi,²⁰ there are no doubts that her personal vicissitudes with her rape and the trial, together with her baroque way of painting sensual biblical heroines, puts her in a different light when compared to other women painters; for these same reasons she appears more modern and closer to our eyes and feelings.²¹

Born in 1593, Artemisia spent her life working and travelling from one court to another following her aristocratic patrons and commissions: Florence, Naples, Venice, London and Rome.²² She often painted large biblical and historical subjects with female characters, Susanna, Judith, Mary Magdalene, and Cleopatra, representing them nude or in sensual clothes, paying particular attention to the fleshy female body that is uncommon for male painters. She was the first woman who was accepted in to the Academy of Drawing in Florence. She married the Florentine dilettante painter, Pierantonio Stiattesi, but their relationship was not a happy one. She became a mother twice and taught her two daughters to paint; twice she was almost bankrupted to pay for their dowries. Artemisia had an epistolary correspondence with men such as Galileo Galilei and Cassiano del Pozzo.²³ In everything she did there was no perception of that 'modestia' that Baldassare Castiglione suggested should be the main characteristic of the court lady.

By contrast, Sofonisba Anguissola, born in Cremona in 1530 to a minor noble family, was the perfect exemplar of the Renaissance lady of court. She learned to paint through the teaching of two local artists. In the hands of her clever father, Amilcare Anguissola, a witty and tireless agent, she became that 'miracle of nature' who enchants theorists and intellectuals such as Giorgio Vasari and Giulio Clovio, who had one of her portraits.²⁴ She had a predilection for paintings of small or medium format, in particular portraits of herself or of her numerous family members. In the self-portraits she painted she was always sober in her manner.²⁵ Often dressed in black, the only frivolity in her *Self-portrait* (1554, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna) seems to be the hem of the ruffled white chemise peeping out from under her heavy gown. The pages of the little book she holds are signed SOPHONISBA ANGUSSOLA VIRGO. SEIPSAM FECIT 1554, her signature written, significantly, in Latin. It is with her *Self-portrait at the easel* (late 1550s, Muzeum Zamek, Lancut), with her mahlstick, brush and colours in

the act of painting a Madonna and Child, that she more clearly declares that she is a painter. As a lady of rank her pictures could never be sold on the open market.²⁶ They were instead given as gifts to well-connected people who could arrange favours or help Sofonisba to advance her career.²⁷ In 1559 Sofonisba was invited by King Philip II of Spain to go to Madrid to become one of the ladies-in-waiting to his third wife Isabella Valois.²⁸ Sofonisba married twice and she never had children. She painted all her life and died at the age of over ninety. Employed by the Spanish court, Sofonisba became well respected and wealthy and, as Caroline Murphy noted, a regular salary from a king easily out-weighed the profits coming from the sales of single paintings.²⁹ She was, in fact, able to find her own space as a successful artist without transgressing the rules tailored by men.

56 The case of Lavinia Fontana falls somewhere between that of Sofonisba and Artemisia. Born in Bologna in 1552, Lavinia was the only daughter of Antonia de' Bonardis, the most important publisher in the city, and Prospero Fontana, a very successful painter.³⁰ Lavinia learned to paint from her father who introduced her as a young girl to the intellectual circles of Post-Tridentine Bologna.³¹ Her first paintings, which date from the mid-1570s, were small devotional works, very highly valued for their iconographic clarity. By the late 1570s portraits of scholars and family friends had become her main activity and this would make her famous among rich aristocratic women, her most recurrent and affectionate patrons. In 1584 she produced her first documented altarpiece for the Palazzo Comunale of Imola, the *Assumption of the Virgin with Saint Cassiano and Saint Peter Chrysologus*.³² This was the first of a series of public commissions.³³ She became very famous, embodying perfectly the role of the 'Christian craftsman' described by Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti in his *Discorso intorno alle immagini sacre e profane* (1582).³⁴ Along with her religious paintings, for which she was very highly paid according to Malvasia, she also specialised in small allegorical paintings slightly erotic in tone, such as *Venus Receiving the Homage of the Cupids*, which were particularly appreciated by male patrons.³⁵ She married a minor nobleman from Imola, Giovanni Paolo Zappi, who, after the death of her father, became Lavinia's agent,³⁶ taking care of all practicalities to ensure that they did not interfere with her artistic production.³⁷ Lavinia painted all her life, despite having eleven children, and more than a hundred works are assigned to her. In 1603 Pope Paul V Borghese invited her to Rome with her family,³⁸ where she stayed for more than ten years until her death in 1614.³⁹ In 1613 she painted for Scipione Borghese, nephew of the Pope an intriguing painting of *Minerva Dressing* (Galleria Borghese, Rome), where the goddess, covered only by a thin veil, wearing her feathered helmet, is showing the back of her nude beautiful body while she holds in her hands the gown that she has just taken off. The shield is on its side: the warrior is not represented here but, rather, the woman underneath the armour.

Lavinia can be called the first real professional female painter of the Renaissance. She had an active workshop that produced a variety of paintings,

with male and female patrons ready to pay large sums of money to have her works.⁴⁰ However, when she painted her Self-portraits in 1577 and in 1579, one for her parents in law and the other one probably commissioned by the Spanish scholar, Dominican Alfonso Chacon, she chose to wear the clothes of the intellectual and well educated lady and not those of the painter.⁴¹ In her *Self-portrait at the Spinet with her Maidservant* (1577), signed and dated (LAVINIA VIRGO PROSPERI FONTANAE FILIA EX SPECULO IMAGINEM ORIS SUI EXPRESIT ANNO MDLXXVII), she represented herself playing the virginal, very richly dressed in red and white, the graceful and well-mannered court lady described by Castiglione. In the background of the painting, obscured in the shadows, there is an empty easel but no canvas: it is a gentle reminder of her ability to paint. In her other *Self Portrait in a studio*, 1579, on copper, (signed and dated LAVINIA FONTANA E TAPPII FACIEB. DLLXXVIII), she is now even more richly clothed wearing an expensive dress with a large lace collar and a gold cross around her neck. She is sitting in a studio surrounded by a collection of antiquities, the classical pose of the Renaissance scholar. In front of her stands a little marble statuette and a white piece of paper. Lavinia holds a pen in her hand and she seems to be ready either to write something or to make a sketch of the statuette but there is no immediate physical action and there is no mention or reference to the art of painting. It is the intellectual moment that precedes everything that is represented here. When Lavinia painted this second self-portrait she was still at the beginning of her brilliant career but she was not yet ready to present herself in the clothes of the painter: like many male painters before her she showed her knowledge and rank. She is a female Renaissance scholar.

It is only with Artemisia Gentileschi's famous *Self-portrait as the Allegory of Painting* (1630) painted about fifty years after Lavinia Fontana's self portrait, that we notice a great difference.⁴² Artemisia is now herself the allegory of painting: the intellectual meditation of Lavinia has become active and the rich dress with high lace collar and large sleeves has been abandoned for a more relaxed dress. Instead of a pen there are brushes and palette and instead of representing herself looking at the viewer she is completely focused in what she is doing: painting.

Notes

A Woman's Skin

I would like to thank Eileen Cooper for her generosity in this endeavour, Dr Alyce Mahon for her insightful conversation, Professor Phillip Lindley and Professor Alison Syme for their constructive critical reading of this text, and Eleanor Coop for sharing her thoughts on these works.

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1
Martin Gayford, 'The Tiger Leaps', in *Eileen Cooper: Between the Lines*, Royal Academy, London, 2015, p. 15.

2
Kathleen Soriano, 'Foreword' to *Eileen Cooper: Between the Lines*.

3
Gayford, 'The Tiger Leaps', p. 13.

4
Norbert Lynton, 'Introduction' to *Eileen Cooper. Lifelines*, London, 1993, p. 12.

5
Paula Lombard, 'Dorothea Tanning: On the Threshold to a Darker Place', *Woman's Art Journal*, vol 2, no 1 (Spring/Summer 1981), p. 50.

6
For an overview of the relationships between women surrealists and their better-known male counterparts, see 'Love, friendship & rivalry: The women beside the men in early surrealism, Tate, 28 February 2017; <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/love-friendship-rivalry-surrealist-women-beside-men>.

7
Katherine Conley, 'Sleeping Gods in Surrealist Collections', *Symposium: A Quarterly Journal in Modern Literatures*, vol 67, no 1 (2013).

8
Charlotte Stokes, 'Surrealist Persona: Max Ernst's "Loplop, Superior of Birds"', *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, vol 13, no 4 (1983), pp. 225–26.

9
Stokes, 'Surrealist Persona', p. 225.

10

Ernest Schonfield, 'Myths of Anglo-German Surrealism: Max Ernst and Leonora Carrington', in Rüdiger Görner and Angus Nicholls, eds, *In the Embrace of the Swan: Anglo-German Mythologies in Literature, the Visual Arts and Cultural Theory*, Berlin and New York, 2010, pp. 252–53.

11

Conley, 'Sleeping Gods', p. 13.

12

As articulated by Louis Aragon in *Paris Peasant* of 1924. See Schonfield, 'Myths of Anglo-German Surrealism', p. 233.

13

Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. by Vivian Folkenflik, New York, 1990, p. 16.

14

Film: *Leonora Carrington: Britain's Lost Surrealist*, The Guardian, 2010. See the transcription of the interview at <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/video/leonora-carrington-britains-lost-surrealist-tateshots>.

The Cutting Line

1

She also paints and draws in her studio in the Royal Academy, depending on her workload. The chief guides to her artistic practice are Martin Gayford, 'The Tiger Leaps', in *Eileen Cooper: Between the Lines*, London 2015, pp. 13–21, Gayford's interview with her, pp. 22–27 and her own essay, 'Stepping Back and Going Forward', pp. 29–33.

2

Another exception was her work at Dulwich Picture Gallery. See *Raw Material: Eileen Cooper at Dulwich Picture Gallery*, London, 2000. The first time Eileen Cooper exhibited her collages was in a December 2010–March 2011 show at the RA. In *Between the Lines*, pp. 264–7, the 2010 Alayrac collages are all misdated to 2012.

3

Love-in-idleness is the wild pansy, described by Shakespeare as inducing romantic love and the source of the love-potion used by Oberon in 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'.

4
Cooper, p. 31 for this term. She has also produced some portraits from life in the last decade, but only rarely.

5
Sara Lee, 'At Every Turn', in *Between the Lines*, p. 278. There, *Barefoot Duet* is dated 2011, but it is assigned to 2012 in the caption on p. 259.

6
Working with contemporary artists confronts the historian with the role chance plays in their production and is one of the many reasons I agree with Martin Wackernagel that discussions with modern artists can inform one's study of historical art production. The determinist art-historian, like the similarly minded historian, sees inevitability where there was actually contingency, though as Sir Richard Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History*, London 2014, has demonstrated, counterfactual history is no solution: what is required is a better use of factual evidence. I suspect counterfactual thinking is better confined to science fiction such as Ray Bradbury's 1952 short story 'A Sound of Thunder'.

7
D. Levy, 'Introduction', in *Eileen Cooper: Deeper Water*, London, 2007, unpaginated.

8
Cooper, in *Between the Lines*, p. 32.

9
Cooper, p. 31.

10
Cooper, p. 32.

11
Cooper, p. 33.

12
Lee, pp. 273–9.

13
Sori Yanagi (ed.), *The Woodblock and the Artist: The Life and Work of Shiko Munakata*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1991.

14
She says as much in *Between the Lines*, p. 32, 'materials and process... are a big part of my *subject matter*' [my emphasis].

15
Personal communication 12.03.17.

16
The fascinating ways in which differently treated versions of the same print can suggest differing layers of depth has, of course, long

been an interest of printmakers, from the time of Hercules Seghers onwards.

17

N. Lynton, *Eileen Cooper. Lifelines*, London, 1994, p. 11.

18

Cf E.H. Gombrich, *Art and Illusion: a study in the psychology of pictorial representation*, fifth edn, London, 1977, pp. 62–3, matching follows making, in a process of schema and correction.

Women Painters in the Renaissance and Baroque: Artemisia, Sofonisba and Lavinia

1

Julia Kristeva, *The Severed Head*, New York, 2012.

2

Mary Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi: The Image of the Female Hero in Italian Baroque Art*, Princeton, 1989 and Bissell Ward, *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art*, Pennsylvania, 1999.

3

During the trial against Agostino Tassi for rape, Orazio Gentileschi mentioned that he had planned for his daughter Artemisia a life in a convent; see Elizabeth Crooper, "Artemisia, la pittrice" in Giulia Calvi, ed., *Barocco al femminile*, Roma-Bari, 1992, pp. 190–218. See also Caroline P. Murphy, 'The economics of the Woman Artist', in *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, Milan, 2007, pp. 23–24.

4

Margaret L. King, *Women of the Renaissance*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 1991, p. 272.

5

Fredrika H. Jacobs, 'Woman's capacity to create: the unusual case of Sofonisba Anguissola', in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring 1994), p. 74

6

Frances Borzello, *A World of Our Own. Women as artists*, London, 2000, p. 18.

7

Jacobs, 'Woman's capacity to create', p. 85.

8

Jacobs, 'Woman's capacity to create', p. 79.

- 9
Joanna Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, New Haven, 1998, p. 188.
- 10
Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, p. 188.
- 11
W. Chadwick, *Women, Art and Society*, London, 1990, p. 29.
- 12
During the Renaissance along with the large numbers of treatises on the exceptional merits of men, a very interesting fashion for writing in favour of women was started, some of the most influential being: Galeazzo Flavio Cappella, *Della eccellenza e dignita' della donna*, 1525, Sperone Speroni, *Dialogo della Dignita' delle donne*, 1542, Lodovico Dolce, *Della Institutione delle Donne*, 1545, Domenico Bruni, *Difesa delle Donne*, 1559; on the theme see Ian Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of a Woman*, Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- 61 13
Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, p. 189.
- 14
The first major exhibition on women artists was the one organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1976, *Women Artists, 1550–1950* curated by Ann Sutherland Harris and Lynda Nochlin. In 2007 the National Museum of Women in the arts in Washington organized an exhibition focused on *Italian Women Artists from Renaissance to Baroque*, Skira, Milano, 2007.
- 15
Borzello, *A World of Our Own*, pp. 47–48.
- 16
Caroline Murphy, in 'The Economics of the Woman Artist', highlights the fact that in the Renaissance becoming an artist was not by free choice but was dictated by the need to earn a living. On the subject of women and work, see also Olwen Hufton, 'Women, work and family', in Natalie Zemon Davis and Arlette Farge, eds, *A History of Women in the West*, Vol. III, Cambridge, MA, 1995, pp. 15–26. Artemisia Gentileschi had to struggle all her life with economic issues; on this topic see Richard Spear, 'Money Matters: the Gentileschi's Finances', in Judith W. Mann, ed. *Artemisia Gentileschi: Taking Stock*, Turnhout, 2005, pp 147–158.
- 17
Letter written in Naples to Don Antonio Ruffo in Messina, January 30, 1649; Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, p. 390.
- 18
Letter written in Naples to Don Antonio Ruffo in Messina, August 7, 1649; Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, p. 394.
- 19
Letter written in Naples to Don Antonio Ruffo in Messina, November 13, 1649; Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, p. 397.
- 20
Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, pp. 141–179.
- 21
Alexandra Lapierre, 'The "woman Artist" in Literature: Fiction or Non Fiction?', in *Italian Women Artists*, pp. 79–80.
- 22
Luciano Berti, 'Artemisia da Roma tra i Fiorentini', in *Artemisia*, Contini and Papi, eds, 1991, pp. 9–30.
- 23
Luciano Berti, Graziella Margherini and Monica Toraldo di Francia, *Artemisia Gentileschi nostra contemporanea*, Florence, 2002.
- 24
Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects*, translated by Gaston Du C. De Vere, London, 1912–1924, Vol. V, pp. 127–128. Fredrika H. Jacobs, 'Woman's capacity to create: the unusual case of Sofonisba Anguissola', in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Spring 1994), p. 78; see also Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo, *Scritti sulle Arti*, ed. R. P. Ciardi, Florence, 1973, Vol. I, p. 95. For Clovio, see *Sofonisba Anguissola e le sue sorelle*, Mina Gregori, ed., Milan, 1994.
- 25
Mary D. Garrard, 'Here's Looking at me: Sofonisba Anguissola and the problem of the Woman Artist', in *Renaissance Quarterly*, Vol 47, no. 3 (1994), pp. 556–622.
- 26
Borzello, *A World of Our Own*, p. 48.
- 27
Ann Sutherland Harris, 'Sofonisba, Lavinia, Artemisia and Elisabetta: Thirty Years after Women Artists, 1550–1950', in *Italian Women Artists*, p. 52.

28

It was probably through her fame as a woman painter that she had got the job because the young queen was very passionate about art and keen to learn to paint; see Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, p. 195.

29

Sofonisba became so famous during her life that Giorgio Vasari wrote of her: 'She laboured at the difficulties of disegno with greater study and better grace than any other woman of our time, and succeeded not only in drawing, colouring, and copying from Nature, and in making excellent copies of works by others, but also has executed by herself some very rare and very beautiful paintings'; see Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, p. 196.

62

30

Italian Women Artists, p. 135.

31

Vera Pietrantonio Fortunati, 'Lavinia Fontana' in Vera Fortunati Pietrantonio, ed., *Pittura Bolognese del '500*, Vol. 2, Bologna, 1986, pp. 727-775.

32

This first very important official commission, the Altarpiece for the Chapel of Imola's Palazzo Comunale, was the result of the family political strategy. Severo Zappi, father of Gian Paolo, was a member of the Consiglio Comunale who paid for the work.

33

Ann Sutherland Harris and Linda Nochlin, *Women Artists, 1550-1950*, New York, 1976, p. 112.

34

Vera Fortunati, 'Toward a History of Women Artists in Bologna between the Renaissance and the Baroque: Additions and Clarifications', in *Italian Women Artists*, p. 43.

35

Daniele Benati, *Percorsi nell'arte dal XVI al XVIII secolo*, Bologna, 2002, pp. 46-48; Daniele Benati, *Amor e' vivo. Due dipinti erotici di Lavinia Fontana*, Milan, 2002.

36

Gian Paolo Zappi who belonged to a minor noble family from Imola, had a relevant role in Lavinia Fontana's career and life, guaranteeing her the opportunity to raise her condition from daughter of an artist to wife of a provincial nobleman. Zappi managed all the many practicalities of his wife's job from

signing contracts to mediating new commissions.

37

Woods-Marsden, *Renaissance Self-portraiture*, p. 215.

38

In the same year the painter was asked to join the Academy of Saint Luke in Rome.

39

In Rome Lavinia found a fertile ground which allowed her to paint for many Roman churches and families, see Sutherland Harris, 'Sofonisba, Lavinia, Artemisia and Elisabetta', p. 54.

40

Lavinia Fontana's success in her time was so impressive that her son, eleven years after his mother's death, signed his will Flaminio Zappi Fontana. It is one of the very rare cases in which a man takes a mother's surname; see Murphy, 'The Economics of the Woman Artist', pp. 27-28.

41

Maria Teresa Cantaro, *Lavinia Fontana Bolognese "Pittore Singolare" 1552-1614*, Rome and Milan, 1989, p. 5.

42

Garrard, *Artemisia Gentileschi*, pp. 337-370.

Colophon

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