

In the mood for God:

Colour and mysticism in the art of Mary Swanzy

By John Christopher Vaughan

'Then, from his place of ambush, God leapt out'.¹

- 'Imaginary Career', Rainer Maria Rilke.

According to her passport² she stood five foot seven inches tall, had a large forehead, grey eyes, a small pointed nose, a small mouth, a normal chin, brown hair, a fair complexion, an oval face, but no special peculiarities. She traveled widely and mostly on her own. For this she stood out. She was an Aquarius. She presented herself to the Aliens Office. She saw Paris, Prague, Dubrovnik, Bratislava. She saw Haiti, Samoa, Hawaii, Sarajevo. Four days. Thirty days. However many days she could afford. She stayed with friends and family. She went to Italy between wars because it was cheap. She ate when she remembered to. She was not wealthy. She tried to sell out, God love her, but her attempts at commercial illustrations were, in the words of a brutally honest acquaintance, 'rather ludicrous and sometimes downright bad'.³ She said: 'The best drawings are good bad'.⁴

She didn't settle down until she was in her forties, and even then she didn't really settle down. Her insatiable curiosity, zealously pursued, lent a peripatetic rhythm to her life and to her work, so much so that her passports, when so arranged, blitz beautifully across the table in multicolour, divulging with pride the variegated impressions left on them by the world, showing

¹ R. M. Rilke, *Ahead of All Parting*, ed. Stephen Mitchell, Modern Library, USA, 1995, p. 13.

² Mary Swanzy Passports, 1915-1965, ESB CSIA Archive IE NGI/IA/MUR2/1/6/1-5

³ Dermot O'Brien, Palette and Plough, Browne and Nolan, 1948, p. 125, cited in S Kissane, *Voyages*, IMMA, 2018, p. 32

⁴ Una Lehane, Interview with the artist, *The Irish Times*, 14/03/1977

a life in transit, a spirit in transport: pink stamps (Slovakia), black circular stamps (Croatia), purple stamps (France and Deutschland); blue crescent stamps (London), faded purple (Sarajevo), blue black (Czech Republic). Her stylistic range was astounding, incorporating elements of Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism, sometimes all in the one painting. She was criticised for being over-influenced by a number of schools and movements.

She said: 'I am interested in everything that is life, every manifestation of life, and in all the mad things people do'.⁵ She exhibited irregularly. She seemed to introduce herself to the public again and again, reinvented and unmatched, each time with a new vision and a new vocabulary with which to express it. In her old age her arthritis got so bad she had to tape paint brushes to her fingers. She was frugal (she *was* Irish). The heating was never on. She read the *Financial Times* in a cold house. When she died, in London, in 1978, there was a work-in-progress on her easel. She was 96. At a friend's house for dinner, she once pursued a single grain of rice around the plate for a long time before capturing it. She couldn't bear to waste it, she said, because it was so delicious.⁶

There is no typical Mary Swanzy painting, no easy introduction to her oeuvre. Sometimes there are men and women, seen at a distance, bent over the land, hard at work or in repose. Sometimes there are animals, chimeras, monsters, sexless and swaggering and scary as animations. There are landscapes. Often there are the soles of feet, creased and pale, anonymous and upturned. Often the people they belong to have fallen to their knees in prayer. High-definition puddles, flat as screens. Still lives, portraits, cityscapes, dreamscapes, nightmares, religious scenes. She was born in Dublin in 1882, a fact worth mentioning primarily because it casts her interests and concerns in a stark and lonely light. She was the daughter of a 'Sir'. She didn't limit herself to the sphere of interests reserved for a woman of her time or

⁵ Una Lehane, Interview with the artist, *The Irish Times*, 14/03/1977

⁶ Terrence de Vere White, 1973, accessed at the Mary Swanzy Archive.

position; she probably didn't think of herself as a woman of her time. She seems rarely to have thought of herself, ever, least of all while she was painting.

If, as Simone Weil wrote⁷, absolute unmixed attention is prayer, then Swanzy's early landscapes are the hallucinatory consequences of a prolonged and extreme attention, directed outward. They are prayers rendered in paint, prayers without object, without end. Just as prayers are not meant for human ears, her landscapes are not meant for human eyes, eyes which want to leave their sockets in order to make sense of what they see: woodlands slashed seven ways by a storm, the formal complexity of plants intersecting with convex trees, exploding crystals, flaming panels of light. If they are confusing to look at or difficult to grasp, that is because they are pictures of God as our comprehension fails to grasp him. The only thing we can know about God, wrote Simone Weil⁸, is that he is what we are not.

In *Cubism, Futurism, and Constructivism*, J. M. Nash writes: 'It is a paradox of much cubist painting [...] that though it is often hard to know what is represented, or even where it is meant to be, that unknown uncertain object is undeniably tangible'.⁹ At once ordered and discordant, refractory, repetitive, Cubism gave Swanzy the tools to express herself in a way that was not altogether human. Surfaces are celebrated for the countless ways there are of looking at them, as a creeping thing would, a flying thing, a thing utterly without name or place. In 1914 she exhibited some cubist landscapes at the Salon des Beaux Arts alongside Robert and Sofia Delauney, contemporaries whose concept of 'simultanism' would have greatly interested Swanzy. Simultanism 'experimented with the concurrent presentation of elements from different places, multiple points of view, radically disconnected segments of time, and separate media'.¹⁰

⁷ Simone Weil, 'Attention and Will', *Simone Weil Anthology*, Penguin, London, 1986, p.232.

⁸ S Weil, 'Attention and Will', *Simone Weil Anthology*, Penguin, 1986, p.236.

⁹ J. M. Nash, *Cubism, Futurism, and Constructivism*, London, Thames & Hudson, 1974, p.19.

¹⁰ Josh Alvizu, 'Simultaneous (simultaneisme)', *Routledge*, 2016, <Simultaneism (simultanéisme) - Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism> accessed 10/09/2023.

These are landscapes in revolt, rejecting the unchecked claim of one dominant point of view. A new kind of viewer is needed to take several points of view at once. Oblivion. In *French River Landscape* (1920) the viewer is absorbed and scattered mathematically, conveyed along lines that intersect and converge, thicken, depart. The viewer is distributed like dew across six pointed mountain peaks. The viewer cascades at an angle of 90 degrees down the mountain's serrated edge. The viewer is in the eye of a raindrop, hurtling through what is seen. The viewer is destroyed. There are a million points of entry, a million turning points and no escape. Oblivion.

She said: 'I find that when I get absorbed in a painting I forget all about putting on the potatoes'.¹¹ There is the sense that they demanded to be painted, that she had no choice, that she painted lost, liberated. Perhaps she painted to get lost. Simone Weil writes longingly about 'the beauty of a landscape just at the moment when nobody is looking at it, absolutely nobody... To see a landscape as it is when I am not there'.¹² This is the moment Mary Swanzy sought to give by stepping back. Simone Weil again: 'We do nothing if we have not first drawn back'.¹³ First the rush forward by stepping back, all the way, straight in, then surrender like death, then falling up.

Audiences were a little baffled by Swanzy's offerings. A critic for the *Irish Times* wrote: 'I can recognise neither shape nor colour nor nature in them, nor can I see any beauty in this vision of hers'.¹⁴ 'Recognise' is a wonderfully telling word choice here. This was in 1921. James Joyce had just published *Ulysses*, serially, in *The Little Review*. In a few years Virginia Woolf would publish *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*, her own modernist masterpieces. Artists were moving away from realism, linearity and representation, embracing instead a multidirectional, fragmented form of expression that better reflected contemporary life. It is ugly because it is

¹¹ Una Lehane, Interview with the artist, *The Irish Times*, 14/03/1977.

¹² S Weil, quoted in the foreword, *Simone Weil Anthology*, Penguin, 1986, p. xii.

¹³ S Weil, 'Attention and Will', *Simone Weil Anthology*, Penguin, 1986, p.232.

¹⁴ Stephen Quinn, *The Irish Times*, 1921.

new, Gertrude Stein famously said, herself an acquaintance of Swanzy's in Paris. And these paintings were definitely new – they still are – because they reveal a nature which has not been tamed or curtailed, not yet made a clown of, not recognisable at all. Rather than describe the world to us for our safe enjoyment, they awaken, then release the natural world back into our domain, where it springs out of the frame as from a trap, like something fast, alive and loose.

Exuberant depictions of a world in constant motion point towards the fear of a world fixed and known, immutable, dulled, never to change or offer the chance to change. It is worth noting that the bulk of her cubist-inspired work was produced in transit, during the 20s and 30s¹⁵, and their compelling energy and rhythm is derived in part from the artist's boundless capacity for fascination. Trees appear in blizzards, as if seen from a speeding train, or else marching like slow giants through snow. In a letter to her friend, the painter Sarah Purser, Mary Swanzy wrote: 'Did you ever feel that you wanted to go to Java?'¹⁶ She always did, and she always went. And she always dared you to join her. In Honolulu she sat and sketched for hours in the shade. She drew Samoan women, working in the tall grass, stripped to the waist with white blossoms in their hair. In Czechoslovakia she saw the black Tatra Mountains and in the markets she saw geese stretching lazily from wicker baskets. In London, painting fruit, she looked up and saw the planes advancing over the city. She painted them small, two quick black flicks, like flies banging noisily against the glass.

Hers was a fleeting step, passerine, direct, and puzzling to many. A photograph of the artist seated in a garden shows a small bird momentarily perched on her headrest, its entire body a blur. It is in the abrupt, startling manner of a bird posing a question that I hear her ask: 'Did you ever feel that you wanted to go to Java?' or 'Don't you want to explore Ceylon with me in your car?'¹⁷ Somehow there doesn't seem to be time for an answer, only haste, movement,

¹⁵ Sean Kissane, *Voyages*, IMMA, 2018, p.198.

¹⁶ J Campbell, 1986, cited in L. Cullinane 'Mary Swanzy Biography', *Voyages*, IMMA, 2018, p.198.

¹⁷ Letter to S. Purser and M. Manning, August 1924, National Library, Dublin, cited in *Voyages*, IMMA, 2018, p. 196.

flight. The critic Liz Cullinane, who is working on a biography of Swanzy, writes that she didn't expect to live long.¹⁸ The void was ever present, there wasn't a moment to lose. Like her tightrope walker in *Above the City* (1959), she was strung between worlds, both aerial and earthbound, and the effect could be vertiginous, one always informing or distorting the other. In that work, onlookers lean out of grimy windows and gaze up at the androgynous figure, who, with arms raised high, manages the dangerous feat with a kind of fascinated disbelief.

Down below in the city, in the crush and bustle (to use Samuel Beckett's scarified phrase) is where a lot of her later work is set, amidst the glare of headlights and cigarette butts, last orders, beggars, phantoms, lovers. In *Taxi* (1950s) a pale woman shaped like a thumb opens her mouth and hollers while her companion waits, angrily twirling a parasol. In *Figures drinking* (1950s) round-faced buffoons guffaw and puff their cheeks like tipsy cherubim. Swanzy's depictions of city life – modern life, staged life – are harsh and violent; the figures in them often appear trapped, frightened and forlorn, like rag dolls abruptly dropped into the frame by a distracted Victorian child. The titular chanteuse in *The Opera Singer* (1944) could have walked straight out of a Jean Rhys story, with her ghoulish make-up and cheap hairdo, spilling her guts to an indifferent crowd.

More sinister scenes appear in *Roundabout* (1966) where high-heeled devils skip gleefully into a packed dungeon cell, dancing their terrified prisoners in with them while those inside try desperately to escape. A boy angel blows a trumpet, black pterodactyls gather squawking to the left, and in front of them, staring out, is a horned beast with glowing eyes. A tree-stump blooms into a saw-toothed maw in *Strange World* (1960s) devouring a figure garlanded with red hissing serpents, while birds with the bald heads of fish stare hungrily from the sidelines. A dark greenish tinge spreads itself over everything, making the hellish scenes

¹⁸ Conal Thomas, 'A Hunt for the Missing Artworks of Mary Swanzy', *dublininquirer.com*, *Dublin Inquirer* 2018/5/16, accessed 1/09/2023.

seem active, mutant and real, like cancerous growths forming quickly on the skin of someone dreaming of fallout.

Much fuss has been made of the difficulty which her reluctance to title and date her work has made every concerted effort at systematising it, cataloging it, fixing it in a tidy chronological arc – but this ignores the fact that she remained skeptical of systems and movements all her life, resisting them deliberately and troubling them by her very presence. Her omissions were acts of generosity and abundance. By not naming her paintings, she names the viewer as co-painter, as if she were handing us the brush and saying, Now, take it from here.

‘These paintings are hanging on somebody’s wall,’¹⁹ said Sean Kissane, the man responsible for her mammoth retrospective at *IMMA* in 2018. Kissane was scouring the city for a glut of Swanzy’s lost Samoan paintings, which had been passed from hand to hand over the years, gleefully evading the greedy clutches of museums like a cloud of ne’er-do-well sprites, making hard work for curators in the process. ‘There are at least twelve more kicking around, probably’.²⁰ Kicking around, like a bunch of truants killing time in a car park, wondering if anyone misses them. Fugitive, changeable, difficult to pin down, scattered – and, evidently, still moving – it’s as if Mary Swanzy herself lives on in the chase, in the art, *her* art, of straying.

Her work – abstract compositions, fantastical landscapes, collages, mirages, spilling from canvas to canvas – resists neat summary or definition. Every standard she set she broke or surpassed or, risking discomfort, dove deeper into. Mary Swanzy championed a kind of fever of influence without ever completely committing to any one style, or ever really abandoning them. No *impression* is ever permanent with her. There is only the *permanence* of impressions.

¹⁹Conal Thomas, ‘A Hunt for the Missing Artworks of Mary Swanzy’, *dublininquirer.com*, *Dublin Inquirer* 2018/5/16, accessed 1/09/2023.

²⁰Conal Thomas, ‘A Hunt for the Missing Artworks of Mary Swanzy’, *dublininquirer.com*, *Dublin Inquirer* 2018/5/16, accessed 1/09/2023.

She lived through world wars, civil wars, revolutions, and she seems never to have been persuaded either way. Through every painting, no matter how different in style or subject, it is the same pair of eyes that are piercing, sorting, coming to terms with that which is, which was, and which is to come. Then as now, it was a time utterly without a point. Those who moved through it did so not by maps or certainty but in total blindness, inch by inch, by the inspired, feckless strokes of a paintbrush. Her paintings can of course be read as responses – to movements in the arts, societal change and shifting borders, both around the world and at home – filtered through a Promethean mind, searching, inquisitive, emboldened. Or they can be read, as they demand to be, by the disquieting light of their concerns.

Theodor Adorno, on Beethoven's late style, wrote:

"The maturity of a late artist's works is not like that of fruits. They are not usually round but, rather, furrowed, even ruptured [...] The common explanation for this is that they are products of a subjectivity or 'personality' uncompromisingly articulating itself which, for the sake of its own expression, breaks open the roundness of conventional forms, twists harmony into the dissonance of its suffering, and scorns all sensual charms through the self-aggrandisement of the liberated spirit."²¹

To say that Mary Swanzy's later works broke away from the geometric precision and grid-style colouring of her early work in favour of a 'furrowed', 'ruptured', altogether 'uncompromising' beauty is only partly true. The problem with taking a chronological view of her work is that it presupposes that the artist is working toward a cohesive selection of subjects and a singular, trademark style, which Mary Swanzy was not. As the critic Eric Newton put it: 'Only by means of brushes and pigment can she externalise her mood – or rather *moods*'.²² (Italics mine)

²¹ Adorno, Theodor, 'Late Style in Beethoven', *Night Music*, Kolkata, Seagull Books, 2019, p. 13.

²² Mary Swanzy Archive, National Gallery, ESB CSIA CSIA-STR

Mary Swanzy had many moods, and they changed. That is their nature; they go away, and, sometimes, they come back. Their capriciousness found competent expression in her personal blend of disparate styles, which has been termed somewhat awkwardly by critics as both 'cubo-surreal' and 'cubo-futurist'. In *Poetic Figure* (1951-1960) a dreamer appears in outline against a guitar, plunged in blissful memory, and in *Female nudes with horse and viaduct* (1950s) the same figure slumps, projected as if by error into the scene, pouring her hair over her hands in distraction. The two share a lunar palette and a collage-like arrangement of incongruent images hanging in space, suggesting we are in the same insomniac mind reaching back, trying to order itself. They're all interior, thought and feeling, washed in the light of closed eyes and contemplation. There are no surfaces here; those aren't lines, they're veins, nerves, tears, tracing outlines, souls in aimless procession, ghosts, the multitude, wondering if they are damned. Oddly, or perhaps not oddly at all, it's in her strangest, most turbulent nightmares that, through attention, painting, prayer, something like grace is achieved, most notably in *Strange World* and *Untitled* (1950s). In the former, a girl lost in reverie turns into a tree, unaware of the branches coming out of her head. In the latter, another girl sits by a window through which a cow has thrust its head and is now chewing on her hair. She doesn't seem to care though. She hardly even notices. She's very busy, painting her nails cherry red. She is completely absorbed in the act. Mary Swanzy was not interested, as some of her contemporaries were, in lending her talents to the construction of a national identity, after the revolution, under the banner of an independent *Éire*. She was subordinate to no one, no cause or collective, only to the work, to the task at hand.

She was stunned, she once said, at 'how many greens there are in the world'.²³ If her early works are bathed in the light of this statement, what came afterwards are dispatches from a land where such a statement could never be uttered, where the wonders of the world have been wasted, abused, and now the face of God is dark, darkened. In paintings such as *Ebb Tide* (1941), *Evening Stroll* (1945), *From the Sea* (1950s), it is always late and getting later; the

²³ Mary Swanzy, *Honolulu Gardens* wall text, Hugh Lane Gallery, Dublin.

Lord's hour is at hand, as in Zephaniah: 'The great day of the Lord is near, *it is near*, and hasteth greatly'.²⁴ Bodies pile up, sick and bloated, decaying, smeared across the canvass like excreta, matter, puss. 'That day *is* a day of wrath, a day of trouble and distress, a day of wasteness and desolation, a day of darkness and gloominess, a day of clouds and thick darkness'.²⁵ Adorno goes on to claim that the late works are the disasters of art. Everything is wrong. That's why they are right. Drunkenness, mould, loose skin changing colour under electric lights, jeering crowds, giant pigs, elongated hands. As she moves further into allegory, time solidifies into space and colour, as in the elegiac *Ebb Tide*. The setting is the time, the colour is the drama; time and space coagulate into a semiotic sludge, blackened green, into which we sink. We are in what Heidegger called in his essay 'What are Poets For' 'the world's night': 'The time of the world's night is the destitute time [...] In the age of the world's night, the abyss of the world must be experienced and endured. But for this it is necessary that there be those who reach into the abyss'.²⁶

Mary Swanzy is our poet of destitution. She was stunned, she said, at how many greens there were in the world, and she attended, singing, to their tireless mutilation, she witnessed their slow exodus from life. In the ashen, murky wastelands of her later paintings, is it even possible to speak of the colour green, is it possible after gas chambers, after Hiroshima, after we have drilled the colour off the face of the earth? Impossible. But then these paintings themselves are impossible. They are miraculous, like risen corpses, articulating through their mortality, their fallenness, their despair, an enfeebled wish for change, transfiguration, for some Rilkean turnabout. The first wish was green, *logos, is*. Everything depends on its recovery. It must be recovered and released, through madness if necessary, as in *Scarecrows*, where ladies in dresses and hobbled, grimacing figures dance around technicolour trees, the whole scene lit up by a radioactive light. Mary Swanzy is our poet in a destitute time because she

²⁴ King James Bible, p. 856.

²⁵ Bible, p. 857

²⁶ M Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, USA, Harper Collins, 1985, p.98.

could stand, and paint, after twenty years and countless atrocities, through the present 'here', she could paint her way to earlier greens through present rot and mould.

Self portrait with a candle (1940) shows the artist alone, awake, her free hand stretched out, picking her way through the night. Faded lights, yellow, red, and green, play across her face. Her face is a fading beam of light, sent forth into the night without promise. She has the steadfast gaze of someone who has seen the hands taken off the clock, the clock taken down, taken out back and shot. It is she who has been keeping time, holding an international candle to what is passing and what is lost. This is not the artist in her studio, seated in a wealth of ease and adoration; this is the artist as a living, dying flame, voyaging uncertainly into the certain dark

