

ANGELA DE LA CRUZ

Angela de la Cruz's brush with death

Rumpled canvases and broken studio paraphernalia: is Angela de la Cruz mourning the end of painting itself?

Angela de la Cruz's paintings are rumbustious, tragicomic and sometimes abject affairs. A canvas sits in a chair and admires its twin on the wall. Both paintings are brown, scuzzy monochromes, and the one in the chair has got mangled in its attempt to sit down. The stretcher has been broken, and the painting is wedged into the seat. De la Cruz's *Self* (1997) is a gag about reverie and narcissism, about paintings as objects and paintings as images, and about paintings as beings. Painting looks at painting, lost in thought. But they are just things of wood and canvas and paint; it's more a case of the dumb staring at the dumb.

The whole situation might be taken for a model of the kind of lonesome identification artists sometimes have with the things that they do. Day after day, artists sit in their studios and lose themselves in contemplation of their work. Sometimes they find themselves there, too, or think they do. Who knows what goes on in the artist's mind as they stare at their work on the wall? It's a conundrum. *Self* is one of the earlier works in De la Cruz's new exhibition at Camden Arts Centre in London. There has always been an element of buffoonery about much of her work. These are paintings whose condition as art is precarious, and whose sorry plight is dramatised as a kind of stoicism. Canvases are ripped, or falling off their stretchers; their surfaces are curdled, puckered, sometimes soiled and sometimes slick and shiny, like so much fetishistic rainwear. Her paintings cower and lean in corners, or flop exhausted from the sheer strain of being in public. These paintings are like so much discarded clothing or violated skin. If they have a life of their own, it is one of constant, unremitting effort.

Further paintings use the painted-over carcasses of metal cabinets, and old art deco sections of wardrobes. One of these, *Still Life*, incorporates an old wooden table that I kept in my studio for years, and gave to the artist along with some other studio paraphernalia when I stopped painting in the mid-90s. The legs poke out at an angle from beneath a great, lumpy brown canvas. The whole thing looks like the picked-over carcass of a dead animal.

Born in Galicia in north-west Spain in 1965, De la Cruz has spent her entire career in London; this small, deftly curated survey of her work is the first to be held in a public British institution. When I first knew her, De la Cruz worked in a studio so small and cluttered, it was hard to tell where her work began and ended; even a scrunched-up canvas torn from its stretcher and crumpled up under her chair might, in fact, be a finished work. What appears to be a black bin liner, a crumpled black canvas, lies on the floor of the gallery. It looks like nothing, and that's its title: *Nothing*. When does nothing become something?

A large white canvas, *Homeless*, is jammed in a corner of the gallery, like a child being punished. This big, off-white monochrome comes as a sort of apotheosis to a long history of other artists' white paintings – the purity and spiritual aspirations of Kazimir Malevich's white-on-white square, painted over 90 years ago; the expunged whites of Piero Manzoni's kaolin Achromes; and Robert Ryman's long career dedicated almost entirely to white paintings – recast, in De la Cruz's work, as a comedy of embarrassment. A tradition of aesthetic hygiene has been replaced with a careless painterliness. A second, smaller near-white canvas occupies another corner, almost shrinking from sight. This is titled *Ashamed*.

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I first wrote about de la Cruz when she made *Larger Than Life*, a painting for the ballroom floor in the Royal Festival Hall, a vast thing that had to be painted by an army of assistants in an old dockyard building in Woolwich. This staggering wreck, crash-landed in the hall, was, the artist said, like a huge woman who couldn't dance and had fallen to the floor. One could see much of De la Cruz's work as a response to all the talk about the death of painting that periodically grips the art world. Painting may be dead, but it won't lie down – except that De la Cruz's does, and worse. Her paintings fall over, sprawl on the floor, sag, fold, appear gutted. If there is something clownish about the way her paintings mimic their demise, they are also often near-balletic. In 2001, a work by De la Cruz became a character in a dance choreographed for Ballet Rambert by Rafael Bonachela. Funny though her work might be, there has always been an air of vulnerability about it. Her work is a play on the folly of painting; it is also a kind of self-portraiture. Which brings us inevitably to De la Cruz herself, and her own body as well as her body of works; the artist and her work have always felt of a piece. Taken up by galleries throughout Europe, in 2005 she was midway through organising a major show in Lisbon (and in talks about this show) when she suffered a brain haemorrhage. While in a coma for several months, she gave birth to her daughter. Her recovery has been slow and is unlikely to be complete. A long hiatus ensued; last year, with the aid of assistants, she began working again.

One of the most recent works here is the sort of plastic and metal chair you might find in any waiting room. The legs have given way, and it is sprawled on the floor, as though it has collapsed under someone's weight. It is a dismal statement. Another new work, *Hung*, is a plain white rectangle with a dark border. Perfectly painted, *Hung* stares back at you like a face, or another self. But there is something wrong with the unseen stretcher behind the canvas, something that buckles the sheer surface; it makes it seem more human.

Adrian Searle