



**LISA WRIGHT**  
TWILIGHT PAINTINGS

*13 OCTOBER – 10 NOVEMBER 2007*

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Fig 1 Sketchbook 2007

## Lisa Wright: Twilight

Anna Moszynska

On the crowded wall of Gallery Five at the Royal Academy Summer exhibition, a particular painting captures attention. Installed high on the third tier, or 'skied' as historic convention describes such hanging arrangements, a square canvas emerges startlingly from its surroundings. The brash black background forces a strong contrast with the paler hues of its neighbours, while internally two gashes of pink pigment clash forcibly with the blood red of the other foreground elements. The eye-catching canvas inspires closer attention and I walk through the room towards it, fascinated by its colouristic daring.

The painting is by Lisa Wright and the title, *Magenta Girl*, provides clues as to its skilful interplay of figuration and abstraction. It explains, for example, the choice of primary colour which outlines the figure, but it is surprising to find that the crimson referred to is most thickly applied to the surface of an axed tree trunk on which the girl stands, the red seeping onto the ground around her, like a bloodied, leaking shadow. The female child stands upright, under a branch, legs akimbo with upturned head while her hands are clasped in what could be read as a beseeching gesture. Strikingly, she is stark naked and the effect of light upon her, the bold rectangular slab of pink, suggests that she is also partially spot-lit from an external source. It is the formal elements of the painting that initially grasp my attention. Spatters of pigment activate the surface; stray blobs of pink create odd splashes against the black background which, substantially worked, shows visible marks of brush and palette knife. On the disrupted surface where further pink breaks through, there is a hint that the black overlies something underneath; is this a masking out of an earlier form or idea that might, if still present, shed light on the strange iconography of this nocturnal image, this twilight painting of unnerving force? For beyond the formal boldness of the composition there lurks a question as to its content. What is the child doing there alone in the open air at night, and what, moreover is our audience-role as witness to this event?

Clearly this is no Romantic idyll, although there may be a nostalgic element in the use of a child in such a nocturnal and remote setting. The surrounding blackness is vaguely threatening and provides no sense of calm or relaxation, not least because the subject itself is inevitably loaded. We may feel a degree of discomfort viewing this child nude; representations of the naked child can no longer be perceived as innocent or neutral in the Rousseau-ian sense. We live in an age that is not only post-Freudian but also post-Nabokovian, one informed by Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* and even by Larry Clark's *Kids*; where songs of experience seem only too ready to replace those of innocence. A tension thus arises between the painting's content and the broader contemporary context in which it finds itself. Wright's current exhibition, *Twilight* allows us to examine this in more detail as *Magenta Girl* is one of a series of paintings that explore this theme of the child.



Fig 2 Sketchbook 2007

The subject is not new for the artist. Until a recent theatre commission beckoned her in a new direction, Lisa Wright has concentrated on the theme for over a decade, using the growth of her own two sons from birth through their development into pre-pubescent boys to create series of paintings of children at home, in the swimming pool, upon the beach and more recently, out of doors in night-time settings, increasingly unclothed.<sup>1</sup> Using the academic studio convention of drawing the nude, but unusually applying it to the child subject, Wright's deft observation conveys the particular pose and quirkiness of the young body. Her drawn outline recreates in paint the precise shape of childish limbs, the particular tilt of a youthful head. Never direct portraits as such, her images still display the changes in the growing child – a territory extended with the arrival of new friends, girls as well as boys.

In the *Twilight* series the children, now older (hard to age precisely, but clearly still pre-pubescent) engage mostly in scenes of individual, ruminative self-absorption. Where paired or grouped, they tend to maintain separate identities, unselfconscious and untroubled by the presence of the other sex – even when in a condition of complete nudity. They meet together affectionately or appear to act out roles: in *Brothers*, the younger child is carried piggy-back by his older brother; in a touching echo of Picasso's 1906 versions of *Two Brothers*; in *The Secret Place*, the boy climbs a tree and the girl stands below, lost in reverie, as if re-living the engendered role-playing of Peter Pan and Wendy. Yet whatever they do, the open-air pastimes of these children run counter to the prevailing social trends where it has been claimed that in the Britain of the present century only two out of 10 children actually play out of doors. They also seem to ignore the concern that children's bodies should be protected from prying eyes in an era dominated by fears of paedophilia and child abduction.

The quiet activities of the children are given a new focus in some of the current series by the introduction of a circular framing device which captures them as if through a spy hole. Yet rather than being voyeuristic, the effect is interestingly photographic – the black background and circular framing reminiscent of the hand painted glass slides found in Magic Lantern shows, with the artistic convention of *repoussoir* particularly evident in the leafy surround of *Shadow Garden*. As it happens, Wright's use of the child as subject is shared by other contemporary artists, many of whom are women working in the realm of film and photography. Rineke Dijkstra, Sarah Jones, Loretta Lux, Sally Mann and Annelies Strba are just a few who have worked with photographic images of children at differing stages of growth, exploring either the direct or insidious affects of cultural influence upon their development. Moreover, like Dijkstra and Lux, Wright also explores the powerful affects of artificial lighting upon her subjects. Spotlighting the children's natural environment with a torch during nocturnal forays, she observes how colours and tones alter substantially in the dark. Memorising and sketching these affects in nature, Wright then reworks the night-time experience in the studio, applying what might otherwise appear to be unnaturalistic colouring to the entire composition. Whereas for the photographers, the emphasis is on lighting the figures 'in situ', here the illumination is part of the slow evolution of the painting process itself. While other contemporary female painters including Marlene Dumas and Nicky Hoberman have also used the child as subject, what is notable in Wright's case is that she has devoted herself, until now, entirely to this subject matter. Moreover, her development as an artist totally coincides with her history as a mother - the start of her professional career coinciding with the birth of her first child.

In the way she treats this progression, Wright shares ground with the American artist, Sally Mann, who having published photographs of her own children during the 1990s, commented that: 'We are spinning a story of what it is to grow up... But we tell it all without fear and without shame.' Mann goes on to state that there is a paradox in this situation as both the beauty and the dark side of things are viewed simultaneously. 'The Japanese have a word for this dual perception: *mono no aware*. It means something like 'beauty tinged with sadness'. How is it that we must hold what we love tight to us, against our very bones, knowing we must also, when the time comes, let it go?'<sup>2</sup> Like Mann, Wright seems to celebrate the freedom of childhood but also the difficulties posed by the child's separateness. There is an unnerving combination of innocence and knowingness suggested in the gaze and pose of the growing child. The photograph may be more direct in this respect but the painting allows more room for interpretation. Both artists search for an honest record of childhood and growing up, but both seem to acknowledge that childhood is complicated. We never know the whole truth. The rapt child is caught up in his or her own world, but where exactly is that? *Silent Wanderer* or *Tree Girl* suggests the level of this childish self-absorption which at times proves difficult for the parent to break into.

For the observer, interpretation of the child subject is also vexed. Within psychoanalysis it has been suggested that the adult's viewpoint is necessarily a compromised one: 'In the effort to present the reality of the child and its perceptions, we cannot help but interpret the child in the light of adult motives; we cannot help but interpret *ourselves* through the child'.<sup>3</sup> In viewing images of the child, our responses are inevitably affected by our own childhood memories, parental responsibilities, or both. According to the art historian, Anne Higonnet, 'By the 1990s, the image of the child had become perhaps the most powerfully contradictory image in western consumer culture. Promising the future but also turned nostalgically to the past, trading on innocence but implying sexuality, simultaneously denying and arousing desire, intimate on a mass scale, media spectacles of children are bound to be ambiguous'.<sup>4</sup>

Wright's painted child subjects hold insistently to their place in the outdoor world. The settings in which they find themselves are natural, not urban, and in this perhaps lies their salvation. Yet the surrounding blackness, accentuated further by the rondels of the new internal framing in Wright's paintings, seems close to physically engulfing them; the diminishing circle of light, as well as throwing the figures into sharp relief, also threatens to render them physically untouchable, as if they are no more than evanescent projections.

In this, the mood of Wright's recent paintings suggests a wavering between maternal assurance of the uninhibited child at play on the one hand, and the disturbance in every mother's mind of what lies round the corner; of the wish for a truly idyllic, happy childhood and the realisation that this stage of human growth is nevertheless fraught and inevitably transitory. However, in this lies their power as paintings. These are indeed twilight images. They probe and invite us to reconsider our view of childhood, while attesting to the power of the painter to make us think as well as feel.

1 Lisa Wright's first son, Max, was born in 1993 and second son, Theo, followed in 1999.

2 Sally Mann, *Immediate Family* (London, 1992) u.p

3 Virginia L. Blum, *HIDE and SEEK. The Child between Psychoanalysis and Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago, 1995) p.5

4 Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (London, 1998), p.153



| Twilight Boy oil on canvas 2007 72 x 66 ins 183 x 168 cm























12 *Circle Girl* oil on canvas 2007 30 x 30 ins 76 x 76 cm



13 *Circle Boy* oil on canvas 2007 30 x 30 ins 76 x 76 cm





16 *Silent Wanderer Study* mixed media on paper 2006 7 x 5 ins 18 x 12.5 cm

17 *Luminous Green Boy study I* mixed media on paper 2006 7 x 5 ins 18 x 12.5 cm



18 *Luminous Green Boy study II* mixed media on paper 2006 7 x 5 ins 18 x 12.5 cm

19 *Arms Out* mixed media on paper 2006 7 x 5 ins 18 x 12.5 cm



## Lisa Wright

1965 Born, Kent  
 1990–93 Royal Academy Schools, London (Postgraduate Dip. Painting)  
 1984–87 Maidstone College of Art (BA First Class Hons.)  
 1997 Elected member of Newlyn Society of Artists  
 1997– Part-time lecturer at Falmouth College of Art

### Solo exhibitions

2007 *Twilight Paintings*, Beardsmore Gallery, London  
 2006 *Night Paintings*, Lemon Street Gallery, Truro, Cornwall  
 2005 *Beach Paintings*, Beardsmore Gallery  
 2003 *Pool Paintings*, Beardsmore Gallery  
 2001 Beardsmore Gallery  
 1999 Beardsmore Gallery  
 1996 Thornton/Bevan Arts, London  
 1995 Sadlers Wells Gallery, London  
 Raw Gallery, London  
 1994 The Royal Overseas League, London  
 1993 *Reflection of Two*, Greenwich Theatre Art Gallery, London

### Selected mixed exhibitions

2007 *Art Now Cornwall*, Tate Gallery, St Ives  
*Ochre Boy Standing* at the Royal Opera House  
 2006 The Sovereign European Art Prize, Bonhams, London  
*To the Edge*, Beardsmore Gallery  
 2005 *Critic's Choice* (Norbert Lynton), Newlyn Society of Artists  
 25th Anniversary Hunting Art Prizes, London  
 2004 Invited artist, Hunting Art Prizes  
 2003 Hunting Art Prizes, RCA (1st prize)  
*Critic's Choice*, (Joan Bakewell)  
 Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall  
 2002 *The Space Between*, 2 person exhibition with Mark Sunridge, Merriscourt Gallery, Oxfordshire  
 Hunting Art Prizes, RCA  
*Ten*, Beardsmore Gallery  
*From the Heart* showcase exhibition, Newlyn Art Gallery,  
 2001 *New Year Exhibition*, Cadogan Contemporary, London  
*Critic's Choice*, Newlyn Art Gallery  
 Lemon Street Gallery, 2 person exhibition with Mary Mabutt  
 2000 Hunting Art Prizes, RCA (prize winner)  
*Cheltenham Open Drawing Exhibition*, Cheltenham, Humberside University and Kunsthalle, Sierre, Switzerland  
 4 person exhibition Merriscourt Gallery, Oxfordshire  
*The Dividing Line*, Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall

1999 *Cornish Art in the Nineties*, Beatrice Royal Gallery, Hampshire  
*The Dark Show (Eclipse)*, Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall  
 Falmouth Gallery, lecturers' exhibition at FCA, Cornwall  
 1998 *Critics' Choice* (Theo Waddington)  
 Newlyn Art Gallery, Cornwall  
*Newlyn Now*, NSA artists at the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol  
*Six of the Best*, Blockhouse Gallery, Cornwall  
 1997 Hunting Art Prizes, RCA and Hunterian Museum, Glasgow  
 National Print Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London  
*Limelight*, Newlyn Art Gallery  
*Contemporary Artists*, Benjamin Hargreaves Gallery, London  
*Diverse*, 4 person show, Herbert Read Gallery (KIAD), Kent  
 1996 West Wales Art Centre, Dyfed  
 Royal Overseas League, Annual Open Exhibition, London and Edinburgh  
 New English Art Club, Mall Galleries, London (award winner)  
 Coombs Contemporary, London  
 National Print Exhibition, Mall Galleries, London  
 West Wales Art Centre, Dyfed  
 1995 Royal Overseas League Annual Open Exhibition, London and Edinburgh  
 New English Art Club, Mall Galleries  
 Royal Institute of Oil Painters, Mall Galleries (award winner)  
 West Wales Art Centre, Dyfed  
 1993 *Cocktail*, Raw Gallery, London  
*Every Colour One Can Imagine*, etchings curated by Norman Ackroyd, Beardsmore Gallery  
 Royal Academicians and Final Year Students RA Schools, RA London  
 Christopher Hull Gallery, London  
*The New Art Award*, Lynne Stern Associates, London  
*London/Leipzig*, 10 RA Students, Grassimuseum, Leipzig, Germany  
*Premiums*, Royal Academy of Arts  
 Royal Overseas League Annual Open Exhibition, London  
 1992 *Young Artists*, Lynne Stern Associates, London  
*Premiums*, Royal Academy of Arts  
 1992–2007 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition  
 1991 Nat West Art Prize, Lothbury Gallery, London

### Collections

Guinness, Unilever, BUPA, Zenecca and private collections worldwide

### Awards and prizes

2006 Sovereign European Art Prize (short-listed)  
 2005 25th Anniversary Most Popular Painting Prize at Hunting Art Prizes  
 2003 Hunting Art Prizes (1st prize)  
 Arts Council of England Award  
 2000 Hunting Art Prizes (regional prize)  
 The Villiers David Award (Fine Art)(short-listed)  
 1996 Marks & Spencer Young Artist Award  
 1994 The Winsor & Newton Young Artist Award  
 1993 The Royal Overseas League Travel Scholarship  
 W H Patterson Fine Arts Award  
 George Isted Prize  
 1992 The Royal Academy Premiums  
 Painting Prize

### Publications

2007 *Art Now Cornwall*, Susan Daniel-McElroy, Tate Publications  
 2007 *St Ives 1975–2005: Art Colony in Transition*, Peter Davies  
 2006 *The Inaugural Sovereign Art Prize*  
*The Hunting Art Prizes, 25 years of First Prize Winners*, William Packer  
*Night Paintings*, Virginia Button, Lemon Street Gallery  
 2005 *Beach Paintings*, William Packer, Beardsmore Gallery  
 2003 *Pool Paintings*, Pip Palmer, Beardsmore Gallery  
*Galleries Magazine*, February  
 Nicholas Usherwood, critical essay, Lemon Street Gallery  
 2002 *The Space Between*, Merriscourt Gallery  
 Exhibition catalogue, Beardsmore Gallery  
 2001 Newlyn Society of Artists Members' Book, NSA publication  
 Exhibition catalogue, Michael Farr, Beardsmore Gallery  
 1999 BUPA Arts Collection, Contemporary Arts Society  
 Royal Overseas League, Annual Open Exhibition catalogue  
 1994 'Working on a Large Scale', *The Artist* (October)  
 Contributor to *Drawing the Nude*, Diana Constance, Apple Press  
 Royal Overseas League, Annual Open Exhibition catalogue  
 1993 'Preview', *RA magazine*  
 1993 'Working with Traditional Drawing Media', *The Artist* (January)  
 Royal Overseas League Catalogue  
 1992 'Working with Oil', *The Artist* (June)



Fig 3 Sketchbook 2007

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