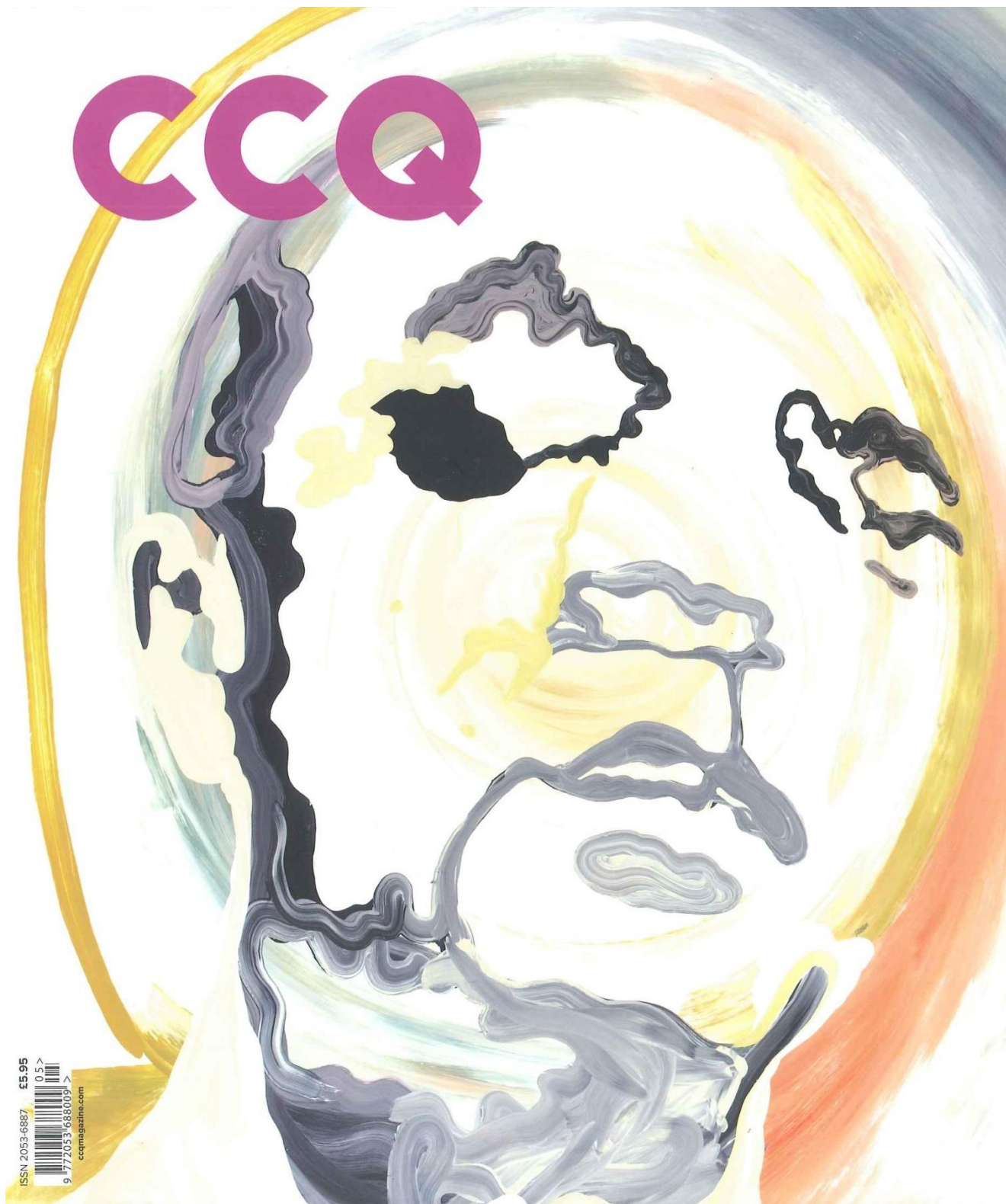


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*CCQ Magazine*  
E. Geliot, 'Semi-Detached'  
Issue 5 2015

**CCQ**

**CCQ**



ISSN 2053-6887 £5.95  
9 772053 688009  
ccqmagazine.com

## Semi-detached

On the fuzzy border between England and Wales,  
Clare Woods talks technical detachment, emotional  
engagement and crossing over from sculpture to  
painting with **Emma Geliot**.

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The sun is as high as it's going to get on a perishing cold November morning. As I twist through the Brecon Beacons, heading for the borderlands, it picks out the scabs of bracken on the hilltops, dried to a blood red like recent wounds. My mind is probably more attuned to metaphors for mortality as I'm heading to Kington, on the English side of the border with Wales, to see an artist who is best known for her gloss paint renditions of landscape on a grand scale, full of dark and complex reference points.

Clare Woods' studio is no romantic artist's garret – it's an industrial unit on one of those little estates that are only visited by those who need something very particular; a spare part for a car, plumbing supplies, school t-shirts. If anything, it's colder inside than out and we huddle around a little heater to talk, keeping our coats on. Let's face it, making art is not glamorous.

Woods is just back from working with Edition Copenhagen, producing two litho prints for the Arken Museum and mentally preparing to make some enormous panels for a Danish commission. These will be a return to gloss paint, after her recent shift to oils, purely for practical purposes.

Behind us, in the vast, un-heatable space, smallish (by Woods' standards) paintings are on the wall and an aluminium panel lies across two trestles, primed and masked up in intricate sections, ready for paint. Woods will work on its flat, horizontal surface until it's finished. Working in this way changes ideas of perspective — until they're finished Woods won't see it straight on. Then, she'll put it up on the wall and look at it and "hope it's not a reject" at that moment of revealing it to herself. She'll often have several works on the go at the same time so that she can move from one to another and not get too bogged down if one of them isn't quite working for her.

This very particular approach to painting stems from her artistic training as a sculptor in Bath and, although she makes paintings, Woods says, "I've always looked at the images I use to paint from as objects, never flat line. I'm interested in the way that images are created in the physical world and their weight and presence within a space." Post-graduation Woods got a bursary from the Hampshire Sculpture Trust but, when she started to make sculpture outside of the art school support system, had an early moment of realisation that it was going to be tough. "I loved sculpture but felt I could never make the stuff that I loved. In college, you've got freedom, you've got workshops. Outside, I thought, 'I'm going to spend fifty quid on something that's going to go in a skip!'"

While still an undergraduate she had begun painting sculptures with gloss paint and, until recently, has used this medium for her paintings because it doesn't leave a trace of her hand or gesture. This, it seems, has its roots in some complex thinking. Firstly, —>



there's a sense of physical detachment from the process, which frees her up for more emotional, intuitive investment in building the image. Yet, there's also another factor – a kind of residual guilt at not making sculpture. Gloss is more associated with domestic DIY, not a proper painter's material. Similarly, the MDF panels, now replaced with aluminium, are utterly neutral and don't have the connection with 'proper painting' that canvas does.

So she began to make paintings as objects, bringing sculptural concerns – weight, tension, a kind of building and excising process – to the temporary table of panel and trestle. The paint would go around the edge of the panel, giving it a three-dimensional presence rather than the illusory flatness of the picture plane. Gloss paint, 'enamel' if you want to sound posh, is used as material rather than medium; a subtle but important difference.

These painted objects were very successful. Woods had lots of shows and sold well. She went back to art school to do an MA, at Goldsmiths, and also started making prints, liking the idea of being a step removed from the image making. That detachment again.

Her work in the early part of the 2000s was often huge, filling vast wall spaces, and referencing nature, built up after taking photographs in the landscape, sometimes under the camera's burst of flash at night to distort colour. Back in the studio, she drew out the key elements, putting them all together on the panel and cutting and masking out before applying the paint in carefully contained pools. The masked areas could easily stand in for Woods' stated desire for boundaries to work to: "Each element of the painting process is broken down and controlled, so when I come to the point of putting the paint on the surface, I am thinking purely formally; it's just issues about colour and mark." The process is very controlled but the pictures/objects are extremely powerful and, in those landscape works, there is far more than a simple desire to represent the visual beauty of nature.

With her sculptor's eye, Woods sees the multiple dimensions of landscape, their physical structure, substance and the layers of meaning. She lives and works in the Welsh Borders, a territory that has been fought over and on which blood has been shed. Woods explains, "We moved to this area because of the border and the poles that surround it.

The extremes that meet there have always been totally fascinating to me – not only with regard to the landscape, but the history and the people that are caught in this."

Back then, her palette was restricted by the same mixture of intellectual rigour and emotional response that is so characteristic in her work. Colours were earthy, rather than muddy, with no reds or pinks. They weren't direct pigment references to natural colours, rather colours that signified a natural context. This reminds me of the viridian used by Graham Sutherland, a green not seen in nature but that references a response to it. As her practice has evolved and Woods settles into the persona of, if not 'painter', then 'artist who uses paint', she has allowed herself an engagement with the process, finally using oils, although perhaps still with the sculptor's approach to texture and material manipulation. She has also produced a body of very large watercolours – a medium that takes no prisoners in terms of revealing gesture. A suite of these has just been added to the Glyn Vivian Gallery's collection in Swansea as the result of this year's Wakelin family award.

The colours in her current work, which I can only feebly describe as 'grown up colours', have been influenced by access to a pathology laboratory. Woods says she was taken aback at the colours of the human interior – not just red, as most of us would imagine if we think about our inner workings at all. Interestingly, as Woods increasingly uses black and white photographs as source material, her paint colour range has extended, liberated by a shift in subject matter that has more human references. Now she can use red and pink.

The source material is eclectic. Woods gathers images, reconfigures them on another big table, and finds connections. There's a picture of an early Phyllida Barlow head – textural and bound, using a variety of those neutral materials that don't announce themselves as specific, but have their own qualities. Next to it an image from the London bombings – a man with his head freshly bandaged, face inhuman with shock. And there's a Paolozzi head. These sources, along with many others, go into works like *The King of Finland*, in her current touring Oriel Davies show, *A Tree A Rock A Cloud*. In that exhibition she showed work alongside three selected works from the National Museum Wales collection: a Paul Nash pond, a Manet

hare and Philip Jones-Griffiths' seminal war image, *Civilian Victim, Vietnam*. Wood's choice of historical works to offer a context to her own is revealing. Here, there is void/portal, weight and human fragility respectively.

Along with her reference photographs, Woods collects potential titles. They wait in her subconscious and present themselves as the work progresses. There's no overt relationship between title and image, except in the mind of the artist, but she thinks it's important to have a title as a way into the work. Titles come from overheard conversations, signs, place names and newspaper stories; they are noted down, recorded and filed away.

Towards the end of our meeting Wood's goes off for a moment and comes back with a small sheaf of watercolour studies. My gob is completely smacked. Not just because they are beautiful, but because I realise that they are studies of Wood's own viscera. Last year she had yards of intestine removed and kept a six-foot section, pickled in formaldehyde, to make drawings from. She had been shown own her guts in a bucket, faced her mortality and processed it into the rich mix of ideas that keep the pictures coming.

I weave my way back across the borderland. This time, I'm looking for evocative road signs. —CCQ

*A Tree A Rock A Cloud*, curated by Aled Boyd Jones and Mandy Fowler at Oriel Davies, will tour to Plas Glyn Y Weddw, Llanbedrog September - November 2015 and Oriel y Parc December 2015 - March 2016. New work by Clare Woods will be added in response to the National Museum Wales collection.