

Lisa Milroy: a Correspondence

30.06.2023

Despite never having read Marcel Proust's seven-volume opus *À la recherche du temps perdu*, I know a bit about its opening 'madeleine moment' – in which biting into a tea-soaked sponge involuntarily conjures a deluge of childhood memories previously locked up in a mental vault. I just discovered, for instance, that in the novel's first draft, it was a tartine – a slice of bread spread with jam – and an early editor suggested the more memorable, plump little scallop cakes instead.



Install shot: Lisa Milroy, *Correspondence* at Kate MacGarry gallery. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

Well, that editor has just earned himself an invite to my fantasy dinner party, where he would be seated next to the artist Lisa Milroy. Her current exhibition 'Correspondence' at Kate MacGarry is about objects and our myriad associations with them. Like Proust's editor, she has an eye for miraculous little knick knacks. I'd

make sure everything on the night was immaculate, just-so, so she felt right at home (I'm thinking along the lines of her neat rows of plates, upon which would be sticky sculpted Japanese sweets for dessert, complemented by plenty of stories.)



Lisa Milroy, *Detached*, 2012. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

‘Correspondence’ is not about food, but it is an invitation à table, to consider a group of objects together as per a set of agreed social codes. A large canvas of similarly sized rocks arranged in a grid suggests a museum cabinet drawer. ‘Tabletop 1’ might well remind you of helping out your granddad in his shed and seeing all his strange tools heaped on the worksurface. Meanwhile, ‘Outfit No. 1’ – thick, exacting paint enacting the thick, chevroned wool on a red cardigan – suggests a walk-in wardrobe. In each case, the neutral backgrounds seem to say, let’s have a look, then; let’s hold these things in mind for a moment. As a painter of objects designed to be used and handled, Milroy is generously light-handed.



Lisa Milroy, *Tabletop No. 1*, 2014. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

The day I visit the exhibition the sun is shining down through the gallery's large skylight on the backwall illuminating a painting called 'Detached' (2012), which shows the constituent parts of a white shirt sitting on a white background. It's a smart title, and yet for all its neat-and-completeness, the painting is remarkably *undetached*: stripped of any mediating factors, such as irony, value-judgement, colour, light – even the shadows could be a designer's 'drop shadow' – there is all the more room for the viewer to approach the canvas with the fullness of her life's experience and have a madeleine-Milroy moment all her own. While I continue to wait on RSVPs from the rest of my fantasy dinner party guests, Milroy and I got to work on the next best thing: a correspondence of our own – in this case, email.

Sammi Gale

Could you talk about the title *Correspondence*?

Lisa Milroy

Correspondence brings together paintings from the 1980s to the present to explore the parameters of still life and the human relationship with objects. The exhibition demonstrates my interest in how objects can spark associations, leading the viewer away from the object through a web of poetically-charged connections and memories – at the same time, keeping the viewer focused on the object through its visual and material presence rendered in paint. This looping interplay between the materiality of an object and its correspondent associations embodies a tension that can be expressed through duality: ‘knowing / not knowing’, ‘having / lacking or losing’, ‘presence / absence’ - key critical perspectives that have come to define my practice.



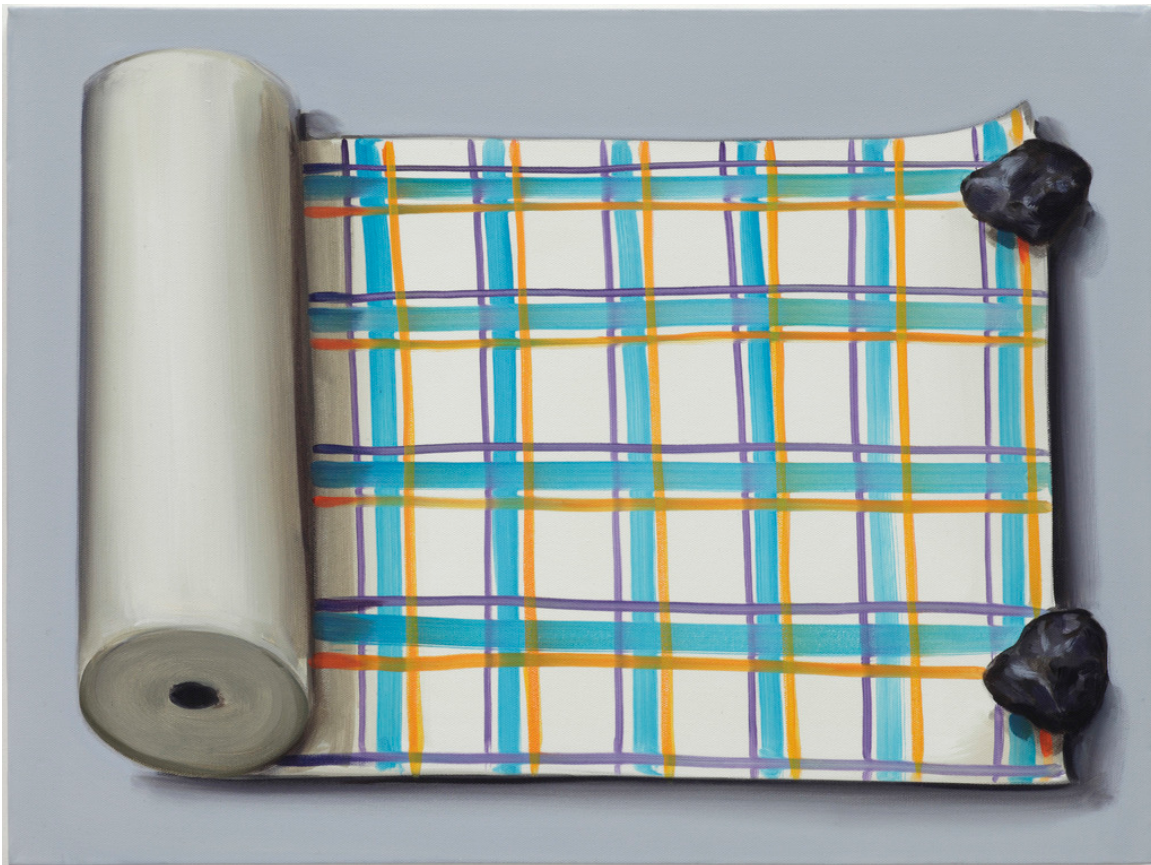
Install shot: Lisa Milroy, *Correspondence* at Kate MacGarry gallery. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

SG

Could you say something about the game ‘rock, paper, scissors’, and the appearance of those objects here?

LM

There is a playful underlying theme in the exhibition that refers to the game of 'rock paper scissors' (object, image, tool). By association 'rock' becomes pigment, 'paper' suggests canvas and 'scissors' the paintbrush, the impact of one on another igniting imaginative and material transformation, generating possibilities for correspondence between things. The paintings also feature imagery of rocks, paper and scissors, evoking the actions of cutting, folding and placing – all objects that have featured in a range of my paintings over time.



Lisa Milroy, *Two Rocks*, 2009. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

SG

There is a history of using still life paintings as a reflection of wealth. More recently, there is something more modest-seeming about still lives. I'm curious where you think these works sit on that spectrum and how precious these objects are to you?

LM

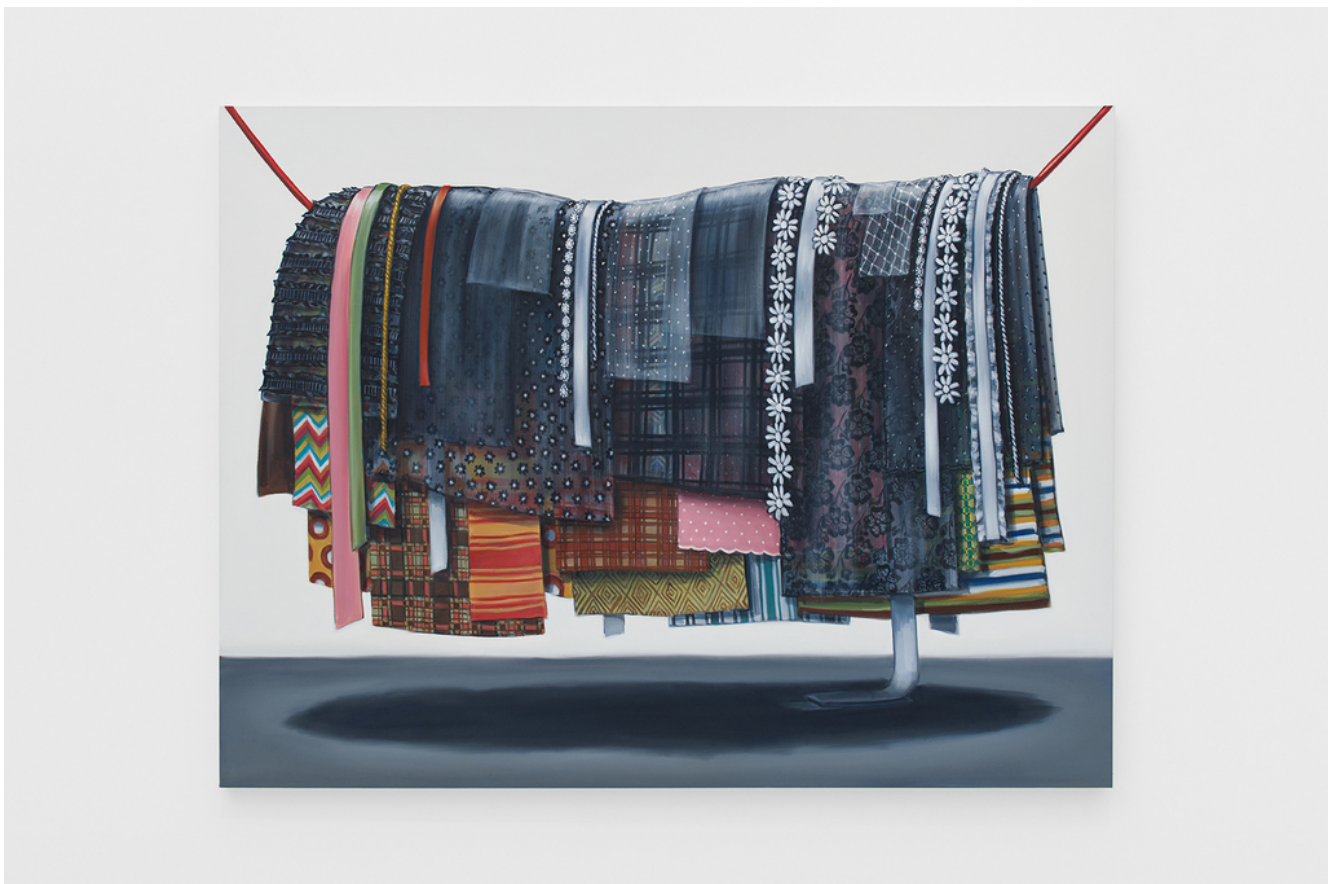
When I came to London in 1979 to start my studies at art school, one of my assignments on my foundation course was simply to draw an object I loved. I chose a seashell that I'd brought with me from my favourite beach in my hometown Vancouver. The seashell was a beautiful object to look at, stirring in me the desire to describe it through drawing. But it also triggered contradictory emotions – the seashell churned up a sense of happiness to be connected to a place I loved while sadly reminding me that I was far away from it. However, while drawing the seashell my homesickness withdrew, giving rise to the affirmative pleasure and enjoyment found in making. In looking at my completed drawing, I remember how surprised I was to discover a feeling of mingled presence and absence embodied in the image.



Install shot: Lisa Milroy, *Correspondence* at Kate MacGarry gallery. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

This proved highly motivating, and I went on to look for other objects that catalysed in me a similar sense of connection and disconnection, presence and loss – everyday objects that held both a sense of vacancy and emptiness alongside fullness and the potential for inhabitation, which I could use as the basis for my drawing and painting. In this respect, my approach to still life could be seen to

speak to the Vanitas tradition in European art history – except that I’m on the side of pleasure! In modern and contemporary terms, my approach to still life speaks to the use of ordinary objects through the lens of Cubism, Pop art and certain forms of Conceptual art. To note, Édouard Manet (1832-83) is one of my favourite most influential painters and as Ann Gallagher points out in her wonderful text ‘The Nature of Things’ written to accompany my exhibition, one fifth of Manet’s output was still life painting!



Lisa Milroy, *Some Endings*, 2022-23. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

SG

Correspondence contains paintings of different fabrics, items of clothing and outfit ideas. Could you say something about your relationship to fashion?

LM

Clothing and shoes were among my favourite objects to paint in the 1980s and have stayed with me as recurrent motifs in a range of paintings ever since.

I'm interested in how fashion speaks to ways in which a person may construct their sense of identity, identity as something that's core yet always on the move, changing with time. But it's the subject of clothing that really fascinates me, in terms of making and craft - the way clothes are put together or how they come apart in different clothing histories and approaches around the world. How clothing speaks to textiles, pattern and colour. The emotional value of garments, how clothes and shoes have a private inside and a public outside, and how they offer forms of protection, use and display linked to ceremony and ritual. How they can act like souvenirs or poignant markers of time. And how clothing and shoes key the human body, presence as well as absence. Clothing and shoes can become such rich metaphors depicted in painting!



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SG

Could you talk about your use of the grid, as in *Rocks*, versus a more scattered approach in *Tabletop No. 1*, both from different decades?

LM

The grid and the random scatter became the two basic compositional structures that defined my object paintings of the 1980s and continue to remain of interest to me. In the 1980s, these two compositional modes opened up different mind-sets in light of how I could engage with painting. For the grid approach, I had to carefully measure the dimensions of the grid across the canvas using a measuring tape and pencil – it was mathematically geared, and I had to follow a set of measurement rules to arrive at the 'right' result. The scatter approach relied more on an intuitive sense of ordering. Nothing was measured and I simply felt my way across the canvas to achieve a feeling of 'rightness' of where things should be placed. Both approaches needed a vital sense of rhythm and flow, each on their own terms.

I considered the grid and scatter in my work a binary or duality that also mirrored oppositional forces within me, for example, dutiful/dissolute, regulated/chaotic, good/bad. My approach to painting based on still life has been defined by a binary structure from the outset, the term 'still life' itself suggestive of a fundamental oppositional pairing in painting: stillness and movement. Since my art school days in the early 1980s, my work has turned on dualities, of presence/absence, here/there, connection/disconnection, same/different, individual/group, loss/non-loss, object/image.



Install shot: Lisa Milroy, *Correspondence* at Kate MacGarry gallery. Photo: Michael Brzezinski.

I find the transition from one state to its counterpart in any duality very intriguing. I love to ponder over the point at which the present becomes the past, or when a feeling of connectedness dissolves and a disconnect takes over. What happens in between? I imagine a gap or liminal space somehow situated between two opposites, charged with an energy that binds them together.

However, Ann Gallagher suggested in her text 'The Nature of Things' that the scattered composition in my work is in fact a *disrupted grid* (my italics), to me, implying that the scatter is not separate from the grid but lies within it. Ann's insight was a revelation! Through it, in my mind I've begun to dissolve a linear kind of division between opposites perpetuated over the years, to cultivate a sense of how opposites may exist more as a rounded totality while maintaining difference. And I'm growing curious about disruptive energy in painting. I wonder what kind of paintings

I'll now go on to make, fuelled by this fresh new sense of dualities and the oppositional!

Lisa Milroy

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By Sammi Gale