

# THE DISTANCE BETWEEN US

Ruby Swinney

24 April- 5 June, 2021

*We are proud to announce our first solo exhibition with Ruby Swinney (1992, South Africa) with the meaningful title 'The Distance Between Us'*

*Distance: dis-stare "stand apart"; destance "discord, quarrel"*

Like an image developing on photographic paper, Ruby Swinney's paintings seem to emerge from the white silk of their canvases. The ghostly figures and landscapes, as intricate as they appear, are simply an encounter between light and shadow. Each painting is a monochromatic exploration of colour as much as it is a worlding: rusted purple, raspberry, green teal, blue. They are not constructions—they are barely paintings. In fact, Swinney has said, she doesn't consider herself a painter: her technique is more influenced by printmaking. Over the paintbrush she prefers tiny cotton buds, with which she can remove paint as readily as apply it. Printmakers are painters who operate in the negative space, in the absence of things.



*Stairs, 2021, oil on silk, 105 x 55 x 5 cm, courtesy WHAT IF THE WORLD & AKINCI*

Each painting is then a dialectic between presence and absence, a value and a non-value. In a sense they represent an argument between paint and non-paint as much as they do the image made from them. According to Heidegger to 'touch' is impossible; even if the distance between us is equal to zero there is always already something held back, concealed. In *Waterfall* two entities stand apart, and yet the whited waterfall, which envelopes the one, takes on all the significance of an attempt to touch, love, explain to the other. Swinney creates other worlds painted with such intensity that they do—in this 'other sense' or 'non'-sense—'touch' the viewer. The elderly couple holding hands in *Stairs* are whited out, their absence shows a not-touch, a removed touch. The paintings rather inspire an emergence of feeling, an archaeology of intimacy.

In *Strand*, untouching, two figures walk along a beach. One leans on a walking stick, the other is upright, young. Surrounded by dense trees there is a quiet intimacy between them – and yet this is not 'told'. The shadows and towering building intrude on them. It is the insignificance, the tininess of their intimacy in the face of such an oversized structure, which moves us. Perhaps the poignancy of Swinney's work is a product of an anxiety one feels on seeing human life so juxtaposed with the *longue durée* often represented by architecture or nature. The modern buildings, Victorian fountains, parks and walkways portrayed allude to a passing of history, but a history that is outside of the paintings. They all inhabit an obscure time, a middle space between utopia and dystopia.

The title of this show is "The Distance Between Us", and in this manner the pronoun 'us' invites me and you, the viewers, in, while at the same time it excludes us from a more personal and insular 'us'—the pronoun shared by lovers and friends—in which something is concealed from outsiders, kept outside of the paintings. In *Mangroves* a man and a woman walk away in different frames, mirroring each other. Separated, but in what looks like the same location. With their backs to us, they are faceless, unidentifiable others. The viewpoint given to us is the first person, as though we were intruding on what appears to be a private moment. There is a context that remains mysterious, a secrecy that is essential to any intimacy.

The large panelled work, *Concerning Plants*, shows a central ghostly figure turning to ether, others dissipate like white mist; they all transcend into light or are annihilated by the silk. The lower panel shows two such figures repeating the motif of walking symmetrically away; on the flanking panels, the same image is mirrored of a blanched figure flaming into a tangle of mangroves, subsumed by the environment. This kind of mirroring, another discord between two, recurs throughout the exhibition. Both the diptych and triptych, for example, are exploited for this same specular purpose rather than to indicate narrative.

Swinney has acknowledged the influence of Lacan's mirror-stage on her work, the point at which the infant (re) cognises the self as another among others. Like the child whose hand only touches the cold glass of a mirror, the paintings seem to recognise solitude as what unifies us in the world. They are always from this point of absolute subjectivity as a mode of self-erasure, what Primo Levi called the shame of being a person: the persistent facelessness of figures seems to become a mode of self-cancellation. It is instead in colour that we find the self-sublimated. The rendering of environs in a single concentration of purple makes the vegetation seem overwhelming, even omnipotent; the two figures are swallowed by the mangroves. An intensity of colour, like Rothko, becomes a world drenched in the self. The vegetation and verdure becomes the greatest omission from the work: the face of the artist.

*Since graduating from the Michaelis School of Fine Arts in 2015, Ruby Swinney (b. 1992) has hosted two solo exhibitions with WHATIFTHEWORLD: Hold Still in 2019 and Ignis Fatuus in 2017. She has also held her solo exhibition Human Nature at Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Arts Africa (MOCAA), in Cape Town. In 2021, she will be hosting a solo exhibition with AKINCI Gallery in Amsterdam, where in 2018 she formed part of the group show, Let's Talk about Nature.*

Text by Noah Swinney.