

## Feet Also Feature

By Sally-Ann Murray, 2011

In: *Andries Gouws: Pedestrian Paintings 2007 – 2011*. Durban: HardPressd.

Andries Gouws is known as an artist whose work mediates (and meditates upon) the banal and the numinous. As we know from his previous solo exhibition, “Hiding Behind Simple Things”, he is a painter, in small, of the commonplace - a cupboard. a burglar bar. a bath – all canvasses distinguished by the painter’s deft combining of realist impulses with more surreal, disconcerting angles and points of view. In these terms, Gouws’ exquisitely rendered painting of a cloth (a ‘cloth painting’ yet also, perhaps, a painting cloth, and a reference to the cloth of the canvas) shows a creamy drape resting across a grey rectangular box. Extremely restrained, and yet rich in folds and planes. The subject becomes as visually mysterious as an emptied shroud discarded upon a tomb. Or perhaps it is a bath sheet. A dish towel. How much ‘looking’ can a simple subject carry or absorb before the viewer inclines to attribute meaning? Is the viewer rebuffed by evident ordinariness, and thus easily tipped towards metaphysics or refusal? I notice the crumpled, discarded paper to the left in the canvas, a quiet, unobtrusive echo of the more fluid fabric fall.

The cloth painting is beautiful, but the awkward truth is that many of us are suspicious of the beautiful in art because beauty, ostensibly, is an embarrassment. It is surface, superficial, rather than integral and substantive. Especially when it’s small. Beauty is too close to the decorative to be a serious category of response to art. Isn’t it? Yet that’s where these paintings give me pause, for Gouws’ ideas of the beautiful are deliberately ambiguous. Norman Bryson suggests that in many still life paintings we are offered only a “brief journey across a corner of everyday life”, where “nothing significant happens: there is no transfiguration or epiphany, no sudden disclosure of transcendence. The eye move[s] lightly and without avidity: it is at home” (2001:93). And yet. In Gouws’ still life paintings, I am invited to discover an extraordinarily lovely nuance in received banality, even as I am also alerted to the contrary possibility that loveliness is best viewed

through a precarious and disconcerting lens. For if Gouws finds beauty in the banal, the affectively momentous in the mundane, there is also a recurrent uncertainty about categorical definitions. If he has trained his eye to attend closely, and his brain-hand to carry the careful signal of detail, the blurred boundaries of many of his subjects also suggest that he remains circumspect about what he sees, and how he sees it, how he renders familiar things differently visible. It's obvious that his goal is not the big, mighty subjects of history painting, but even in his choice of still life, a genre somewhat disregarded or even derided in art history, Gouws does not aim to redeem the ordinary through the liveliness of crowded interior scenes or the pointedly placed, highly reflective decorative symbolism of still life as occurs in vanitas paintings. (While some pieces lean gently towards the didactic, playing off numerous painterly precedents - a table surface featuring a dead beetle, legs bowed in the air; a blurry, framed image of a skull; an orderly collection of mineral balls; a phrenological head – the studied play of light and shadow mutes moral instruction into compositional interest, the balance of these items as a coherent aesthetic grouping.)

Gouws seems to set himself deliberate boundaries, limits within which to work: the palette is frequently restricted, demanding that the painter proceed slowly and deliberately in order to mix the required shade. Similarly, the application of paint to the canvas is precise without aiming for photographic effect. These are, after all, after all the attention of artist and viewer, *paintings*. They do not aim to diminish difference but to demonstrate it, skilfully. In this light, I think about Gouws' settings. His decision to work with 'found' angles and takes; the canvas filled with a vertiginous view of a household appurtenance such as a bath. I also think of the artist's canniness, appearances being deceiving: here, a canvas purports artlessly to capture, through visual quotation, the extremely artful everyday habitus of people with a highly developed, creative-aesthetic consciousness. Stones, objects, books, fossils, embroidery, prints...all these powerfully suggestive things at home, quietly gathering their dust, the artist re-views for his painterly purposes, encouraging his eye to separate and section, claiming for the existing arrangement a new, differently interesting relevance in the space of an artistic endeavour which co-exists with - alongside, within, apart from - the domestic living spaces of the

family. In this light, too, I think about Gouws painting from life, or from photographs. I think of the snapshot as a device (in the manner of Gerhard Richter) through which a painter may subvert realist painterly conventions. Blurring. Shifting focus. Subtly calling into question the truth status of the real; the boundaries between paint and camera eye, and also between conceptual categories such as the beautiful and the flawed. There is no ‘resolution’ in a painting. Merely a possible approach. Also, by displacing or unsettling the real through paintings which rework the photographic view, the trivial and the random can be placed on an equal footing with the studied subject of the strategically-arranged still life.

At times, Gouws’ use of constraint brings to mind something of the avant garde French literary group Oulipo, whose members’ precise experimentation with language led to highly ordered, highly unusual texts such as lipograms, premised on idiosyncratic systems of production. Most notoriously: an entire novel by Perec without the letter e. Here, too, I find myself looking at the paintings and finding linguistic analogies in the objects upon which the painter has settled his visual frame. In one painting, ‘skull’ may set up an elusive rhyme with ‘scale’. In another – “Ingrid’s studio, Richter and phrenological head” – the richness allows Richter’s skull – *schädel* – subtly to sound in relation to shadow. This is painting as visual-conceptual complexity. I love the fact of the painter-philosopher as an artist who uses whatever oily medium, the poetic slipperiness of language included, to struggle with making his meanings.

So while the subject matter of the paintings is domestic and familiar, it is not wholly domesticated. Unheimlich, uncanny. The eyes have to home in on the habituated materials of everyday life, but only as permitted by an odd scale and often a fragmented and awkwardly angled attention. And they must do so against piercing light, or in semi-gloom. The result is not domestic nostalgia, not sentimentalized interior. The paintings are still, yes, quiet; but the objects also appear on the verge of an animation which takes its cue from the painter’s own philosophical mindfulness. This is dark, shadowed. Take “El Greco and Sheep Skull”. The shadows acquire an abstract, planar weight, a presence

that competes with the ostensible subject of the painting, and hints at the painter's interest in forms other than, beyond, the figurative. Shadows jut, angle, and curve. What objects cast these strange dense shapes, and how is it that light works to produce things as so other than themselves? In this particular painting, it is difficult to distinguish a focus; the eye is constantly distracted. It is taken to the back, beneath, along a dividing line, to the place where margins and frame merge. If you look at "El Greco and Sheep Skull" digitally, as a JPEG, you will be hard-pressed not to scroll down, looking for 'the rest' of the painting. But there is nothing more. If, as Bryson (2001) has it, still life is the genre habitually 'overlooked' in serious art; well, in Gouws' "El Greco and Sheep Skull" the artist gives new intensity to this point, not only offering a traditional nod to reminders of human mortality through the skull, but in the very positioning of his subject on – and almost *off* – the canvas, ending the viewer's participation. You are cut dead by an arbitrary edge. Here, this odd place, is where your privileged (in)sight ends.

Gouws' own view as a painter is sparse, which gives space for breath. In Gouws' paintings, the oddity of a quiet, reserved beauty, struggling between presence and absence, shadow and light, is an important element of the works' vitality. Many times, now, I have looked at Gouws' paintings - fragments of rooms, of shelves off-centred; ceiling lights dumbly cornered - and wondered whether I am mistaken to take these elements for the familiar. How weird they appear. Almost like pure matter, the shapes taken as physical form. Long planes. Sharp angles. Curves. Orbs.

And now, in these *Pedestrian Paintings*, an added element of surprise: the ungainly form of the foot. This is new subject matter. It sits – stands – alongside the familiar still life pieces, under the clever umbrella title "Pedestrian Paintings", which brings together varied forms of mundanity, whether inanimate domestic objects and interiors, or the fresh attention to that neglected, humble body part, the foot. (No doubt the artist's gallery walkabouts will assist viewers in finding sophisticated routes between the two subject varieties.) For now: a few speculative footnotes on this shift in the artist's attention...

It seems that in about 2006 -7, on the very cusp of his growing success with established domestic subject matter, with collectors eager to acquire his calm, virtually egoless executions of small still life scenes featuring unremarkable household objects and homely interior views that might have come to the canvas via the eye's casual happenstance, rather than artistic contrivance...Andries Gouws grew weary, dissatisfied. What now?

Perhaps, over the long years, a disciplined posse of small brushes began to bristle at yet again being bound to blend the same little of life into the constrained blanks of his restricted canvasses. A cup. A4. A4. A4. The artist sighed and wiped his hands on a cloth. His bony brushes. His feet were tingling. Flexed his instep. He stretched, and leaned back. Something cracked. For years he had sought to discover in the familiar contours of 'home' a sufficient, sustaining imaginative quiddity, one which would enable him to paint with loving verve and slow passion the drab, habituated subjects against which a conventionally aesthetic consciousness had been trained to balk. Home. Again and again. Full-stop. These. Four. Walls. How could such a narrow round ever be properly exotic, or creatively and culturally sophisticated, even with the magnificent extension of a light-filled, roof-room studio that promised to draw the mundane towards the celestial?

Let's imagine his thoughts paced up and down. Drifted up – and down – winding off into the suburb's smokeless zone. Wound in spirit past the worn "Bath" and the terracotta tiles he'd already painted, and from such an angle that a wet foot, looking in, might all-too-easily slip. Bath? An egg or cocoon. An opened sarcophagus. Ideas filtered, in another room, along the white ceiling boards of "Lamp, turquoise wall and bricks". He noticed how the utterly undistinguished ball light fitting had aspirations. It wished to become a moon. The artist knew that it might just manage, given the unusual framing angles he had chosen. The lamp/ball/planet/light certainly did not seem to be itself. The painter too. All along he had understood that the prosaic, the everyday, had also a vital poetic vigour. His foot itched. He lowered a hand, and scratched.

The painter woke from the reverie and stood up from his chair. He walked downstairs, all the careful many of them, the staircase a structure at once solidly bolted, yet seeming to float barefoot above the lounge. Suspended. But he was grounded, now. With each step the wooden treads felt warm. Then the parquet smooth. And the rug rough. Where was everyone? His wife...it was five o'clock, after all. He made tea in the tiny kitchen. Looked up to see the woman's narrow, angular bones standing sudden in the doorway. (He hasn't heard a thing.) Beneath her loose pants, cut off, her bare feet. Each foot a beached sole, thin toes like blunt teeth, long in the mouth. And then he knew.

He'd found another version of his favoured, unexceptional subjects. Still banal, yes, for what fine fool gives a fig for a foot, female or otherwise – and yet he saw that these feet brought within the ambit of his hands all the freshness and originality of human presence that he had thus far refused. And, of course, feet would allow him to step into the equivocal, constrained joy of the painted series. “Feet I (full frontal)”. “Feet II (three quarters view)”. With just two feet, *one* foot, to start, a series could stretch far. How many feet might a series make? Even the artist could not know the measure of the foot project from the beginning. What shape it could take.

Since his established domestic subjects had begun, to the artist, to feel pedestrian - worn out, fading in appeal - his wife's feet were a gift. How better to energise the inner, artist's eye than to place people, in part, as part of his repertoire, without explicitly signing the connections? He would paint a series of portraits, in place. But not renderings of the face and eyes, those tired windows to the soul; nor even of the full figure predictably positioned as a sitter to reveal character and personality, mood and profession. Instead, he would do feet. Base subjects. The most foundational. And always, in his paintings, feet unattached. Detached and yet affectively freighted. Feet. Deserving of (un)divided attention. Here, too, would be an apt implied link between his previous and his current subject matter: still life as the lowest ranking artistic genre, one which depicts the ordinariness of “the world trampled underfoot to make way for what is of importance” (Bryson 2001:86). And feet: physiologically the lowest of the low, at opposite ends of the

earth to the brain, despite the linking thread of the spinal cord. Moreover, if he agreed with himself to take as his starting point the feet of his familiars, the family and friends who found themselves at home among the already-painted scenes of his homely repertoire...He could do “Feet VIII (Mike’s feet)”. “Feet IX (Corinne’s feet [small])”. Already he had at hand a range of subjects, with possible angles and sizes and placements giving scope for repetition with variation in the ten toes, the shape of a heel and of hidden musculature; the ley lines of metatarsals. Flexions and aductions.

The feet stand for so much in Gouws’ current paintings. Audiences may recall that in his earlier work, people didn’t feature. People were replaced by things, suggested through the metonymy of domestic objects and settings. Sometimes, the human was obliquely figured through dolls, or chunks of sculptural statuary. Sometimes there was a face quoted from a famous painting. All of these seemed less people than artistic devices. Currently, it’s not that Gouws has eschewed the turn to painterly device; it’s simply that such devices, when set among the present footwork, appear less pointed. And now, still instead of people, Gouws gives us their feet. Their feet stand in their stead, and the painter has a new leg on which to stand.

Of course I’m toying, here, but so too does Gouws. While his earlier paintings have often been described as contemplative, inclining the viewer to conjure scenes of the solitary artist studiously at work in his private eyrie space, this reverential isolation should not dominate our understanding of his painting at the expense of the artist’s subtly playful pleasure in his grounded, everyday subject matters. In both the still life pieces, and the foot paintings, we are on occasion invited to enjoy visual *playfulness*. Consider the restrained wit through which Gouws paints a painting which not only contains a container, but in which the point of view is oddly-angled or sliced, interrupting the viewer’s visual desire rather than allowing her to find a neat, settled, conceptually contained centre. And when it comes to the feet...? What initially attracts is the painterly skill. As in the still life paintings, Gouws’ representations of feet are not hyperbolic or overstated, in terms not only of scale but of attention to surface detail. As in his still life,

the surfaces are not overworked, even though the artist works slowly, and with studied attention. To me, this is less costive than poignant. It gives Gouws' work a restrained beauty. He does not polish surfaces until they shine. He does not strain after the veracity of every minute detail. His feet are not faked; they are never buffed and idealised, plumped out to compensate for the bony oddities which time and footslog, the weight of being human, have slowly made of them. (How much 'nicer' to hide behind shoes, which conveniently glove-over cracks and calluses. The skewed big toe. How persistently gnarly the nubbed nail of the toe pinky, as yellow and hard as if it were already growing hair in its ears.)

Whether still life, or of the feet series, Gouws' paintings are full of shadows, 'holes' (or perhaps lacunae) that a viewer is coaxed to fill. I can, sometimes. Sometimes I cannot. The general absence of people is but the most obvious gap, which even the feet struggle to contain. And it is a sense of absence that is heightened rather than alleviated when the painter *does* offer us a figurative representation of the human form in "Male nude". Even here, I find myself looking while working through a rough conceptual series. For this artist: not history, but the domestic; not big, but small; not hands, but feet; not female nude, but male; and not reclining, but standing. As if to underline the painter's interest in the partial, and the impossibility of a painting offering 'the whole' in its entirety, the singular male body is given to the viewer only in part. We see him from the front, and lit from below by a concealed light source. He is cut off just beneath the groin by a surface we cannot quite discern. His feet – as we should expect from the rest of the exhibition – are elsewhere. The artist prods us into mindfulness; we are not allowed to relax with this male body. For some reason I think of Francis Bacon and his interest in the body as *movement*. Gouws' male nude seems to stand on the brink of movement. The painterly surface, too, is rich in movement and hints at interior unrest. It is as if we are given a few pages torn from a book, and nothing more. What story follows? The minute you put a person into a picture, a body with a face, narrative starts to clamour for attention. Is the situation here sinister or more prosaic? Are the sepulchral tones and lighting an extended *memento mori* which render irrelevant such questions as What is the man doing? Where



has he been? There are too many restless questions. Where he is going? - now that one we *can* answer.

Movement. Pause. Rest. Stasis. How to paint such different states? Gouws' feet paintings are evidently a mark of the painter's desire to still haste, to slow speed. Feet stride. The title "Pedestrian Paintings" might be expected to have something in common with the looped footage recently projected onto a sheet of builder's plastic spread on the paving outside the City Hall during Jomba!'s Friday evening art event. The images were an endless urban slew of different feet to-ing and fro-ing; school shoes, sandals, business brogues, pumps, All-Stars and...bare feet?. The legs were cropped near the shin and all the footsteps cut across a slice of representational space in which plastic litter blew slightly in a breeze, the erratic puffs of life and stillness offsetting the urban foot traffic.

But in Gouws' Feet Series, the feet are not such busy human vehicles. While they show evidence, on the skin, of worn tracks and heavy bodily loads, they are abstracted from the round of daily life. In this regard, they are not pedestrian, in the sense either of ordinary and unexceptional, or as walking pedestrian movement. His paintings are still. Portraits which also speak to the conscious taking of time in order, paradoxically, to reproduce stilled signs of human liveliness. These feet do not stride, step or leap. They sit, paired. Stand solidly. Occasionally they are suspended: on a ledge, or in water. Invariably they are feet, only. 'Only' feet to which we are asked to attend as we might ordinarily a detailed portrait of a face, or perhaps a painting showing hands, and by implication all the artistry and ordinary activity and callow disregard of which hands are capable. The artist explores the enigmatic effects of proximity which make a foot as strange as another form of life, or an object. His view of the feet, more a *felt apprehension*, really, often entails deliberate distortions of angle and point of view. Positioned precariously on a wooden shelf, feet become objects dissociated from the body, from *any* body. Stared at long enough, the eye habituates, turning the unusual into yet another constituent of a styled domestic interior scene, a still life. Detached like this, the paired feet in "Feet III" are nearly sculptural vases; they have little or nothing to do with limbs. Lilies that fester

could be wilting from within their hollowed shins. Curious. The artist elevates feet – puts them on a pedestal, of sorts - in order to bring them down to earth as objects of artistic focus.

In what sense are these feet portraits? The sitters – sometimes standers – are present in feet only, otherwise absent. The feet represent – are asked to stand for – at least two elements. On the one hand (*sic*) the feet gesture towards individual personhood such as we more often find in portraits which show the face, where the eyes, mouth, tilt of the head, all incline towards implying something of personality, mood, profession. In *Pedestrian Paintings*, it is the feet which imply the ‘appearance’ of absent people, *and* moreover the nakedly exposed renditions also work to intimate the artists’ closeness to his intimates, friends and family, whose feet feature as his present subject. On the other hand, of course, the feet paintings are also invested with a powerful human charge in that they appear to speak about the relation between the aesthetic and the ordinary, embodiment and the cerebral. A sign language. In a sense, the feet paintings speak subtly of what Michel de Certeau in a different context has called “pedestrian enunciations” (1984:116), meaning the highly individuated movements through which individuals re-shape received spaces and spatial codes into personally meaningful, enlivened practices of mobility, both as actual modalities of walking, and in terms of imaginative thinking. (Such creativity is massively diverse, and means that ‘the pedestrian’ as a form of being and thinking “cannot be reduced” to one singular “graphic trail” [1984: 99].) In such terms, Gouws’ Feet Paintings, while part of a series, also mark distinctive difference amongst people, and in the painter’s treatment of their personalities. “Right Foot” is meaty. Engorged. Heavy as a hunk of beef. “Feet V” are awkwardly – painfully – twisted, yellowed in tone as if circulation has stopped. There is something in the torsioned subject of Grunewald’s “The Small Crucifixion”. The potent cultural image of Christ’s agony. The suffering of the saints.

If Gouws’ paintings intend us to appreciate that ordinary feet matter, there is the crucial informing sense, too, of feet *as* matter. Flesh. Skin: tightly shiny, rubbed to flaking, sagging loose. The application of the paint conveys flexibility and fixity, almost a liquid

musculature of blood, bruising, ageing. Thick, raised veins and fine, spreading capillaries. The curl of an ingrown toenail suggested in a dab of yellow pigment. The mottled blues and greens which seem to bruise the feet immersed in water. Sea surface full of clouds. Rock pool wrong-footed with pale spines. Feet, Gouws' blotchy paintings suggest, using macabre yet lively textures, are often forgotten in extremis. Lucian Freud comes to mind. Not the scale, or the lashings of paint, of course, Gouws' work being more precise than impasto. Yet the feet sometimes have a doughy, pasty quality, and the painter works with an interest in conveying the tension between surface and beneath. It's a realism that vibrates with unease, and even the hints of toenail varnish – or is that shadow? – disallow an easy, gendered certainty.

Gouws responds to the foot as a feature which is physiologically under tremendous pressure, and then he adds to this a conceptual-philosophical weight. Further, if these feet are still – the artist remaining attached, to some degree, to the contemplative space - *because* these are feet, it is difficult for a viewer to eliminate movement entirely. The mind's eye projects, links feet to walking, striding, skopping. It is as if the artist is conscious of stillness as a moment which might soon shatter; while there's still life, these are feet poised on the brink of action. As Gouws has said, he finds feet disconcerting. They have the capacity to dis-concert, to set up disagreement. Feet are for coming and going. For leaving. Kicking out. Feet can be disagreeable subjects. Good grief, using those very same feet 'the artist's wife' might have the temerity to walk over to him where he's working. She might run her bare instep archly along his shin...and then what? Into what still life might the touchy subject of feet take the artist then?

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