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## An English Murder: Clare Woods Has a Poisoner's Touch

The artist's ominous paintings suggest imminent threat and moral decline at Mead Gallery, Warwick Arts Centre, Coventry

BY HETTIE JUDAH REVIEW - 19 FEB 2018

In his essay 'Decline of the English Murder', George Orwell proposes a formula for a diverting true-crime story, of the type relished by readers of the Sunday papers after their roast lunch. The murderer should be respectable – 'a little man of the professional class' – in the grip of romantic passion or workplace jealousy. After long tussles of conscience, the deed would be meticulously planned and the 'means chosen should, of course, be poison'.

Writing in 1946, Orwell identifies such histories as belonging to the pre-war period. They were a 'product of a stable society where the all-prevailing hypocrisy did at least ensure that crimes as serious as murder should have strong emotions behind them'. The quotidian horror of wartime – with its combination of imminent threat, precipitated moral decline and social upheaval – instead fomented murders that were casual, callous and cruel.



Clare Woods, *My Horrible Head*,  
2017, oil on aluminium, 3 x 2 m.  
Courtesy: © the artist and Simon  
Lee Gallery, London/Hong Kong

Clare Woods's three-metre-high *English Murder* (all works 2017) certainly has a poisoner's touch: in outside, psychotropic swirls, bilious yellow oil paint creams into washes of toilet-bleach green. At the centre of the painting, a hard shadow describes the visible edge of a tipped-back head, carving form into this queasy welter with uncompromised black. This figure is perhaps not the victim of a well-plotted suburban poisoning, but a different kind of 'English Murder' altogether. For Woods, like Orwell, is interested in the social impact of horror and the transition from the 'stable society' with all its hypocrisies, that existed pre 9/11, to the overt dread and suspicion that prevails in today's 'age of terror'.

The eight large paintings of 'Reality Dimmed' are delivered in subterranean hues, their subjects threatening to fragment into feverish blobs and stripes as if what we are looking at is too unbearable to hold in focus. In *The Last Word*, a white cloth conceals the seat of a chair and whatever is laid upon it. Painted in broad, swiping strokes in dilutions of viridian, it is restrained and ominous. *Smoke and Daggers* and *An Arctic Breakfast* are delivered from their apparent abstraction by identifiable bodyparts – a hand in one, an ear in the other – around which the works coalesce into a greasy kind of figuration.

*An Arctic Breakfast* reads as the compositional evolution of *English Murder*, though in this work, with its apt icy blues, the face and head are indistinct, a series of coloured puddles that barely afford an image. The weird, almost unreadable composition of *Smoke and Daggers* is drawn from a cropped photograph of a portion of statue in which Mary bears the weight of Jesus's head. Another dead face, but this stone form is given something closer to the colour of flesh.



Clare Woods, *Reality Dimmed*, 2017,  
oil on aluminium, 1.9 x 1.9 m.  
Courtesy: © the artist and Simon  
Lee Gallery, London/Hong Kong

The exhibition's only live body almost fills the frame of *The Dementor* – the stripped torso of a looming young man, cropped at the crotch and mouth. Above the waistband of his Adidas track pants, the pale pink tones of his skin are described in globular planes, like the lobes of colour on a heat map. As the Harry Potter generation know, a Dementor can suck happiness, hope and eventually the soul from its victim: here, the monster is perhaps a cipher for the memory of trauma or abuse.

There's fleshiness too to the heavy petals of *Something Bigger*, a bunch of ghostly flower forms exploding toward the viewer, the interstitial spaces between blooms fading toward the beige and khaki of entrenched decay, something gross beneath. Two final works *My Horrible Head* and *Reality Dimmed* hint at absent bodies: human forms suggested by rumpled (perhaps horribly stained) sheets and worried pillows. This is a brutal series, pitching Woods's confident and assured picture-making to powerful, haunting ends.