Anna Calleja: Painting shadows

> ***But after reading a chapter or two a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter "I." One began dodging this way and that to catch a glimpse of the landscape behind it. Whether that was indeed a tree or a woman walking I was not quite sure...***[1]

Anna Calleja (b.1997, Malta) is a painter whose work draws on personal experience, love, longing and the slipperiness of memory. Her works fuse the intimacy, indulgence and quietude of devotional paintings with quotidian, domestic references, while her content is drawn from a personal archive of photographs, memories and images of herself, pets and loved ones. Calleja's paintings seem to exist on a tightrope of tension between tenderness and melancholy, pulling her characters into scenes that softly unfold themes of love and grief, comfort and loneliness, while exploring larger ideas of patriarchy, regeneration and the legacies of colonialism. Though Calleja's compositions are deeply beautiful and uncannily familiar, they are also cut with taut flashes or discordant details; her figures might be mediated through the screen of a mobile phone, viewed from an awkward perspective, or glimpsed via a mirror or the layered reflections of windows at night. Modern technology makes a regular appearance in Calleja's paintings, a feature that might often feel jarring given the timeless quality of her work. Electrical cables, wires and chargers curl in and out of her frames, functioning as both connecting threads to the outside world and a reminder of their commonality in our everyday lives. Mobile phones appear frequently too, with Calleja describing them as a 'third eye' that reflects both an idealised version of ourselves and a black mirror to our darkest desires[2]. Phones allow us to stay connected, as well as – of course – isolating us from those we love. As such, like so many aspects of Calleja's work, they symbolise both the pro and the con, offering the prospect of communication, as well as the opportunity for absentminded avoidance.

For *The Air is Thick with Dust and Dawn,* her first solo exhibition with Lyndsey Ingram, Calleja has made 19 new paintings. These works index the places which Calleja has held as home for small moments over the last year, a period of time in which she has been renovating and preparing to move into a home of her own – A Room of One's Own – while staying with her parents or partner in Malta, or with friends and family around the world. Most of these works are interior scenes, capturing shadows, fleeting moments of peace and belonging, and furtive glances out onto the landscapes of her home country. They capture a longing for natural light, for space and serenity, as well as a way of holding onto hope for a differently imagined future, one might say a utopia. Calleja's title for the exhibition came when she was driving between her studio and her parents' house (where she was staying) at 5/6am in the morning. Travelling through an area of heavy construction (as is now common in Malta), she thought about the huge amount of change that she was undergoing personally, the massive geographical changes wrought on the landscape around her, and the violent polarisation of much of the world's politics. The air was thick with dust and dawn.

Calleja states that she 'grew up on her parents' nostalgia about Malta'[3], a country colonised by the British in 1813, which gained independence in 1964, and is still experiencing the effects of being a divided nation, bi-partisan and bilingual, rapidly developing and regenerating apace. Calleja talks about how her mother and grandmother were 'locked out of their Maltese identity'[4] with her grandmother not being permitted to speak Maltese and her mother, and

[1] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)
[2] Anna Calleja in conversation with the author, summer 2025
[3] Anna Calleja in conversation with the author, summer 2025
[4] Anna Calleja in conversation with the author, summer 2025

subsequently Calleja, growing up English-speaking. As such she felt a real sense of ostracisation from her local community as well as her Maltese matrilineage. These thoughts lead us to (Virginia) Woolf, and her insistence that as creative women we 'think back through our mothers'[5] – in Calleja's paintings it really feels as though she is trying to chart that matrilineage, to connect with her place and heritage in the post-colonial terrain of her country. For Calleja, painting a place or a location allows her to 'adapt' it to become her own. In Malta, increasingly urbanised and redeveloped, painting allows her to crystalise the moments of joy and beauty that the landscape holds, as well as her anxieties around the constant construction and the loss that that brings. She insists that as an artist her work must 'live by the principles of her own utopia'[6]. And her paintings reveal her desire to position herself within the landscape and history of her country, as well as her struggle to do so. She very rarely paints an outdoor scene, rather her works look out onto the land through windows and reflections, or she somehow places herself artificially outdoors – via the mechanism of a mobile phone for example. These are quietly revolutionary works, holding time still – building a room of her own – while she strives to imagine other possibilities.

Calleja paints predominantly in oil on panel, in a labour-intensive way that grants her work its sheen, rigour and luminescence. Her process is one of addition and subtraction, applying a layer of paint and repeatedly scraping back, sanding and making her surfaces impeccably smooth. The quick-drying nature of this method means that she often has to work late into the night or even keep her paintings in the fridge to stop them from drying too quickly, to preserve as much light as possible. Through this technique, she attains her almost translucent surfaces, revealing the deftness of her touch. Calleja's paintings on tracing paper however are much quicker and more fluid, a way for her to 'feel less pressured'[7]. These works are gestural; the softness of the paper allows her to be intuitive and impulsive, bestowing them with an organic and changeable atmosphere. Across all of her works though, she constrains her palette, balancing her choice of tones in a push and pull between warm and cool, creating a feeling that is as comforting as it is melancholic.

The titles of Calleja's works often reference significant literature, from Woolf to Sappho to Margaret Atwood. Books and words are important to Calleja and she writes and journals every day, binding her own books to contain and trace her thoughts and threads. In many ways her paintings operate as fragmented journal entries, each image possessing a narrative element that is indicated by its title. Within this exhibition all of Calleja's titles feel as though they contain movement or directionality. For example *The boat to row you back* takes its title from Margaret Atwood's *Variations on the Word Sleep* (1987), the actual line being: 'I would like to be the boat that rows you back.' This painting depicts Calleja's partner in bed asleep, an emerald-coloured (green water for the titular boat?) tallboy dominates the background while the majority of the painting is striated with waves of shadows formed by bright sunlight streaming through a blind. This is a very still and quiet painting, simultaneously tender and somewhat disconcerting (there is something eerie in the notion of watching someone sleep during the day). And yet the lyricism of its title grants it a romantic impetus and soft sentimentality. Another work, *The Next Right Move* draws its title from something Calleja's father has often said to her when she is feeling overwhelmed, as well as being the title of her ongoing to-do list. The work shows Calleja taking a selfie on her mobile phone in a round, gold-gilded mirror on a dark wall. It is a composition that Calleja has returned to several times in the same place and form over the years. For her these portraits track the passing of time and, through their regularity, allow her to take stock of where and how she is feeling, their title – and its positive

[5] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (1929)
[6] Anna Calleja in conversation with the author, summer 2025
[7] Anna Calleja in conversation with the author, summer 2025

affirmation to keep moving forward – also pointing her in the right direction, perhaps towards her own utopia.

Two other works *After the green light* and *Aftersun* were painted after a weekend away at her family home in Gozo, Malta. The green light is something that Calleja's aunt implores her to look out for at sunset; it refers to the green flash phenomenon, a rare optical effect where a brief flash of green light appears just as the sun sets or rises. Jules Verne's 1882 novel *Le Rayon-Vert (The Green Ray)* is associated with this phenomenon and its romanticised, almost psychic mythologisation around understanding one's own feelings and the thoughts of others. In both of these works we are inside a house, looking out through its windows at sunset. The silhouetted landscape of Gozo is dark below a pinking dusk sky that merges with the interior reflections of Calleja and her partner pottering domestically. Through her adroit and clever positioning of herself and her loved one both within and without the landscape, Calleja uses the reflective window as a portal to simultaneously allow access to the world outside, as well as shielding her from it.

The work *Straight dark bar* uses the Woolf quote at the top of this text to explore the edges between the creative output of women and men. Calleja's painting takes a collage by John Stezaker titled *Recto/Verso* (2012) as its starting point. In Stezaker's work the silhouette of a male face obscures – almost completely – a painting of a woman's face so that only her hair and dark red lips are visible. In Calleja's work she paints herself into the image – positioning her face in the foreground observing the original collage. This is a powerful and authoritative exercise in equality. Here Calleja places herself in front of the 'I' – the male shadow that very obviously conceals the woman behind him. Calleja describes this work as a tribute to 'all of the lost voices, all of the anonymous women'[8] who have been overshadowed and/or obfuscated by the very presence of the male 'I'.

Both *A subtle difference* and *Falling down mid flight* reveal the dual threat and potential of masculinity. They present Calleja's partner, topless, in tightly cropped compositions that only contain his abdomen, arms and hands. Here, his masculinity feels loaded with both vulnerability and destruction. His nakedness – and the beauty and luminescence with which Calleja has described his skin tones – make him feel exposed and unguarded. While his raised knuckles could be read as either playful or aggressive. These paintings take their title from a poem by Veronica Shoffstall: *After a While* (1971) (which was originally misattributed to Jorge Luis Borges). The poem opens with the lines: 'After a while you learn the subtle difference / Between holding a hand and chaining a soul' which wonderfully exemplifies the dual-edged-ness of masculinity and its interface with romantic relationships.

Many other works in the exhibition operate through similar twofold emotional states; vulnerability and menace, exposure and shelter, comfort and anxiety, particularly a number of paintings of animals and family pets, *Toby* (a very honest title for a friend's dog) is an aerial view of the protagonist resting/stretching across the floor while the toes of a human reveal the perhaps portentous presence of someone watching him. Another image of Toby, *A great hope* (the title coming from Emily Dickinson's *A Great Hope Fell* [1938]) borrows the exquisite palette of Piero della Francesca's *The Nativity* (c.1480) to present the dog amidst blue violet, yellow and brown, eagerly and earnestly waiting for something (food?) with zero ulterior motive. Cats also feature frequently, and there is a sincerity across these paintings that relates directly to the sincerity of animals, they have no façade, no pretence, nothing is concealed and there is an honesty to their emotions that human beings simply can't achieve.

[8] Anna Calleja in conversation with the author, summer 2025

In this exhibition Calleja is attempting to hold on to the things she loves so that they are not lost or destroyed. These things are her people, her pets, her home, landscape and cultural history, as well as her hopes for the utopia that her work imagines. She is grasping for light, striving forward, following the notion that in today's world a painting of a thing might survive the thing itself. There is a radicality to the tenderness and dignity of Calleja's paintings, they use their beauty to disarm. Her works are quietly revolutionary and autobiographically charged, holding time still – building a room of her own.