

LYDIA BLAKELEY | HOLD ON FOR DEAR LIFE

*So teach me now that things can only get better  
Only get, they only get, take it on from here  
You know, I know that things can only get better*  
D:Ream, 1993

A woman, dressed in office clothing, is stretching. She reaches her hands to the floor, a conventional stretch of the muscles in one's legs and back. There are two pot plants, one to each side of her on the canvas, but even though they are strangely congruous to the figure of the woman, they are not part of the same area of the canvas, which is instead divided into three. Each of the plants and the woman belongs to its own section of the canvas in a way that is reminiscent of works such as Pauline Boty's *'The Only Blonde in the World'* (1963) and *'Colour Her Gone'* (1962). The difference in composition is that the three parts of Blakeley's canvas are not equal sizes, with the plant on the left occupying a significant portion of the canvas. Its size makes it oddly echo the relationship of the protagonist and the plant he stands next to in Lucian Freud's *'Interior at Paddington'* (1951). In both Blakeley's and Freud's painting, the plant has a slyly ambiguous role; decoration but mirroring the subject in their interior space (an office, a front room of a flat) whilst perhaps being a subtle suggestion that a different reality is possible.



Pauline Boty, *The Only Blonde in the World*, 1963. Collection of Tate, UK



Lucian Freud, *Interior at Paddington*, 1951. Collection of the National Museums of Liverpool

The woman is part of the painting *'Forward Fold'* by Lydia Blakeley. She is based on a photograph that Blakeley found in a book published in 1988 by Time-Life Books titled *'Managing Stress: From Morning to Night (Fitness, Health & Nutrition)'* an educational book in pre-internet days of how to combat stress in the workplace through a series of stretches, yoga and meditation. To contemporary eyes the poses in the book look peculiarly static; we are not used to exercise routines being pictured in a series of stills. They are less instructive (their original purpose) and more mementoes of a time that informs our present but in a broken line. In a painting titled *'Release/Variation'* we see the same office worker bending forward in her chair so that the back of her knuckles reach down to the floor. A plant, similar to the two in *'Forward Fold'* is seen on the right hand side of the canvas. A third painting titled *'Salutation'* sees the office worker in a happier pose, a sun salutation. In this work though the foliage of the plant breaks free from its part of the canvas and protrudes to where the office worker is.

The three paintings are included in Lydia Blakeley's new solo show *'Hold On For Dear Life'* that takes place across both gallery spaces at Niru Ratnam from 2 October to 9 November. The attire of the office worker in each painting, bland corporate setting and source material locate the works in a specific timeframe and context, that of the corporate capitalist world of the 1980s and 1990s. This was a time when a globalised post-industrial economy took increasing hold in the west to begin with and then through the forces of economic globalisation through other parts of the world. The Fall of the Berlin Wall and collapse of the USSR heralded this period of change. In retrospect, the bombing of the Twin Towers marked the beginning of its decline although it took until the Global Financial Crash of 2008 to definitively mark that. In Britain New Labour under Tony Blair personified this new era, their victory in the polls in 1997 being soundtracked by the co-option for D:Ream's single *'Things Can Only Get Better'*. It is a period that has been characterised by its close relationship with loosely-regulated finance, a sector that became

dominant in economies such as the UK's. The boom in such country's was driven by money, consumables and the unshaken belief that this would be the way things would indefinitely continue, and that history would now be a global consensus of capitalist liberal democracy, a feeling famously distilled in the title of Francis Fukuyama's book *'The End of History'*.

Blakeley's paintings in the show move through the trappings and aspirations of this emerging world order such as the clunky early mobile phones and rolodex of '*Motorola Rolodex*' and '*Model 5350*' which now are curiosities of that time. Michael Douglas would famously speak into a Motorola DynaTAC 8000X as Gordon Gekko in the 1987 film '*Wall Street*'. Like the mobile phone the rolodex, although invented in the 1950s, came to be associated with corporate culture. Data, transmitted via the mobile phone and stored as contacts on the Rolodex, was money; a 1985 episode of the detective television series '*Moonlighting*' involved a stolen rolodex being ransomed for \$50,000 because of the contacts that it contained. '*Fiscal Drag*' and '*Majority Shareholder*' are vignettes of the suits and jewellery available for those driving the financial growth of the era.

It would be simplistic to think that these paintings are disapproving of this era, and there is nothing about them which suggests such a reading. Instead Blakeley brings a gaze that seems to hover between fascination and a more detached dispassionate view. Now, some of these objects and poses seem to be of a historical era that is as distant as the post-war period rather than closely linked to the present. "He was the future once", was the new Conservative leader David Cameron's taunt to Tony Blair in the former's first appearance at Prime Minister's Questions in 2005, but Cameron's phrase might be widened to cover the entire period that Blair's reign encompassed. Blakeley's show is shot through with ambiguity, a recollection of modes of being that seemed immovable. Things, we all thought, could only get better.

Of course we now realise that this was not quite the case. A hint that the progress of late global capitalism had a flipside to it is evident in the two related paintings '*Regina Emerita*' and '*Modus Operandi*', and it is worth noting that the composition of these two works again nods to Pauline Boty. '*Regina Emerita*' seems to point towards a glamorous forward-looking society embodied by Concorde, whereas the top section of '*Modus Operandi*' seems to allude to financial crimes and mismanagement that started to come to light as the Global Financial Crash unfurled.

And yet these two modes of thinking about this period are interconnected. Whilst globalisation was celebrated both as an economic and cultural phenomenon benefitting all who were touched by it. Few realised or argued that there would be many who were left behind by it. And even fewer realised that whilst global capitalism would generate vast revenues it was hiding its fault-lines whether in complex financial products such as credit derivatives, in growing inequality or in an increasing gulf between the West and the rest. This interweaving of capitalism and its discontents can also be seen in '*It's a Man's World I*' and '*It's a Man's World II*' by Boty where in the former images of a US jet bomber are juxtaposed with figures including Elvis Presley and indigenous Native Americans.

How then to think back to those stretches of the first three Blakeley paintings discussed here, as well as the hand exercises of the suited individual in smaller accompanying paintings '*Loose Fists*', '*Circulation*' and '*Pressure Points*'. Instead of seeing these paintings as depictions of individuals attempting to manage stress in their corporate workplace, it might be arguable that the stress that these individual workers were trying to address were not simply in their own bodies. Stress was built into a system that looked stable but was precarious. For those who were riding the wave of global capitalism from captains of industry through to office workers, it made sense not to think about where this could all end up. Instead it made more sense to take ten minutes out to do a forward fold at one's desk, without even leaving the scene that embodied global capitalism, the office. You didn't even have to leave your desk, although that plant did in moments of weakness seem to annoyingly suggest that there might be a world outside somewhere. Sometimes, during a salutation perhaps, that other world might even intrude into your consciousness. But only for a moment, before returning to the next task, waiting for the next monthly pay cheque and progressing through the ranks. And after enough pay cheques and progression, one would be able to afford a mobile phone, fill the rolodex with high-powered contacts, fly from New York to London faster than the speed of sound. Things, after all, were only going to always get better.

Niru Ratnam

#### ABOUT LYDIA BLAKELEY

Lydia Blakeley's subject matter is, quite simply, the world around her. The paintings are her observations of what surrounds her, often first translated through the screen of her camera-phone or her laptop, and then translated once more into the medium of paint. More subtly though, her works are about a particular form of looking at the world, and that is through the filter of aspiration. Her subject-matter ranges from seemingly perfect holiday scenes, mid-century modernist home decoration, the perfect smile, hip food and drinks, streetwear and even the esoteric world of best-in-show pets.

Blakeley zooms in on a new way of presenting ourselves that has thrived in recent years. This is often via our smartphones and platforms such as Instagram where subjects pretend to present themselves in an honest or neutral light, but are often self-positioning, showing off, or subtly (or not) attaching themselves to the latest desirable item, trend or look. Particular scenes or memes become a hot trend that often passes a few weeks later, and there is an unspoken race in the act of attaching one's image to that moment. Through the act of painting this very contemporary process, Blakeley slows and stills this phenomenon. Her paintings make still the rapid and overwhelming welter of desirable phenomena that we are bombarded with on our screens.

Blakeley often close crops a particular part of the image that she is working from, and then starts with a pink underpainting. From there she makes a chalk pastel sketch on top of the underpainting, adds a wash of colour, and then returns to work on details. There is an evenness to the surface of her paintings that results from the consistency of this technique but this process also brings out a certain evenness of gaze that is dispassionate, deadpan and cool.