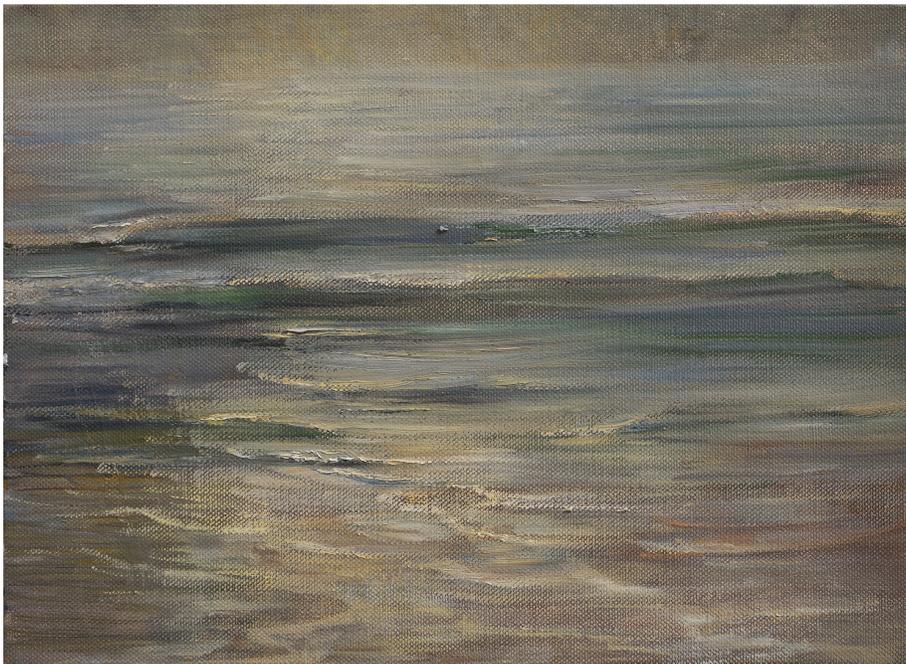


Celia Paul Desdemona for Hilton by Celia

Private View 6 – 8pm, Thursday 15 September 2016

Exhibition 16 September – 29 October 2016

Victoria Miro Mayfair, 14 St George Street, London W1S 1FE



Celia Paul, Last Light on the Sea, 2016

Victoria Miro is delighted to present an exhibition of new work by Celia Paul. Since her first solo exhibition at Victoria Miro in 2014, there has been an increased focus on self-portraiture and seascapes. For this exhibition, examples from both bodies of work offer touchstones for thoughts about time, transience, spirituality and mortality.

Paul has produced a large number of evocative self-portraits over the course of her career. In these new works, she sits with her hands in her lap rather than with brush in hand, as if she were one of her own sitters. While her head and shoulders are painted with delicate free brushstrokes and possess an otherworldly quality, the clothes she wears, by contrast, are described with thick impasto. The paintings open up a painterly and conceptual dialogue between the dual role of subject and artist – caught between self-possession and self-scrutiny – as well as offering an extended consideration of the essential dualities of the medium – its ability to capture qualities of form, light and atmosphere, and its material presence.

Titled after the month in which they were commenced, the self-portraits are suffused with echoes and resonances of passing time, which in turn points to the poignancy and essential melancholy of the medium. Yet, there's a candour to these new works. As Paul says: 'As a young woman I felt very self-conscious when I looked in the mirror. I feel more confident now because I don't really mind how I appear to people, and so it's made me look at myself more truthfully.' A renewed commitment to self-portraiture may also relate to the death of the artist's mother in February 2015. Between 1977 and 2007 Paul produced a series of paintings of her mother. In these recent paintings there is a sense of a torch being passed down through the generations: Paul is now around the age her mother was when she started to paint her, an age at which she says 'a woman needs to be looked at.'

Paul's art stems from a deep connection with subject matter. While markedly different in character to her self-portraits, her seascapes similarly focus on a subject she knows well. During the 1970s, Paul's father was head of the Lee Abbey religious community in north Devon. Paul returned to this stretch of coastline to make studies for the paintings in this exhibition. The works highlight the painter's challenge not only to capture specific states of matter – water and air – but to attempt to capture the moment. *Wave Traces in Sand, 2016*, in which the artist records the momentary 'drawing' made by the action of a retreating wave on the shoreline, highlights the near-impossibility of the task

A shared characteristic with the self-portraits is that each wave has its own distinct character of form, tone and texture, becoming a kind of horizontal portrait. Taking the idea of portraiture in a more elemental direction, the seascapes are permeated by a sense of mortality, of bodies becoming dissolute and consciousness shifting into water, energy and light, as in the haunting *Last Light on the Sea, 2016*. Paul has spoken of the seascapes in terms of feeling in flux following her mother's death. They speak to the disorienting experience of grief. And yet, for Paul, solace can be found in the consoling beauty of nature and in the flow of time that connects us all.

The exhibition coincides with the launch of the publication *Desdemona for Celia* by Hilton, conceived by Paul and the acclaimed writer and critic Hilton Als, published by Victoria Miro (£35.00).

This publication follows their collaboration at Gallery Met, New York on the occasion of the Metropolitan Opera's 2015 production of *Otello*. The book features Paul's paintings and drawings alongside a nuanced selection of photographs as well as texts by Paul and Als. The works were shown at Gallery Met in part to evoke the enigmatic literary figure of Desdemona. While Paul does not work explicitly from literary sources, the human desires and failings Desdemona's story expresses resonate in this evolution of her work. Certainly, the story of Desdemona strikes a chord with the solemnity of Paul's self-portraits, their feeling of isolation and longing. Similarly, the seascapes chime with references to water in *Othello*, in which, for example, Othello talks about Desdemona being as 'false as water'. The subtle alteration of the title of the publication to become this exhibition's title, *Desdemona for Hilton by Celia*, is intended to honour the friendship between Paul and Als and their continuing creative conversation.

Paul has had recent major solo exhibitions including *Desdemona for Celia* by Hilton at Gallery Met, New York (2015-16); *Gwen John and Celia Paul: Painters in Parallel*, Pallant House Gallery, Chichester (2012-13); The Grave's Art Gallery, Sheffield (2005); Abbot Hall, Kendal (2004). She has also participated in group exhibitions including *Forces in Nature* curated by Hilton Als at Victoria Miro (2015); *Self-Consciousness* curated by Peter Doig and Hilton Als at VeneKlasen/Werner gallery, Berlin (2010); *The School of London: Bacon to Bevan* at Musée Maillol, Paris (1998) and *British Figurative Painting of the 20th Century* at The Israel Museum, Jerusalem (1992). Her work is in the collections of institutions including Abbot Hall, Kendal; British Museum, London; Carlsberg Foundation, Copenhagen; Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Frissiras Museum, Athens; Metropolitan Museum, New York; National Portrait Gallery, London; Herzog Ulrich Gallery, Brunswick, Germany; Ruth Borchard Collection; Murray Edwards College, Cambridge; Saatchi Collection, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and the Yale Center for British Art, Connecticut.

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