

Standing in front of a painting can sometimes make you feel something; there can be a sort of sensory reaction, prompted by colour, scale, line, or texture, or a combination of these components. For some this feeling can be dominant and memorable, others might get it as a fleeting moment, barely perceptible and perhaps less important to them than the many other ways of responding to an artwork.

Since I haven't seen Emma McIntyre's new paintings in person, my response here is more reading than feeling. i.e. *painfully inadequate* for Emma's work, in which the varying scales of the canvasses, bright colour washes and dancing lines seem to me to invite a physical response. To you who are standing in the gallery: feel it. I print out the images she sends me and respond thus.

The paintings in *Madonna of the Pomegranate* are mostly red, blue and purple. Here is one with no blue or purple at all, mostly reddish tones,

I am reminded of blue and purple nevertheless.

Yellow? What place has yellow here? It soothes the purple.

Does green feature? Not really (it does, but I am ignoring it; it does its job without fuss).

Pink (red) dots, orange (red) wipes.

Blue dots, blue wipes, red stains, blue stains. On top of all,

purple struts, as purple does.

There is a Japanese term, *notan*, which refers to the balancing of light and dark in a composition; *notan* studies can be made with just black and white to see the composition of a painting more clearly and I try with some of Emma's. What I find is that the diagonals, which are so prominent in colour (isn't everything drifting sideways and out of the picture plane?) are not so in a pared down sketch. There are framing devices around the edges, all the way around, or just along the bottom, and I think it is this that makes the paintings feel relaxed, solid even — despite the float and the drift.

I am thinking about Emma's work this morning as I line my eyelids with khol. The applicator is a little plastic rod that I push into a metal tube and sort of rub, drag and pull along my lashline. I am preparing for the dentist and some long-headed advice echoes in my head: "Always dress up to go to the hairdresser, so they know what to improve on" ... though wouldn't flossing be the better option?. I am thinking, as I do this, about the tools of painting and the broad range that Emma uses. Even on the computer screen I can see that the paint has been applied and moved around in more than one way.

What's this? A leaf. And there: a flower. A spiral of a shell reference — I have one in the studio too, on an unresolved painting, a line turning around itself, hinting of the sea and some soft intelligent creature within, origins. I open a book on painter Hilma af Klint and there it is again, that damned shell.

Spring: flowers
Autumn: leaves

On pomegranate symbolism in art, architecture and adornment: there are so many avenues to take. I go to the chapter 'P: Pomegranate' in Kate Lebo's *The Book of Difficult Fruit* and read about Persephone, who in Greek myth eats the food of the underworld (in the form of some pomegranate seeds) meaning she must forever return some months of the year.¹ Back to her husband Hades, to whom her father Zeus married her. Away from her mother Demeter, goddess of harvest and fertility, who mourns. Her coming and going from below the earth become the seasons; spring she returns, pale and strange.

In the chapter, Lebo describes how pomegranates have been associated with fertility for millennia, whether they are smashed at weddings (so many seeds) or used as contraceptive in ancient Greece (lab tests on rats and guinea pigs in the 70's confirm a drop in fertility).

As for Sandro Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (1487), source of Emma's exhibition title, the imagery of death and rebirth aligns with the Christian narrative the painting might foreshadow.

Another interpretation is that this particular pomegranate represents a heart, due to the way Botticelli has pictured the chambers of the fruit correctly mimicking cardiac anatomy.²

A bloody heart.

Emma emails me some paintings she has been looking at and they are delightfully idiosyncratic. What I glean is that her abstract world uses figurative painting as a sort of browsable material and that, judging by these images that range from the 15th century to the 20th, her aesthetic treasures floaty shapes, flouncy motifs and colour that acts overtly rather than describes or delineates.

Today, reading Oscar Wilde's play *Salomé*, a pomegranate metaphor leaps out. Salomé, speaking to John the Baptist in his cell:



"It is thy mouth that I desire, lokanaan. Thy mouth is like a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory — it is like a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of ivory."³

Red (lips?) against white (teeth?). Blood. Violent desire. Salomé's striking description of John the Baptist's body (against his will).

Another day and I have pomegranates on my mind. I wander through Hallwyska Museet, a lavishly decorated house gifted to the city of Stockholm, full of art, ceramic and decoration collected and commissioned by Wilhelmina von Hallwyl. I am suddenly intent on finding a pomegranate. There are some places you expect them to crop up — a few days ago I opened a *bon appétit* magazine and counted the number of pages until the fruit appeared: eleven.

The walls of the billiard room are covered in leather tooled wallpaper patterned with a strange fruit... I enlist the help of the person working in the giftshop who rises to the occasion, but finds little information on the wallpaper other than a detailed inventory of the cost of purchase and restoration. "Is it a pineapple?" he asks (it is clearly not, but my pomegranate suggestion is also flimsy). Instead we track down a pomegranate in a Dutch still life up on the barricaded top floor. He walkie talkies the guard and I am allowed to go up and look. Upstairs the gallery guide/guard is also amenable to the search and starts looking for other possible pomegranate paintings in the salon. But it is just the one painting. The light reflects badly off the varnish so I have to stand and peer at it from a side angle. "Why are you looking for pomegranates?" they ask. "Oh, I'm writing something" I trail off, thanking them for helping.

"I always found fruitful ideas more interesting than the complete development of those ideas."⁴

As I leave I spot some stone wall decorations in the entranceway, rounded bottom-like fruits, surrounded by swirling ribbons. More pomegranates?

I buy a real one on the way home, roll it on the kitchen counter a few times and stick a straw in, delicious.

"The juice is sweet, acidic, and tannic, wicking the moisture from my mouth in a pleasant way, a quenched feeling that also makes me want another drink."⁵

1. Kate Lebo, *The Book of Difficult Fruit: Arguments for the Tart, Tender, and Unruly (with recipes)*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021), p. 207

2. Oscar Wilde, *Salomé: A Tragedy in One Act*, trans. Lord Alfred Douglas, (London: John Lane, 1894).

3. Davide Lazzeri, Ahmed Al-Mousawi, Fabio Nicoli, 'Sandro Botticelli's Madonna of the Pomegranate: the hidden cardiac anatomy', *Interactive Cardiovascular and Thoracic Surgery*, Vol. 28, Iss. 4, p. 619-621

4. René Daniëls quoted in a review by Lauren O'Neill-Butler, *Artforum*, Summer 2014, Vol. 52, No. 10

5. Lebo, *The Book of Difficult Fruit*, p. 209



Emma McIntyre
River red, 2022
oil and oil stick on linen
78 x 94" / 198 x 240cm