

'THAT WHICH IS LOST'
EXHIBITION TEXT
BY ALICE SPAWLS



Self Portrait (Mystery Cycle I), 2020, oil on canvas on board, 60x110cm



Self Portrait (Mystery Cycle II), 2020, oil on canvas on board, 60x80cm

*Near the start of *The Winter's Tale*, Mamillius, the young prince of Sicily, tells us that 'a sad tale's best for winter.' Shakespeare would have expected us to be sceptical of his title: a 'winter's tale' signified some romantic nonsense to while away a winter's eve. His play is neither silly, however, nor random. And despite the gap of sixteen years that separates the third and fourth acts, it has a deeply satisfying structure.*

It begins in winter, at the end of a nine-month visit by Polixenes, the king of Bohemia, to his childhood friend, Leontes, king of Sicily. Hermione, Leontes' queen, begs him to extend his stay, and Polixenes agrees. On seeing this, Leontes grows jealous and decides to poison his friend. Polixenes escapes to Bohemia, but Hermione is thrown in prison, where she gives birth to a daughter. Leontes instructs a servant to abandon the baby in some desolate place. Word arrives from the Oracle at Delphi confirming Hermione's and Polixenes' innocence, and warning that Leontes will have no heir until 'that which is lost' is found. But it is already too late. Prince Mamillius wastes away and Hermione succumbs to heartbreak. Leontes is left to mourn his lost family and his barren future.

The story resumes sixteen years later with a new generation. It is summertime, and Polixenes' son, Florizell, is in love with Perdita, a shepherd's daughter. Polixenes forbids the match, so the couple fly to Sicily, where Perdita's identity is revealed. Leontes and Polixenes reconcile, and Hermione, presented in the form of a statue, comes back to life and is restored to her family.

The *Winter's Tale*, then, is a play of second chances, of art fulfilling time's promise, or reviving that which was dead or dormant. There is a simplicity and absurdity (as in the famous stage direction, 'Exit, pursued by a bear') to the story that lesser hands would have struggled to transform beyond romantic nonsense, however charming.

Instead, we are presented with a series of elegant paradoxes, or 'impossibilia'. Just as the Oracle upsets Leontes' certainties, so we are asked to accept not only the discovery of a lost child, but the restoration of a dead wife. Art is the medium – the statue, the play itself – by which all is made well. 'This is an art,' as Polixenes puts it, 'which does mend nature, change it rather, but the art itself is nature.'

In his later plays, including *The Winter's Tale*, Shakespeare often pointed both to the artifice of the theatre and its great power. When Perdita dresses up as queen of the sheep-shearing feast, she may be playing make-believe but she is also, unknowingly, revealing a deeper truth about her nature. Artfulness and artistry are our inheritance – as natural as the changing of the seasons and more magnificent. From Bohemia, which is almost a site of the imagination, the impossible is made possible.



Self Portrait with Fan, 2019-23, oil on canvas on board, 60 x 45cm



Cymbidium Orchids, 2023, oil on board, 40 x 30cm

In Naomi Grant's recent paintings, the delicate foliage of a rose or the folds of a fan, the patina on a vase or the plumage of a jay, alerts us to the heightened beauty and determined fancy of impossibilia. Her canvases, which sometimes make their way into the pictures, form another plane in spaces that seem to compress and extend into some indefinite backstage. Here a door, a screen, a table, a frame, a window (or is it a painting?). Here the artist – or a picture of the artist within the picture – or perhaps not the artist at all, but her Hermione, stepping down from the pedestal, revealing nothing of the magic that brought her here.

As in Shakespeare's play, the dramatic effects – here the lusciousness of paint, the bravura richness of tones – don't seek to deceive us with their verisimilitude but to move us. The vases of flowers Grant often returns to are perfectly balanced, just at the point of extreme brilliance, yet threatening to dissolve away again, to lose their form, or to wither and fade into their indeterminate settings. Their beauty is offset, made ambivalent, by the formal properties of their compositions.

We can see a similar effect in the frescoes of the Villa Livia, painted in the first century AD, which gave the illusion of a great garden extending on all sides. Low walls and neat lawns open onto trees and flowers of every description, all in bloom and fruiting at once and visited by all manner of birds, descending obediently to picturesque spots. The impossibility of the scene – as though all nature's beauty could be concentrated to its finest point – is not lessened by our awareness of the illusion; if anything, the painter's skill is the pathos that completes the scene. It tells us: only here can you see this, only by my hand.

We see it also in Piero della Francesca's paintings, where a stable and manger is pictured in its most rustic form, little more than a piece of stage scenery, and the distant hills or city could be painted on a screen. It is to the characters we must attend – to their drama, and to the beauty of the scene, especially the rendering of plants and birds, which gives these arrangements their tangible elsewhere-ness. That which is lost can be found there, in Bohemia, and in these paintings.

Alice Spawls, 2023

Alice Spawls is co editor of the London Review of Books