

Blog interview, Mimei Thompson show 2013

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**[Mimei Thompson talks to Alli Sharma at Art First Projects, London W1](#)**



Dead Fly, 2013

**Alli Sharma:** We're here at your exhibition, in front of the work. So what came first? I recognize some of the cave paintings?

**Mimei Thompson:** The two small caves came first, and this one of the fly. Most of the other works in the show are from the last six months. This larger cave is a new painting but the

series has been ongoing for a couple of years. I was interested in the cave motif being connected to the unconscious, and the idea of it being a place where you could retreat to and come out changed. Or it could be the inside of a body.



Cave Painting 2013

**AS:** Tell me about your fascination with insects.

**MT:** I have a huge interest in insects. They're easily overlooked, or looked at with disgust, but on the other hand, they're incredible. One of my main fascinations with insects is their use of metamorphosis. I was thinking about the cocoon as being like a cave, a place of transformation. With some insect metamorphoses, the larva will liquefy within the cocoon, and reform from this liquid into the adult, and I think about this in relation to painting; there is potential in the substance of paint to become anything. So, in the works, there is this shifting, transformative matter that can morph into different forms and blur the boundaries between animal, vegetable and mineral.

**AS:** These marks here are literally swirling up to form a *Green Man*.

**MT:** I like these paintings together because you can see the suggestions of *Green Man* in *Buddleia*. I simplified the way I think about my practice recently. I identified a few things both conceptually, and to do with the technique, that have become fixed points. Working with a really smooth, white non-absorbent ground and working fast with mostly translucent paint. In painting, it can feel like there are so many possible things you can do. For a long time everything was very open, but in the last few years I feel like I have narrowed it down a bit.



Green Man, 2013



Buddleia, 2013

**AS:** I wanted to ask you about the surface because the paint looks iridescent, almost as if the support itself could be transparent.

**MT:** Getting the working surface right seems to be a lot of it. It must be non-absorbent. It's a pre-primed, thin, fine grained cotton, primed a few times with layers of gesso, sanded and then I add a few layers of acrylic primer to stop the absorbency. I like the almost plastic feel. Then I use a lot of Liquin in the oil paint. It makes the shape hold. If I used oil it would spread. So it makes the oil function a bit more like acrylic.



Pavement Tree, 2013

**AS:** So that's how you get that edge to the marks. The way you move the brush around to make organic shapes really suits the subject matter.

**MT:** I was interested in the natural shape brushmarks take, as if they might have grown. There is a trace of something real in the world, like the surrealists used to do with their rubbings and different techniques, for instance, Max Ernst's scraping technique he uses in his forests. My marks are then emphasized because I give them highlights and shadows, so the marks themselves, as well as being traces, might exist as objects within a represented space.

**AS:** Do you work on a painting all in one go?

**MT:** I work on it in one go and then go back, so there is one layer of working which is really fast and then I go back to it over a couple of months, working in a detailed way, and sometimes I knock it all back again, or sometimes it goes too far and I have to abandon the work. I want that fresh feeling, but then you can also see that it's been worked into. So there is a contrast between something spontaneous and something studied and detailed. I like that contrast.

**AS:** I love your *Asparagus*, they always make me think of Manet.

**MT:** That was the starting point, and then I got the exhibition title *Lunar Asparagus* from the Max Ernst sculpture. I can't remember if the title came before the paintings. Within the show, the asparagus paintings bring some calmness and simplicity to the hang, and they have a distilled version of the mark making.



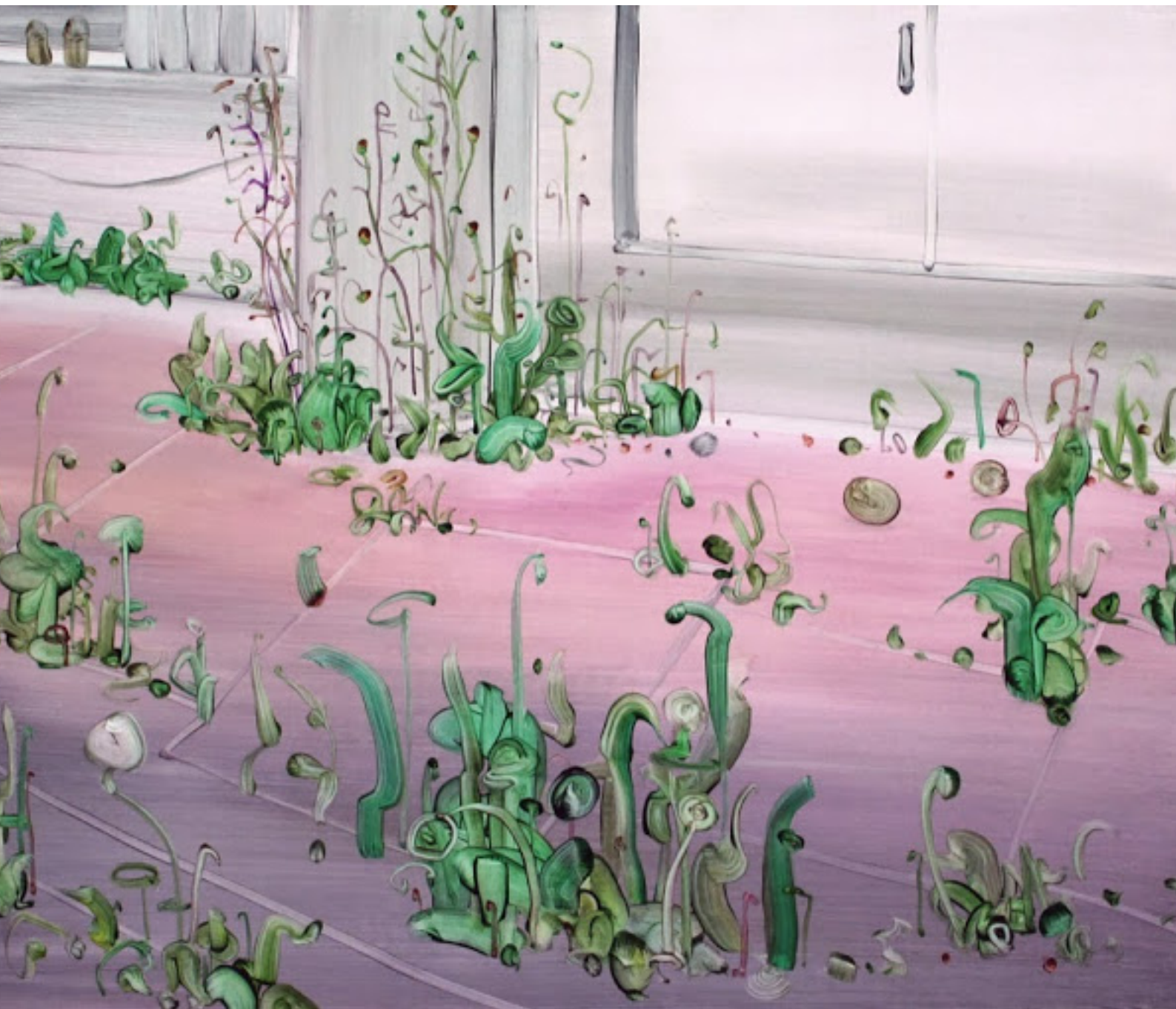
Asparagus, 2013

**AS:** You seem to have also developed a signature palette. Does your use of transparent colours limit what you can use?

**MT:** I suppose the colours I am drawn to tend to be transparent; I really like Hookers Green and Paynes Grey. Then in the detailed working I do use opaque paint, too.

**AS:** Do you start with an image?

**MT:** I always start with an image, or collage of images. The weeds are from photos I've taken between my house and the studio. I was interested in looking at neglected corners, with the idea of finding something transformative in the everyday.



Weeds (Forecourt), 2013

**AS:** There is so much space generated in the paintings.

**MT:** The baroque marks need to have space around them and the very simple illusions of depth help

**AS:** In contrast to say Andy Harper, who uses a similar technique but fills every inch of the canvas with marks.

**MT:** Yes, Harper uses a similar kind of mark making, but the work is about a different kind of sublime, I think.

I'm often drawn to something a bit mundane. That's why I like the fly. It undermines certain traditional notions of romance or nature. A sense of humour is also important to me, and I want my work to have a bit of air to breathe. It feels good at the moment, like a pause after many years of struggle and confusion.

**AS:** Maybe you just understand your own language and recognize that.

**MT:** I hope so, and I'm more relaxed about it. There are things I want to develop but I don't feel the need to change everything.

**Mimei Thompson** is exhibiting at [Art First Projects](#), 21 Eastcastle St, London W1W 8DD until 16 November 2013