

Making Sanctuary

Essay by Anna Souter

“A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction,” wrote Virginia Woolf in 1929. In Woolf’s formulation, this “room” is both a physical place and a state of financial and social independence. To make art, she suggests, women must have a viable practical, psychological, and economic position from which to work. In a world designed for the convenience and creativity of men, women must carve these spaces for themselves.

Artists often enact small rituals in order to create their working sanctuaries. For Heidrun Rathgeb, this involves putting on a “paint-covered apron” and ceremonially brewing a cup of tea. These actions mark the transition from the artist’s “busy family home” into the quiet, secluded studio at the top of the house. Rathgeb’s serene compositions recall moments of stillness captured from a world in constant motion: “My room is my sanctuary; a paper-, pencil-, and book-covered floor, a paint-splattered mess, a space where no one looks and thinks and feels except myself. A space where in the moments in between I drink Japanese tea from a tiny iron cup, where I paint into the small hours without any notion of time nor the other world outside my door.”

For Joanna Logue, sanctuaries are to be found outside the home. Her creative process starts by moving within and observing her local environment: “The gift of acquiring acute observation and walking mindfully in the landscape, in solitude, is akin to having a room of one’s own, where we might return to our true selves and have the space to make sense of our place in the world.” Logue’s complex scenes of marshes and ponds are devoid of human protagonists, but they powerfully evoke the interconnectedness of living beings experienced by the artist’s walking body.

Anonymous Was a Woman is threaded through with landscape scenes and depictions of the more-than-human world. Penny Davenport’s small oil on wood painting *Go On Just Listen* speaks to a quiet moment spent taking in the sounds of a landscape, where peaks rise out of a grassy hillside like breasts. As Virginia Woolf writes, “it is in our idleness, in our dreams, that the submerged truth sometimes comes to the top.” Mary Herbert’s *Of Clay* further suggests a synchronicity between female body and landscape. Herbert’s luminous pastels reveal hints of a figure emerging out of an environment that is both psychically charged dreamscape and topographical wilderness. Gleaming pools and earthy fissures conjure a sense of the intimate relationship between woman and place.

Reflective bodies of water punctuate the exhibition, from Angela Lane’s moonlit scene *Lunar Halo* to Rebecca Harper’s *They had sent my little fish into hiding*. Harper’s lyrical paintings combine imagery from multiple sources in order to create compositions that are both instantly familiar and otherworldly. Harper’s current body of work features “metaphors of a room where the landscape of the river is situated beyond the window. The landscape becomes a metaphor for freedom and power.” The river and its reflective surface takes on a powerful emotional charge: “the river is symbolic of home for me, located at the water’s periphery the water reflects the environment and the metaphysical. It mirrors, carrying references to the rain, the Mikvah, the womb, the ritual of water that helps to cleanse, heal, and purify the body, and through this it connects us to ourselves, others, to life, to earth.”

The psychological charge of water is evoked in Julia Adelgren's *Girl*, which depicts a silhouetted woman swimming alone in a shadowy lake. Adelgren suggests that "every artist has a room of their own, and that is a space of the mind." However, without a corresponding physical studio space in which to give form to the artworks, "you build invisible walls of solid glass around you, in order to stay connected to the work, and to protect it." She argues that it is "hard to live like this while also maintaining an openness to the world. Speaking for myself, I ended up feeling like I had driven that way of working to the very edge, and there was no other way to turn than into that shell, to become a duo Russian Matryoshka doll with the studio."

The idea of the studio as a shell resonates with Angela Lane, who writes: "The space you create from is more than just a room, it's a carapace of sorts - it becomes a part of you and the work you make." Currently in the process of leaving her studio, Lane is seeking out new modes of producing art, inspired by figures such as Luchita Hurtado, Vladimir Nabokov, and Virginia Woolf, who created masterpieces from a wardrobe, bathroom, or garden shed.

Many of the artists in *Anonymous Was a Woman* suggest that psychological space is more important than physical space. Marenne Welten writes, "A room of one's own is a room in myself where I work, paint, and draw." Welten crafts an extended metaphor of moving from door to door within her mind, gathering "experiences, possibilities, materials, colours, feelings." After many years of looking around, Welten found herself back where she started: "There was no longer a need or excuse for me to wander in the other rooms. So I closed the adjoining doors and I started to paint. Life moulds you into a person you are not able to see at first. It takes time to see it, lying before your feet."

Themes of freedom and female solitariness recur in *Anonymous Was a Woman*, such as Heidrun Rathgeb's evocative painting *Girl in the Wind* and Clara Adolph's *Woman, Dreaming*. Adolphs portrays a moment that is simultaneously universal and deeply personal. Through this image of a young woman stretched out on the grass with her eyes closed, Adolphs seeks to capture the feeling of having "a room of one's own". She explains, "I see a person who is free and content in their space, and this is what my studio is to me. A space where I can disconnect from the world and create."

Alice Watkins, whose three paintings are inspired by lines from Virginia Woolf's writings, also finds a sense of freedom in the studio: "I love being able to afford a space of my own and love to paint, however, sometimes I do feel a tad selfish - these egotistical thoughts soon diminish once I smell the aroma of turpentine and then I realise that I am free. I am free to pursue knowledge and creativity in a space that provides me with painting time that is sealed off from outside interference."

Here, Watkins taps into a common formulation associating women's creativity with selfishness. Woolf's essay attempts to encourage women to find a space of "one's own" in which to make art; however, from her radical feminist perspective, when women make time for creativity, it does not result in disconnected, individualistic artworks. Instead, Woolf recognises that "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."

In her 2014 novel *Dept. of Speculation*, Jenny Offill plays with the image of the woman who rejects social convention in favour of being an artist: "My plan was to never get married. I was going to be an art monster instead." Offill explores the socially engrained ideas that a woman is made monstrous by pursuing her intelligence and creative practice, and that solitude and

selfishness are necessary to art making. The “art monster” doesn’t deal with practicalities, with bills and food shopping and getting children ready for school. What the writings of Offill and Woolf reveal, however, is the generosity and openness at the heart of artistic production; every work that leaves the artist’s studio is a gift to the world and the product of infinite tiny collaborations.

Gosia Machon, whose ink on paper work is inspired by folk art traditions, touches on these issues when she explores the dual feelings of freedom and duty that accompany her visits to the studio: “I feel the privilege of living in a time and culture in where as an artist it is possible for me to rent a studio room for myself. Saying that, I still have a particular set up due to being a mother: At home in our small apartment, every room is occupied by the whole family. At the studio I combine things, as I also do jobs that support me and my children there. A space that only I occupy starts first inside of me, in my own mind and in my unconscious.”

Chechu Àlava has created new work in response to *A Room of One’s Own*. Her painting *Woolf’s Table* draws on a 1965 photograph by Gisèle Freund of Virginia Woolf’s desk in the garden of the writer’s house in East Sussex. Àlava explains, “A strong feeling of empathy makes me choose an image and paint it. In many cases, it is an emotion that appears all of a sudden and has a connection with the mystery of beauty.” The soft-edged image is emotionally charged with the possibility of creation, a pen resting lightly on the empty page of an open notebook.

This exhibition is ripe with the potential of women’s art making, which has come a long way since the days of forced female anonymity. Woolf argues that “any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at.” This exhibition draws attention to the multitude of possible paths open to women artists today, beyond the crazed witch, repressed anonymous figure, or art monster. *Anonymous Was a Woman* teases out the relationships between inner and outer worlds, affirming the links between psychological and physical spaces, and the significance of having a “room of one’s own” in which to work.