

It isn't masks now, it's faces

By Corinna Lotz

How far can you go in deconstructing the human face? When does deconstruction become destruction? How minimal can a painting be and still convey a wealth of ideas and emotions? Frances Aviva Blane makes you wrestle with such thoughts.

Exploring her large square oil paintings in different lights from a variety of angles is a voyage of discovery. Different things emerge as you zoom in or move away. There are a host of complex colours, textures and layers as something asserts itself above or beneath another colour or shape.

In *Blue*, a brash mass of blue is all you see at first. Then, reds, yellows, whites, oranges and greens begin to appear. “No blue without yellow and without orange”, Van Gogh wrote to Émile Bernard, and these intense contrasts make themselves felt here. But what lies behind that thick mass of paint – hard to know.

These are unmistakably portraits of Blane herself – elongated, pale-skinned face, cropped black hair, smeared red lips. They are shocking, broken-hearted, lost. She hates painting heads, but finds them easier to make – the element of figuration provides a ready-made starting point.



Split Head

Sometimes (as in *Split Head* and *July Head*) features are reduced to a single eye. The diluted acrylic paint dribbles in watery tearstains, and crimson drops of blood. How far can you go in leaving out features and still convey emotion?

Glass Head, looks like dirty water flung on the paper – and yet its random splashes cohere perfectly. Each drop and spot is realised by some freak chance, yet somehow perfectly placed, a calligraphic tango clasped with a red seal. A clown-like smudged mouth – eyes and nose are missing – is all that remains in *Blue Head*. In their place, zigzagging streaks and maroon patches, whitish greys and pink. But the chin, in its craggy jaw, juts upward in a powerful gesture of defiance.

The hollowed-out, tilting eyes, looking out from a bandaged chalky facescape are ghostly and unbearably sad.

The image makes you think of Jean-Louis Barrault in his role as Baptiste, the lovelorn Pierrot in Marcel Carné's film *Les Enfants du Paradis*. Blane's heads evoke that archetypal figure with its combination of naiveté and hopeless yearning, reincarnated by artists from Watteau and Daumier to Picasso, Meyerhold, David Bowie and Patti Smith.

These mask-like images obliterate the self, allowing another, more eloquent, alter-ego to emerge, as in *Sleep*, with its wrapped up, bulbous head and dreamy eyes, floating in a sea of choppy waves. The head seems sculpted out of the criss-crossed thickness of the brushstrokes, pinks, creamy whites, turquoises and blues. Is it death or sleep? "Våra ögon står vidöppna under bandagen – Our eyes stay wide-open under the bandages", as the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer says.

In *Pool* and *Face*, the mood and scale change as the contrasts turn even more strident. The faces burst out, raw pink and white, the eyes desperate, scarcely held within the square of the stretched linen. This is a confrontation. Electric blues, yellows, pinks and reds around the face are just as strongly brushed and give no respite from a shockingly angry and desperate image. In the monumental *Melt*, a strange giant monster dissolves before our eyes. Unafraid and unashamed, this mountain-face gapes into the abyss, tearing away veils to reveal raw despair, anger and horror.



Face

Freeing yourself from the anchor of figuration is a tough call, as Blane knows only too well. In pictorial abstraction new challenges and possibilities arise as the artist escapes from the constraints of self. In her abstract work she also drives to the extreme. In the *Deconstruct* paintings, and in *Black*, she explores the possibilities of no colour and thinned-down paint. As you search in the dark, it seems like peering into outer space – the longer you search, gravitational waves, points of light and even soft-haired black holes begin to appear. We're taken to the edge of perception to find "barely discernible forms", to use Diana Souhami's words.

Derail is supremely joyous: a dancing brush glides and drags over deep cherry red, tracing out whirls and fringed dribbles. In *Black on Blue* flashes of electric blue and yellow struggle with dark matter.

Blane's work is not only about emotions, however strongly she conveys them. There is a chaos of marks, never repeated, never mechanical, always with the feel of the hand that made them. They have a lyrical quality, orchestrating a whole range of physical movements, as formal patterning strengthening the emotional impact. They can be explosive as well as achingly beautiful.

No rhetoric here, just honesty, a fine sense of pictorial judgement and above all, a generous sense of humanity, bringing to mind the words of Terence, the Roman-African playwright: "I am human. Nothing human is alien to me."



Blue

It isn't masks now, it's faces – Men det är inte masker nu utan ansikten
The Gallery by Tomas Tranströmer