



# MAHALI O'HARE

## *Songbirds*

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BOSSE  
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## ‘Container for the thing contained’

In a 1986 text, beloved by nearly every artist I know, Ursula K. Le Guin laments a particularly virulent strain of storytelling and history-writing that is dominated by the antics of ‘sticks spears and swords, the things to bash and poke and hit with, the long, hard things’. Mahali O’Hare might say the same of painting and its classic subject matters - landscape, portrait, still life, even history painting. The history of painting has long been synonymous with a weighty story of art, often told through a mythologising of individualist, canonical, artist heroes. Artists splatter, smear and encrust paint. They have orchestrated where and for how long our gaze might settle, even sometimes ushering in transformative spiritual experiences. What power! O’Hare, however, does whatever she can to dissolve all these heroics, in favour of something lower key, more uncertain.

Instead of weapons, knives, axes, Le Guin – after anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher – identifies ‘A leaf a gourd a shell a net a bag a sling a sack a bottle a pot a box a container. A holder. A recipient.’ as the site of the story that matters. This is the real story of humanity. This is the new, constituted from the age-old. It feels rather mundane, to tell the story of ‘the thing to put things in, the container for the thing contained’, but the repercussions of this change in focus are great. Containers are everywhere in O’Hare’s work. Usually, but not always, they are pot-like. Usually, but not always, they hover against a surround of slate grey, olive green, muddy brown, black. Her (usually) horizonless backgrounds are rendered in a melancholic downy sheen. Usually her containers all but fill the canvas so that the painting becomes ‘container for the thing contained’. They come in a myriad of shapes from tall and slender with contoured shoulders and a narrow mouth, to squat with a broader base and wide-open mouth. Their bodies are depicted with different degrees of roundedness from the bulbous to the more gradually sloping. I’m no pottery expert but judging from their outline Meiping Chinese vases, vessels, lidless urns, or common garden terracotta pots might be some of her points of departure - I imagine O’Hare rummaging through charity shops, visualising family ornaments, or losing herself in pottery collections at museums, seeking out suitable silhouettes to outline.

Rendered as if at eye level, O’Hare doesn’t allow you to look into her containers, only at them. It’s not what’s on the inside that counts. In fact, it’s not really about the pots at all. It’s all a ruse. The form of the pot is more of a stand-in for the human figure – a different kind of (leaky) container. Technical descriptions of pots speak of shoulders, necks, mouths, lips and bodies. The surfaces of the bodies of O’Hare’s pots appear to have absorbed, like sponge, the pictorial qualities of English pastoral landscape paintings. In her jittery paintwork I make out bustling leaves, wind swept

trees, swaying meadows, entangled bare branches, specks of stars, bubblegum blossom and clouds scudding across unsettled skies. This is paint and landscape in motion. It is restless, but also held in check. It spills over the outline of the pots, but only just. ‘It is not a revery’, O’Hare is keen to point out. Her pastoral is much murkier than that.

Portraits, more explicitly, appear too. They are rendered with equal imprecision, though some are more defined than others. Mostly they amount to little more than an amalgam of smudges, a rough outline, a hint of a single figure, sometimes two. The face of a bearded man emerges from *Kings Hill* (2022), naked lovers in *For a Moment I Lost Myself* (2022), two young girls in 18th century garb melt in to the background in *Daughters After Gainsborough* (2023), and the face of a green woman fills the surface of her container in *Solitudes* (2021). Sometimes the pots disappear completely such as in *Garden* (2023) where the pot is replaced by another container, a child’s head roughly described in red sketchy outline. A few times, a single lamb appears. But again, I wonder if O’Hare sees these as psychological stand-ins for human vulnerability, innocence and loneliness. These animal bodies, like their human counterparts, are absorbed, little distinguished, from the landscapes they inhabit, making me think of the myth of Daphne transforming into a tree, the stories of Green Man, and to images of Ana Mendieta’s *Silueta* series like *Imagen de Yagul* (1973) in which the artist’s body merges with its surroundings.

O’Hare’s containers become overwhelmed by the landscapes and portraits that they subsume. These containers don’t contain within, but without. Their surfaces magnetise. As I look, miscellanies of artists swim around my head; Peter Doig, Agnes Denes, Ivan Seal, Giorgio Morandi, Francisco de Zurbarán, Mohammed Sami, Duncan Grant, John Constable, Rachel Busby. And on and on. Sometimes her references are more overt either in her titles (like *Daughters After Gainsborough*), or a name scrawled in paint (‘Blake’), or because they stem from painted sketches on pages torn from old art catalogues, like *In a Shoreham Garden* (2022). Whether in her sketches or paintings, images of figures and landscapes feel like sites of displacement where past memories, current feelings, and art-historical echoes are gathered. In her gathering, a convergence happens: one thing is seen as an echo of something else, which reminds you of something else in turn and something else again. Pot becomes figure; landscape becomes pot; figure becomes landscape. Fictional and remembered stories, as well as images from the history of art and film merge, absorbed and then channeled through her container for the ‘container for the thing contained’. Or as Le Guin puts it, ‘the tool that brings energy home’. O’Hare sees this all this as a kind of ‘rewilding’: she gathers seeds from the past, stores them and recultivates them, watching as a new bank of ideas takes hold.

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<sup>1</sup>Ursula Le Guin, ‘The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction’ in *Dancing at the Edge of the World* (1989). The title of this text is also a reference to Le Guin.