

Artist of the week

Artist of the week 56: Lisa Milroy

Lisa Milroy doesn't like to call herself an artist, but her powerful still-lives and ever-changing style mark her out as a true contemporary talent



Objects of consumerism ... Lisa Milroy's Shoes (1987). Photograph: Alan Cristea Gallery

Jessica Lack

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With a career spanning 20 years and several changes in style, Lisa Milroy first gained recognition in the 1980s for her object paintings, a series of highly stylised inanimate objects set against white backgrounds. In these, rows of patent leather shoes exuded a sultry, polished newness; ugly charity-shop vases were painted with the dull lustre of clay; and light bulbs were neatly arranged as if laid out on the table of a hardware shop. Surprisingly, the results were oppressive – they didn't celebrate consumerism and wealth so much as the nerdy compulsiveness of a collector. Later paintings, like her portraits of tanned blond-haired girls, were more in keeping with the aspirational consumer society of the 80s, enthralled by glossy magazine adverts. Wearing Ray-Bans, with peroxide hair swept back, the subjects epitomised upper-class privilege.

These images were superseded almost immediately by Milroy's series of sketchy comic-strip-style canvases, inspired by Japanese ukiyo-e. Depicting geishas

performing domestic tasks, they were far removed from her previous work. Such a fluid approach to style suggests that Milroy's work is governed by her interest in technique and love of paint, yet she shied from calling herself an artist until very recently, saying it was a job description best confined to her passport.

Born in Canada in 1959, Milroy studied briefly at the Paris-Sorbonne University before coming to London to study at St Martin's School of Art and Goldsmiths. Her decision to leave Canada was a compulsion; she says she was enticed by her love of art history, her Ukrainian roots and a desire to continue the travelling she had done as a child visiting extended family across Canada.

Her career took off relatively quickly after graduating from Goldsmiths in 1982. Her work was included in a show at the Serpentine in 1984 and bought by Saatchi not long afterwards, appearing in his Saatchi Gift to the Tate in 1992. Milroy's new exhibition is called *Life on the Line* and is, for Milroy, a kind of personal retrospective.

Why we like her: For the intensely unsettling painting *Room* (1997), which depicts a traditional Japanese interior. Painted in a subdued palette of greys, greens, browns and white, the neat and orderly rows of cupboards and shelves do nothing to quieten the viewer's unease, brought on by its repressive atmosphere and lack of human presence.

At heart she's a frustrated: Nurse. As a child she loved the Cherry Ames nurse stories, and in her teens worked as a candy-striper volunteer in a local hospital.

Weirdest art experience: Being commissioned to paint a portrait of a dog and discovering the dog was more at ease with the project than she was. The final painting was commended for capturing the dog's personality, but criticised for making him look too ancient. So she repainted some of the grey fur black, which seemed to do the trick.