

## IT WAS LOVE THAT FIRST STRUCK ME TO THE CORE.

Her Honour Judge Maureen Bacon Q.C.

That's no rapture to the power of greater good but my reaction on seeing the first of Nina Mae Fowler's Love drawings with that sly male hand lying on a female neck. To me, a picture not so much about love, more the absence of it.

In a summer where scenes besieged the media of a male politician's hand placed on a female protester's neck, ejecting her from a gathering of the elite, I wondered if, somehow, that shocking image still endured; that some ghastly imprint lingered on beneath the surface of my memory.

Then I realised that what Nina had managed to capture there on paper were scenes I'd viewed so often in my mind's eye when reading the statements of those subjected to domestic violence, or when hearing them give evidence in court. This was my imagined context, a vivid depiction of all the desolation their words had conjured in my head. Here was that moment before the brutality begins, the attempts to justify it after.

The female figure hangs her head, hopelessly and in sorrow. The man's hand reaches for her hair, her shoulder, her neck. We cannot see her face but we know she is unhappy. His hand mocks her despair. Does it disguise its own guilt? Is this the offering of comfort that hand made necessary, or just the beginning of pain being inflicted by it? Either or both misrepresent truth under the guise of Love.

The room here is not defined and yet, somehow, I think she is in a bathroom – usually the only room in a house with a lock on the door. By the time I came to look at Blonde, Nina had actually predicted my imagined room choice by drawing it in: sanctuary in a place of sanitation. This figure cannot meet our gaze either and looks away with arms clasped around her in a self-hug.

The abuse of women has long since been subtly established in popular culture. This must take its share of the blame for what happens in private, the macro serving to reinforce what becomes the micro.

Cinema has been chief amongst the promulgators of normalising female exploitation in the most insidious form of all. On film, the male studio bosses of old Hollywood confirmed the objectification of women with their female stars presenting a super-sexualised ideal of feminine beauty. Women themselves often bought into it.

Off-camera, those same bosses often preyed on the vulnerabilities of such female stars, discarding them ruthlessly once their youth and commercial worth were past. Women seldom saw that would be the consequence.

Nina's montage, I Didn't Know Robert Rauschenberg Could Dance, shows us all the synthetic glamour those women were made to project in the midst of such a distorted reality; how belittled they were, their costumes and their roles all designed to make them unchallenging appendages in a world of men. In amongst all the abject horror,

though, Nina still finds scope for fun, wryly allowing one nearly naked woman to break a glass wall imprisoning another, no more adequately attired, and set her free.

The disintegration that ultimately befell some no-longer luminous female stars has allowed Nina to cast her rueful eye over the life-wreckage that ensued. Her representation of the original studio victim Judy Garland in *I Could Go On* sets the one-time youthful owner of a pair of red shoes against the only reality she came to know, a red curtain on stage. With the *There She Is* series, Nina captures how even the super-smart Hedy Lamar ultimately succumbed to the male view of her only value by undergoing successively horrific 'work' on her once lovely face, her reality blurred, like these studies, she becoming so disturbed by her obsolescence as to venture into a short career in shoplifting before withdrawing to live in complete isolation.

None of us will see these works in the same way, or even agree about the origins of female abuse and subjugation, but in one aspect I am confident we will all reach accord: that they were created by one possessed of a vividly enquiring mind, equalled only by her astonishing masterly technique. That is Nina Mae Fowler. She has a lot to say. Now go listen with your eyes.

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