

Thursday 1 February 2001

Inside Out

Esther Cawley - Quay Art, Kingston-upon-Hull

John Hudson

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Esther Cawley is Quay Art's First In-Studio Award winner for this year.

The award is designed to encourage creative development by giving 'an artist time, space and money to research, experiment and make new work.' Yippee! At last, money is going to artists rather than administrators. I hope this continues.

For Quay Art's money Cawley has produced five oil paintings each featuring a human figure. At first we assume that the figure is female, portrayed as it is in a tradition and a product of a culture that has long objectified the female form. On closer inspection our assumptions are soon challenged. Feminine poses, and long, painted finger nails conceal what seems at times to be a masculine body: big boned, wide shoulders, flat chest and muscular arms. Cawley paints the torso, a life study if you like, rather than a portrait of her subject, so as to conceal the identity of the sitter.

Cawley's work concerns itself with the way we view the body, and is challenging our (male) gaze. Esther Cawley's art questions notions of identity as she presents us with a series of images of what we discover to be a pre-operative transsexual. This notion of transexuality is suggestive of a body in flux. Rather than viewing a female figure, we find ourselves gazing at a body which is neither female nor male and yet presented as seductive and sensual.

Cawley rejects photo-realism painting for an expressive realism and a painterliness that is not in vogue these days. On studying these works one can find similarities with the painter Jenny Saville who also goes for an aggressive and loose brush style that emphasises the fleshiness of the subject's body and concentrates on the craft of painting and making of art rather than on the concept. How else but through realism can we register the world's contradictions and complexities? One wonders whether Cawley, having left some art school in the southeast, has reacted strongly against the dominance of the ready-made and 'conceptual' art and the shallowness in which these styles and forms have too often been used to fill gallery spaces. We may well be witnessing resurgence in realism and a new objectivity in art in Britain.