

**A shoe,
A moon,
A flower,
A pot,
A suit,
A kettle,
A cabbage,
A fold,
A vase,
A chair,
A book,
And the smoke from
a cigarette**

Johnny Izatt-Lowry

And it was indeed a hawthorn, but one whose blossom was pink, and lovelier even than the white. It, too, was in holiday attire...but it was attired even more richly than the rest, for the flowers which clung to its branches, one above another, so thickly as to leave no part of the tree undecorated, like the tassels wreathed about the crook of a rococo shepherdess, were every one of them “in colour”...

Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, *In Search of Lost Time*¹

Proust is associated with the concept of involuntary memory triggered by ordinary objects or tastes – most famously a Madeleine cake dipped in tea - which unexpectedly whirl his narrator out of the present and into the past. But an often neglected aspect of Proust is his meticulous attention to material detail. Descriptions of a single subject are apt to run to several pages. The above quote, a fragment of a lengthy passage on hawthorns, gives a sense of this obsessive tendency to home in on quotidian things in a way that defamiliarises them. Proust teaches us to look anew, to approach the everyday with all our senses and associations.² Johnny Izatt-Lowry does something similar in his intriguing paintings, which are not in fact made with oil or acrylic paint but coloured pencil and pigment on crepe.

These works are largely still lifes, portraying ordinary objects like shoes, flowers, jeans, pencils, cigarettes and reproductions of artworks. Izatt-Lowry scours the internet for stock photographs of these things, which he downloads, edits in Photoshop, then draws and finally paints from

memory. There is an instant recognisability on seeing his generic images, a sense of comfort: “ah yes, I know where I am with this”. But do we? The longer one spends with his paintings, the more questions they generate. The artist conceives of his series of works as chapters in an evolving, connected opus.

Suitiness

Take *A Suit*, which depicts a monumental grey pinstripe suit. Set against a similarly dark background, it looms like a tombstone out of the dimness, requiring time for the eyes to adjust and pick out details such as sleeves, seams, buttonholes. With no horizon, it's hard to tell whether the suit is held upright by an invisible force or laid down on a surface? Where and who is its owner? Then one notices that the shoulders are impossibly broad, so it can't be a *real* suit. But of course we know it isn't a real suit. As Foucault says of Magritte's painting of a pipe with text declaring it is not a pipe, “...who would seriously contend that the collection of intersecting lines above the text is a pipe? Must we say: My God, how simpleminded!”³ Without wanting to go down a Saussurean rabbit hole, Izatt-Lowry's paintings very much belong to the complex conundrum around pictorial representation that artists have grappled with for millennia. He shows us a suit that not only is *not* drawn from life, it does not actually exist, yet it evokes what we think a suit should look like. “It's so far removed from what it was, but it still holds its core suitiness to be read as a suit, although you can't imagine anyone really wearing it,” he says.⁴ The oversize suit fills the frame, almost like a cartoon version of itself. Indeed, it is almost

too suity to be a suit; perhaps because of this excessive suitiness the viewer feels compelled to try to unravel the discrepancies between their memories of suits and this representation.

Awkwardness

Perspective presents another quandary in Izatt-Lowry's work. Several of the compositions suggest objects arranged on a tabletop. But one object might be depicted from an aerial vantage point and another front on, judging from the simple shadows which themselves appear generic. Or the scale of the objects to each other might not be quite right. The overall effect is destabilising. "I like the awkwardness of trying to recreate the world," Izatt-Lowry notes. "And it always fails." He is particularly drawn to the art of the northern Renaissance, when perspective had not yet been fully worked out, finding a charm in the "awkward angles" of the period. Sometimes his paintings directly reference art history, depicting works by Leger, Picasso, Matisse. This is less about paying homage to artistic forbears than rendering familiar images strange – by painting them in the form of a leporello, for instance. He employs the knowing trick of trompe l'oeil, without necessarily intending to convince but rather add a note of whimsy.

Dimensionality

Part of the deliberate offness in Izatt-Lowry's work relates to the tension between two and three dimensions that is both present in the composition and integral to the process of its creation – the convoluted, even counter-intuitive procedure of downloading images from the

internet and drawing them to look as if they sit in a real world space. This tension is heightened by the artist's chosen medium. Since 2018 he has worked on crepe stretched over canvas and board, favouring its physicality and the matte fuzziness created by coloured pencil on the fabric and the distinctive texture of the crepe. If online the works appear to be composed of washes of solid colour on a uniform surface, in real life the paintings appear to almost vibrate; one discerns myriad multihued markings that dissolve the image the closer one gets. This push and pull between flatness and volume recalls Edwin A. Abbott's Victorian novella *Flatlands: A Romance of Many Dimensions*.⁵ As the narrator A. Square is taken to spheres of one, two and finally three dimensions, his perception is transformed by "a dizzy, sickening sensation of sight that was not like seeing". "I saw a Line that was no Line; Space that was not Space: I was myself, and not myself," he says. Once acclimatised to three dimensions, however, he is enthralled.

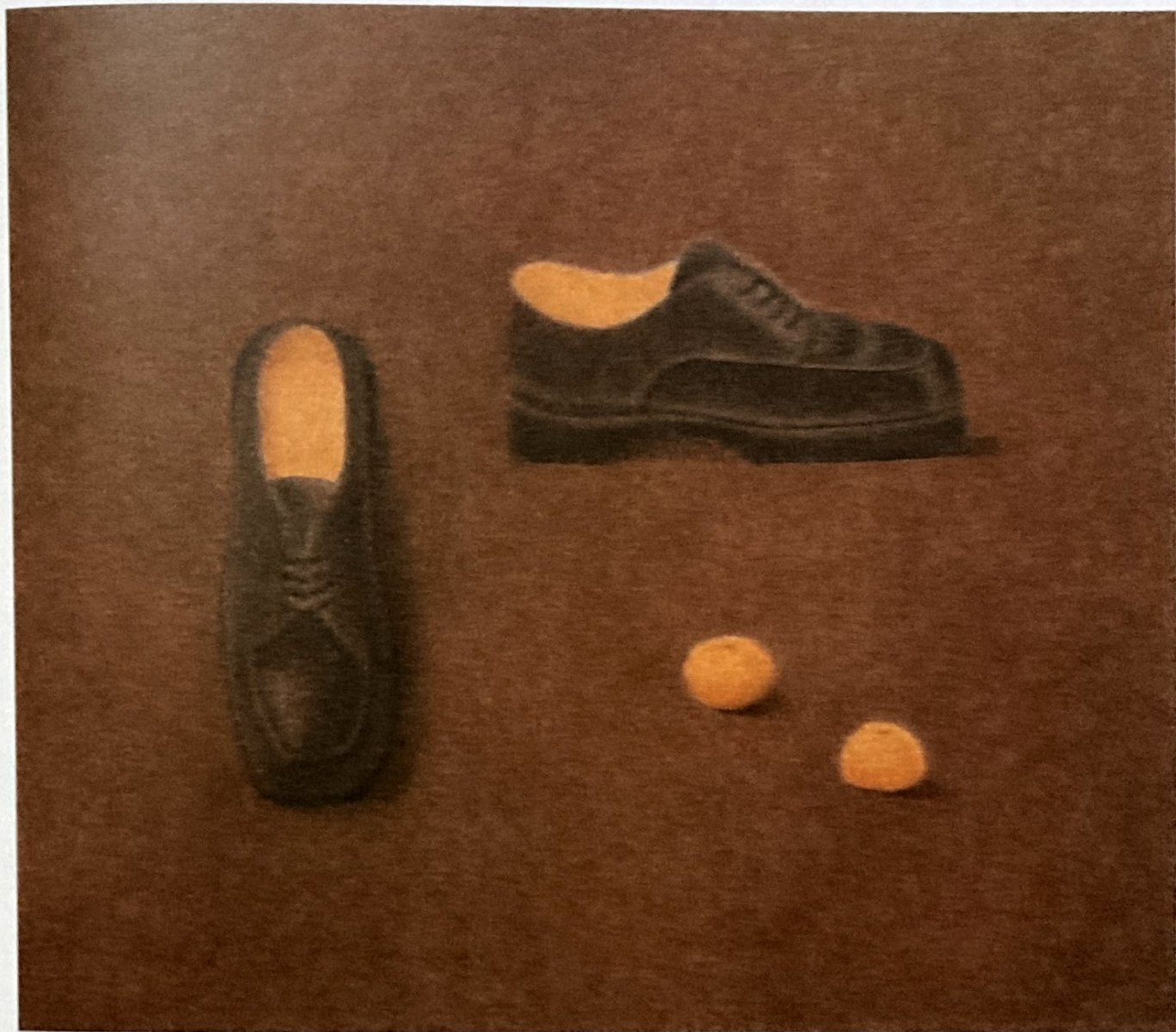
Theatricality

Izatt-Lowry's work has a subtle humour, perhaps related to the inordinate investment of time and effort expended in his process to portray these anonymous, mundane objects. Crepe offers much less margin for error than canvas. It is almost impossible to rub out mistakes or lighten colour so his compositions are determined from the start and built up in multiple layers. If he has not decided on every element he might leave a book or flower-shaped blank on the surface that must later be filled in with the precise blend of hues used elsewhere – hence the colour coded lists pinned by paintings on his studio walls. There's

also an inherent theatricality in Izatt-Lowry's set-like scenes, which can be read as surreal, melancholy or absurd. In some, a spectral hand that seems disembodied from its faceless owner holds a pencil or a smoking cigarette. Often the objects play their own parts, without a human prop. These blurry, stagey tableaux with their floating objects have a hallucinatory, out of time quality; like in a casino where clocks are banned, the artist denies the viewer cues as to time or place, yet one has the undeniable sensation of déjà-vu. As happens with Proust, where past and present merge and steeples metamorphose into maidens or hawthorn flowers become tassels on "the crook of a rococo shepherdess", Izatt-Lowry's paintings are an invitation to look at the material universe in a different way. Enter the quietly uncanny environments he constructs and, as the Flatlands narrator exhorts, "behold a new world!"

Elizabeth Fullerton

1. Proust, Marcel, *Swann's Way*; In Search of Lost Time, Vol. 1, Trans. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin. Rev. D.J. Enright, (New York: Random House, 1992) p.196
2. In thinking about Proust and ways of seeing, I am indebted to Maury Bruhn's illuminating text *Seeing Impossible Things: Proust and the Reader's Visual Imagination*, dissertation submitted at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2021, <https://cdr.lib.unc.edu/concern/dissertations/lc18dr378?locale=en>
3. Foucault, Michel, *This is Not a Pipe (with illustrations and letters by Rene Magritte)* Trans. and edited by James Harkness. Enlarged ed. Berkeley : University of California Press, 1983, p.19
4. Quotes by the artist come from our conversation during studio visit on Feb 10, 2023.
5. Abbott, Edwin. A. *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, (London: Seely & Co, 1884) accessed online <https://www.math.ksu.edu/~cjbalm/570s14/flatland-edited.pdf> p.14-15



Two shoes with two oranges, 2020
pigment and pastel on crepe, 70 × 80 cm



