

Ishbel Myerscough
Kitchen table, 2021-2022

These were years of sacrifice: sacrifice of everyday ease, sacrifice of want, sacrifice of duty, sacrifice of desperation, sacrifice to political ambition. Laid out full stretch on the hard wood of a kitchen table, a boy gazes from the corner of his eyes. It is not a trusting gaze but wary, and well it might be. The tabletop is no place for the healthy: it's the resting place of the sick and the dead. This body still pulses with breath and blood, glowing in licks of red around his fingertips, the rims of his eyes, toes and earlobes. Nevertheless, the suggestion of death is embedded in this painting's composition. The long, thin, stripped body in its white undergarments, contained by a canvas tight as a coffin, looks back to Hans Holbein's *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb* (c.1522) in which Jesus appears human, vulnerable, and compellingly dead. His long dark hair flops back, and his head tilts as though to speak. At the centre of the painting is Christ's right hand, and the wound he carries, vivid against grey flesh: his body is suspended between light and darkness, this life and the next.

Myerscough, too, paints a body in transition, not between life and death, but between childhood and adulthood. With its torn, wrinkled fabric and cracked marble, Holbein locates Christ's tomb in the flawed world of the everyday. The table on which Myerscough's son lies, too, is marked by use and time. The rich wood is gouged, its edges scored and pitted. Bleached circles and a hovering veil of pink betray decades of tea spillage. Like the tabletop, the body above carries markings of its individuality, and the artist looks closely, attentive to every freckle, every hair, the blue veins patterning the pale skin. Its vulnerability is inescapable.

Myerscough's ink drawings expose her private world in all its excess: a place of art, books, laundry, an unstable dune of footwear, drawers spewing unmatched cables. None of this visual noise appears in *Kitchen table*: instead, the boy's body is isolated against a deep blue, like a figure in a 16th century portrait by Holbein or Agnolo Bronzino. All attention is forced onto the figure, luminous against the depthless indigo which appears to push him forward into the room with us.

In Carrie Mae Weems's *Kitchen Table Series* (1990), a domestic table is the stage for the dramas of life: romance, family gatherings, study, heartbreak. Perhaps because it is the central point around which everything revolves, it is the one piece of furniture that barely features in Myerscough's drawings. In this time of sacrifice, the artist paints her son lying on the family tabletop like an offering. A recognition of all that was demanded of the young on behalf of older generations. Having allowed thoughts of death to intrude, the exquisite care with which she portrays her son's body feels like a devotional gesture, holding him safely in place beneath her brush, and the darkest maternal anxieties at bay.