

How to tell your parents you love them (this text should be in neon)

By Oliver Basciano

If there's an origin myth to Joe Fletcher Orr's work then it is this: as a child the artist used to be taken to modern and contemporary art museums by his dad. The purposes of these trips weren't educative however, but a moment of father-son bonding in which together they would laugh and joke at the absurdities of the conceptual offerings. *I could do that*. Except, as the visits went on, and Fletcher Orr got older, he realised he could do that. So he did.

The lightness of touch remains in Fletcher Orr's work however. The artist is one who doesn't passively accept the intellectual aura of art but instead prefers to prod it, jest it, question it, until something stronger, more robust emerges. Take for example a new work made for *Mummy's Boy*, the artist's solo show at the International 3, in which the artist takes a fruit bowl from the family home and has it photographed several times by a professional studio photographer. Each picture shows a different artful arrangement of fruit – pears and satsuma nestled alongside a lemon; bananas still in polythene, a bunch of grapes dangling slightly over the rim – all beautifully lit. The styling of these bowls – or even, shall we say, the curation – is done by the artist's mother. Indeed the homely enamel vessel, with its turquoise edging, belongs to her also. There is of course a humour to Fletcher Orr involving his mother in this process, but this is not a return to the childhood mockery: the results are genuine. Mum has done a good job. The pictures photographically recall Dutch eighteenth century still lifes even. His mother's taste is evident too in the colour the artist will paint the gallery walls for exhibition, chosen by her from the range on offer at a local B&Q hardware store. In outsourcing these roles, Fletcher Orr draws, with genuine affection, a Beuysian parallel between the choices made in the creation and exhibition of an artwork, and the everyday creative choices made by non-artists. How to place fruit in a bowl? What colour to paint the bedroom? In doing so it strips the artistic process of pretension, and returns art to be a vehicle of sincere expression, expression which for Fletcher Orr concern ideas of the family, of love and relationships.

While the production of Fletcher Orr's work is a process frequently involving his specific relations, the results, for the viewer, are a more universal expression of our kindred bonds in whatever form they take. The artist makes this his explicit intention through a series of works that utilise parental proxies. There is the painting from 2015 by the artist, shown in *Modern History, Vol 1*, a group show at Blackpool's Grundy Gallery, which features Fletcher Orr standing flanked, close, behind either shoulder, by the exhibition's curators Lynda Morris and Richard Parry. Titled *Me and our Lynda, Richard* it is modelled such as a family photograph –

the cosiness accentuated by the soft lines of the paint's application – and drew parallels between the actual family unit and the professional and friendship-based 'families' we all rely on for support. It positions the curators – female and male, both older than the artist – in the same nurturing roles that mum and dad otherwise occupy. Similarly with *Muppet* the artist has created a soft toy self-portrait – a caricature of Fletcher Orr with long face, round glasses and head of dark brown hair – a work that the artist says he hopes will be bought by a private collector, the transaction recalling parental financial support.

It is Fletcher Orr's commitment to these perhaps unfashionable subjects of love and family that make his work stand out. Studied detachment is pervasive in contemporary art (it is perhaps telling that this creepy mode of cool was coming to fruition just at the point Fletcher Orr was visiting the museums as a boy in the late 1990s) and the artist's work can be seen as a direct rebuke to its pretension. In conversation Fletcher Orr refers to a series of new works, pots made by the artist and his mother at a local ceramics class exhibited with houseplants from the family home, as a means in which he could spend some time with her. It's a narrative that the artist makes plain in another work, one that is emotive, personal and, lets be frank (it would be a disservice to the artist's aims not to be after all), really quite sweet. A neon sign in the gallery reads 'Soft Lad'. Like any process of something personal made public it can be a daunting experience. No one feels particularly comfortable with public declarations of love (that's why, incidentally, they feature so often in the films, from the final subway scene of *Crocodile Dundee* to the press conference in *Notting Hill*); through the sign Fletcher Orr recognises this and exaggerates the tension by literally putting his avowal up in lights.

To this end, Fletcher Orr, the mummy's boy, might have met with the approval of the late American writer David Foster Wallace and his 1993 call for an emergence of an 'anti-rebel'. These would be figures 'who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles. Who treat of plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction... to risk accusations of sentimentality, melodrama. Of overcredulity. Of softness.' Fletcher Orr's works runs all these risks, indeed relishes them, and comes out stronger.

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