

IN 1990, when she was 35 years old, Paulina Chiziane became the first woman in Mozambique to publish a novel. She has since published six more books, writing in Portuguese, and is one of Mozambique's most culturally significant writers. In interviews, Chiziane has explained that she has received a lot of criticism for her books from people who think that the women's lives she depicts aren't deserving of attention; that the subject matter of a number of her books – women in love, as it were – is decadent, in a country where there is so much development work to be done. But, she corrects, 'I'm talking about a country where most people are women. We have a rural country made by women. Therefore, the true development of Mozambique is in the hands of women.' And it is to women she is mainly writing.

Chiziane's father was a factory worker. She grew up speaking Chope and Ronga, and learned Portuguese at a Catholic mission school. She married young, had two children, then left her husband in her mid-twenties. At university, she studied linguistics but soon quit to dedicate herself to her writing. In the 1980s, she became a member of Frelimo, the Marxist-Leninist movement which had achieved independence for Mozambique in 1975, but grew disenchanted with it, and has since worked with NGOs, including the Red Cross, on development work across the country. So she witnessed Mozambique's successful land liberation process, but also understood that 'the process of mental decolonisation has not yet been concluded.'

The narrator of *The First Wife* – Chiziane's fourth novel, but the first to be translated into English, which shared the José Craveirinha prize with Mia Couto in 2003 – is Rami, a woman of forty. She is a mother of five, and the wife of Tony, a police chief. Although they have been married for twenty years, their relationship began to suffer long ago when his promotions and growing wealth meant beautiful women would 'fall at his feet like diamonds'.

When the novel begins, she hasn't seen Tony 'since Friday' and suspects he's with a woman. Most urgent is not her jealousy, but that she needs Tony because their son is in minor trouble with the police. Worried about having to deal with it herself, she remarks, in the first of many such declarations of the way things are for women: 'A husband at home means security, protection. Thieves keep away if a husband is present. Men respect each other. Women neighbours don't wander in just like that to ask for salt, sugar, much less to bad-mouth the other neighbour. In a husband's presence, a home is more of a home, there's comfort and status.' Her loss of comfort and status has only just begun, and adjusting to it is her central task – perhaps an impossible one because 'in matters of love, women are a defeated army, they have nothing left to do but weep. Lay down their arms and accept their solitude. Write poems and sing to the wind in order to chase away their pain. Love is as fleeting as a drop of water in the palm of one's hand.'

Rami begins a hunt to discover her rival in love and confront her ('a husband isn't a loaf of bread to be cut with a bread knife, a slice for each woman,' she complains), but

Didn't we agree to share?

Sheila Heti

THE FIRST WIFE

by Paulina Chiziane, translated by David Brookshaw.
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the first woman she finds leads her to another one, and that woman to another one, and still on to another one: in total, Rami discovers four girlfriends, all of whom are being betrayed by Tony, each one younger than the next, like Russian dolls.

Most of the women she finds have children, and one, Julieta, has five. Julieta has been his mistress for 19 years. When Rami first meets her, they fight in the street, but the fight is broken up, and when Julieta takes Rami into the house that Tony has given her, and tends to her wounds, she opens up. 'He made wonderful promises. The years passed. I saw my children born one by one, and each time he would renew his promises of marriage.' Now it has been seven months since Julieta has seen Tony – not since she delivered him the news of her most recent pregnancy. 'He only comes to me to answer the call of the divine creator,' she complains. 'To seed my belly, in order to fill the earth and multiply.'

'Poor thing,' Rami thinks, 'She is more of a victim than a rival.' She tells Julieta that they are together in this tragedy. 'Me, you, all women.' She can't keep herself from admiring Julieta's beauty, as later in the book she will admire another of Tony's girlfriends:

She had smooth skin while mine was wrinkled. She had abundant, uncrimped hair while mine was sparse and frizzy. Once again, I admired my rival. She had fire in every vein. She exuded strength with every breath she took. She had a shooting star in each thread of hair, my God, how resplendent she was. Her eyes were as gentle as moonlight, that mouth of hers must be as sweet as honey . . . She had all the charm I had lost.

When she returns home from the fight with Julieta and confronts a sleeping Tony, he wakes up angrily and cries: 'Don't make me laugh! Purity is masculine, sin is female. Only women can betray, men are free, Rami.' Then he leaves the house in a fury for the comfort of another woman. Rami considers divorcing him, but it wouldn't help matters: her husband would be lost for good, and her children would be his, not hers.

Desperate to win him back, Rami considers visiting psychologists, elders and medicine men, but settles on taking lessons from a 'love counsellor' from the north, who says that since Rami has not undergone the initiation rites (only northern women do), she is 'not a woman'. Rami is determined to learn as much as she can, and begins visiting the woman regularly. She is stirred by the love counsellor's wisdom:

Woman is a curved line. Curved are the movements of the sun and the moon. Curved is the movement of the wooden spoon in the clay pot. Curved is the position adopted in repose. Have you noticed how all animals curl up when they sleep? We women are a river of deep and shallow curves over each part of our body. Curves move things round in a circle.

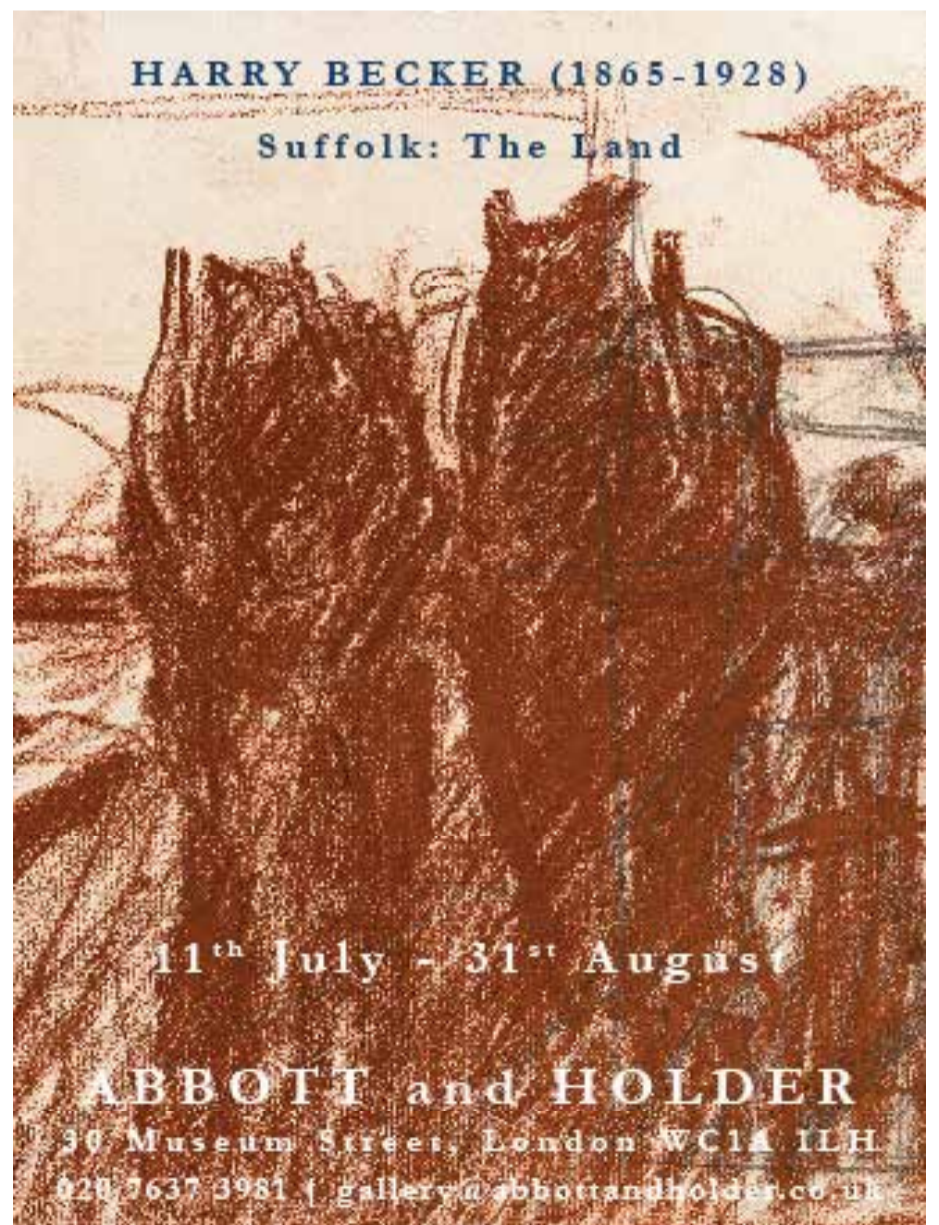
Man and woman are united in one sole curve in the meanderings of our paths. Curved are our lips and kisses. The uterus is curved. The egg. The celestial dome. Curves enclose all the secrets of the world.

'Now I understand that swaying but secure gait that northern women have,' Rami thinks happily. She learns how to soften her skin with *musiro* paste. On the counsellor's advice, she buys colourful new clothes and jewellery and delights to discover when she puts them on that 'everything about me spoke of ripened fruit. Cherries, cashews, apples. I was quite simply a temptress. Along came Tony, and his eyes latched onto me. My heart was pumping, dear God, how right the counsellor was!' But instead of admiring her, Tony says: 'What inspired you to such gaudy tastes?'

Is no culture beyond peddling expensive and useless 'man-catching' techniques to vulnerable women? Next Rami visits a pedlar of fortunes, who instructs her to win Tony back by adding to his soup 'cobwebs, two threads of my hair, three threads from his underpants, four drops of sweat' and 'enough fat from a mole'. But she regrets the visit: 'I'm not going to allow myself to fall into the grip of a madman.'

Rami is hurt, but at least she still feels virtuous. Her own fall begins when one night, visiting Luísa, she sleeps with Luísa's lover out of grief and passion. Luísa, being a liberated woman from the north, encourages her boyfriend to seduce Rami. She feels sorry for Rami, living a life of no pleasure. Rami wakes the next morning in Luísa's bed, horrified to remember how she was overtaken by lust. For twenty years, she was faithful, 'firm as a rock. Incorruptible. I always lived on a higher plain than other women because I was someone who stood for all the virtues.' She rages at her body – which she now calls her enemy. 'Cursed flesh, what have you done to my soul?' But Luísa's lover tells Rami he admires her for coming to her rival's house to make peace. 'I think all women should unite with each other against the tyranny of men. If I were a woman, I'd do that.'

Rami realises she has 'never lifted so much as a finger' to turn fate in her direction, and soon she begins. First, she gathers the girlfriends together to meet each other. Everything comes out: their suffering, their fears for their children, who are like 'rotten, abandoned eggs'. 'What future can we expect for these children of ours?' one of them asks. 'They don't know their aunts, grandparents, living as they do, hidden away like moles, their father never there, lacking any points of reference. Just people growing up to fill the world.' 'It was a good feeling for me to be chairing this meeting when I'd never chaired anything in my life before,' Rami thinks. 'There are five of us,' she says to the other women. 'Let us unite, and together form one hand. Each



one of us will be a finger, and the great lines of our hand will be life, heart, luck, destiny and love. We won't feel so unprotected, and we'll be able to steer our course through life and choose our own destiny.' The women agree.

At Tony's 50th birthday celebration, Rami gathers the women together – they and their children are all dressed in the same pattern, 'just as a polygamist's wives were supposed to present themselves . . . sheep from the same flock'. She introduces the women to everyone and the girlfriends chat 'in lively fashion, like sisters'. As Tony writhes in shame, anger and surprise at having been exposed, Rami begins her subtly mocking speech: 'Tony is a man who loves life, and for this reason he multiplies.'

The male guests soon slink from the party, 'given that they too were guilty of the same thing'. But Rami is triumphant, having 'destroyed the mantle of invisibility' these women were living within. After Tony himself flees, the wives and their children party till dawn. But Rami's pleasure has left her by morning, and she looks in the mirror and considers her situation. Her rivals have gained status, but she wonders 'What have I gained from this comedy?'

Rami begins to realise that she will never be the only woman Tony loves. He won't lie and pretend to be faithful, for Tony now believes that being with many women is his right as a Bantu man, and his community supports him in this. His mother is delighted to discover so many new grandchildren, and admires what a virile patriarch her son has turned out to be. Rami's aunt scolds her: 'My girl, life is a never-ending process of sharing . . . To share a man isn't a crime.' Even Luisa speaks in favour of polygamy, 'for leaving other women without any cover is a crime that not even God forgives'.

Nostalgic for her life as one of 25 wives of the king, her aunt explains to Rami that in traditional polygamy

there was social equality and democracy. Each wife had her house, her children, and her property. We had our organ of govern-

ment – the assembly of the king's wives – where we would discuss the division of chores, decide who would cook the sovereign's morning pap, who would prepare his baths and rub his feet, cut his nails, massage his back, shave him, comb him, and provide other cares. We would take part in drawing up His Majesty's matrimonial rotation, which consisted of a night for each wife, but everything conducted on a strictly equal basis. And he fulfilled this duty to the letter. He had to give proof of statesmanship, be a good model for the family. If the king was imprudent enough to favour one wife in particular, he had to face criticism at meetings with his advisers and elders. As for me, the king had me whenever he wanted, but no one ever mentioned the matter. My status was never questioned. All the wives surrendered to my charm. I was a great lady, you know?

Rami remains confused. 'But then, how does the relationship work?' 'What relationship, my dear? What are you talking about?'

CHIZIANE'S PROSE alternates between a dramatic, high-octave style – often when Rami is suffering – and a terse and humorous frankness. She cites the Portuguese poet Florbela Espanca as her most important influence, and there is something similar in the way both writers are able to express the peaks of emotion, while never forgetting the part of the self which evaluates oneself. In one poem Espanca writes:

What kind of magic potion
Did you give me from that jar?
That I forget who I am
But always know who you are . . .

It is a similar sentiment to that contained in the advice Chiziane's father gave to his daughter when she was young, about the dangers of love – a warning that finds numerous means of narrative expression in *The First Wife*. 'If you love someone,' he told her, 'you have to leave your own self – because anyone who loves another person becomes a slave of this other person. Daughter, you are going to lose your freedom' in marriage 'because you'll be doing everything the man wants you to do, so leave him.'

The older women don't tell Rami to leave Tony: they advise her, instead, to institute the traditional system of polygamy and so impose order on his selfish wanderings. Around this point in the story, something remarkable happens: Rami shifts her focus from her own jealousy and pain, and begins to take care of the other women – to worry over their futures, their finances, their children. She lends them money so they can start their own businesses: a hair salon, a second-hand clothing shop. They are all thrilled they've managed to find some security apart from what Tony offered. They grow healthy, happy and self-confident. It's a religious alchemy that begins to lead Rami to her salvation ('do unto others' and 'love your neighbour as you love yourself'), but it's also a political alchemy – for no one can be free if one person is enslaved. More pointedly, it's a feminist alchemy: women suffer from our divisions from other women as much as we suffer from men; and we would suffer much less from men if we helped each other more. Or, as Rami's aunt put it, 'when the wives agree with one another, the man can't abuse them.'

Rami consents to a polygamous marriage, and her mother-in-law works quickly to make the wives official, paying their bride prices and putting the age-old structures in place. Rami and the other women are instructed in how to keep a polygamous family: they must serve Tony on their knees and only feed him the best cuts of meat. A conjugal rota must be established, meaning Tony must spend one week with each wife. If the wife is menstruating, she must inform him, for one drop of this blood could mean the cause of pumpkins. 'We didn't burst out laughing, but we certainly felt like it,' Rami says, but as the lessons grow ever drearier, it all grows less funny. These old women, she realises, 'only know about what pain has taught them. They know of no other world except that of darkness itself. And they see darkness in front of them as the only source of their wisdom.'

Tony soon tires of polygamy. It has divested him of much of his wealth, and the pleasure he gets from having five women is bound to his freedom to visit whichever he desires that night, and for his movements to remain virtually unknown to the rest. But in the system of polygamy, when a husband moves from one house to the next, the wives must gather to hear a report: of how and what he has eaten, how he has slept. His independence vanishes when his girlfriends become wives: they determine which house he is in when, and he must have sex when he's there – it's his duty.

It turns out it's not traditional polygamy Tony wants, or the Christian monogamy that the Portuguese colonisers brought with them. He doesn't want any system. Most systems, even if they fail, at least profess to look out for every party, but Tony just wants to do whatever he wants. It's no surprise when, partway through the novel, he takes a new girlfriend and doesn't consult his wives. This is a deep offence and flagrantly against the rules: if he wants a girlfriend, the wives must choose her.

The women gather to take their revenge, which begins as a verbal assault in one wife's

home, then turns into what Tony calls a 'revenge orgy' with all but one of the wives participating. The women disrobe and begin writhing around him, taunting. He lashes out at Rami. 'You're siding with these sluts in their conspiracy?' he cries. 'You've changed a lot, Rami!' Rami retorts that he has led her to this, but she feels sorry for him, inwardly acknowledging that they really are using their nudity 'to scare him, to torture him'.

The original title of this book is *Niketche*, which refers to the 'dance of love' girls perform to proclaim their blossoming womanhood, their fertility and their readiness for life. Luisa is disgusted by Tony's snivelling reaction to what she calls their *niketche*. He should be so lucky to have so many women perform this sacred and seductive dance solely for him! Yet their dance can only ironically be considered a *niketche*. These women aren't young virgins. They are deep in life already. Yet Chiziane suggests that they really are being initiated into a new life, one of their own making; a life beyond the limited destiny they are handed, as women.

Rami is actually initiated into two womanhoods. First, through Tony's betrayal, she discovers a woman's age-old birthright: suffering through marriage and motherhood. The second initiation she constructs improvisationally, through liberating the women who were positioned as her rivals. The first is given. The second is chosen, and is therefore her victory. But let's not confuse victory with happiness. Soon after the dance, Tony decides to punish Rami for taking part in his humiliation by divorcing her. He's been angry with her since his birthday, he tells her, when she began 'the whole rigmarole that led me to having to take on the commitments of a polygamist'. Rami is terrified, but Tony is unrelenting. 'You'd better be aware that your fate is to cluck, lay eggs, hatch them, and keep your eyes on the ground.' Rami understands: 'That's exactly what marriage is all about,' she thinks. 'Agreeing to snuff out your candle, so as to use your companion's torch, while he decides the amount of light you should have, and at what time and on what occasions.'

Gradually, Rami begins to admire Tony less, and in fact all the wives begin to lose patience. Maua complains: 'A man in the house represents double the work, there's no time.' Sally berates the others: 'He's been in my house for more than a fortnight without me being able to get rid of him, and you people complain. Didn't we agree to share, a week here, a week there? I need some time as well . . .' Julieta agrees: 'Looking after him has become too much trouble. Cooking his lunch and dinner. Laying the table, cleaning the table.' Rami listens to them speak, and thinks: 'The world is in a permanent process of change. It changes silently. Only Tony hasn't noticed the change. He's still dancing the man's dance, in which everything is permitted.'

CHIZIANE has spoken about the hypocrisies of many of her countrymen who profess to support the rights of women. Her characterisation of them rings a depressingly familiar note: 'At political rallies, we applaud the speeches: "Down with polygamy! Down with it! . . . Long

live the revolution and the New Man!"' But 'after the rally, the leader who made all the popular speeches to the shouts of "Viva" and "Down with" goes and has lunch and puts his feet up at the home of a second wife.'

The Frelimo activists who 'fought against capitalism in order to create a more equal society are capitalists themselves today. And the ones that dub themselves fathers of democracy are the same that violate peace and create disturbances all over the country.' Things are starting to improve for women, however. 'When I was 18, every woman's dream was to get married, have children and find some mediocre job,' but today, some women are 'fighting for their autonomy. Even in rural areas, where tradition is strong, if you ask a mother what her dream is for her daughter, she will tell you she wishes her daughter goes to school and gets a decent job.' In her books, the view is bleaker: 'A woman is an eternal problem that has no solution . . . She's an imperfect project.'

In Cardiff

THE HUGE CANVASES Gillian Ayres painted during the 1980s rush at you like Atlantic breakers. Bursts of orange, viridian, scarlet, yellow and cyan tumble forward and engulf you; convulsions of oil paint are thrown up at such a pace they seem weightless. Handfuls are grabbed from paint pots and thrust every which way, urging the viewer to fall in with the flux.

The exhibition of Ayres's work at the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff (until 3 September) foregrounds these extravaganzas, which date from Ayres's six-year sojourn in the Llyn peninsula. Their unruliness exceeds definition. The nine and a half foot high *Antony and Cleopatra* seems luxurious – its square of yellow ochre is fringed with the zigzag borders of an Oriental carpet – but it abandons courtesy in favour of an escalating battle of colour, fought to a climax in its top left corner. With its internal arena *Dance of the Ludi Magni* might be a painting about painting, echoing Howard Hodgkin's work. But where self-reflexiveness led Hodgkin into pathos, it exhilarates Ayres. Not haunted, as he was, by the ghosts of human figures, she reaches for her globs of paint as if to shout for shouting's sake. The upwards tumbling torrent of *A Belt of Straw and Ivy Buds* swaggers with energy, until, at the top of the canvas, two closed-off compartments rebuff it: river reverting to rug.

In her years on the Llyn Ayres juggled the roles abstract painting might enact – a grand ornament, a meditation on artistic means, a melodrama of mobility – keeping all in the air. This legerdemain is especially on show in *Æolus*, a seven by seven foot canvas from 1987 with a zingingly fresh surface. In some of her canvases drawing is more or less avoided, as though out of suspicion: for Ayres's colours to remain vivid and distinct, they must have boundaries, but she prefers a brusque four-finger swipe or a coarse brush's perfunctory looping to any distinctive thought about shapes. In her more recent work, which isn't on

This may be so, but imperfection does not imply a complete lack of progress. In the choice between the traditions of Mozambican society with its well-ordered but unbalanced polygamy, and the colonisers' Christianity with its hypocritical monogamy which also separates women from each other, binding them to a single man, neither option is particularly appealing. Chiziane has sympathy for Tony too: even the men don't know how to live, torn between two incompatible value systems. His ethical rudder has been broken, and no one – not Rami, not his uncles, not even Tony – can repair it.

The First Wife is not a story that offers a simple, happy ending. But such an ending has always been a lie, especially in love stories aimed at women, and the people who will change Chiziane's country (or any country) need love stories like *The First Wife*, which admit that no new freedoms are gained without seemingly pointless suffering.

When we suffer alone, and try to mend our own suffering – as Rami does at the

start of the novel – nothing is solved, and our suffering is for naught. But when we add our suffering to that of others – and then try to fix things – something happens. Or as Chiziane stated in an interview, 'women can join hands and improve their world – that is what has happened throughout history. They made a mosaic of their differences and improved their lives. All I want to say is that there is no north without south and vice versa. We all need each other. It is a message of national unity.' This is hardly a frivolous point, even if conveyed in the context of a love story; even if told in a country like Mozambique where, as Chiziane has said, 'We are still concerned about satisfying the most basic needs, the house, the bread, the water.' Yet the house, the bread, the water, and who gets them, depend on equitable relations between people – between those from the north and those from the south, and between men and women.

At one place – and not the only point – in the book, one of the women praises Rami:

show at Cardiff, there is a recognition that shape might be a painter's friend; that structure might flatter pigments rather than shackle them, and that if these units happen to suggest landscapes or plants, no real harm is done to the cause of abstraction. But in *Æolus* the impulse to cut space – which is what lines do – changes



Æolus (1987)

gear and accelerates, from carving out bands and formal entities to slashing at the whole chromatic tapestry. The painting defaces itself.

Abstraction has been Ayres's cause ever since she quit Camberwell School of Art in 1950. Beyond Cardiff's two rooms showing her 1980s work, further galleries follow her steps backwards. The exercise gets to feel archaeological. Artists in 1950s London were challenged both by Continental tachisme, with its blots and smears, and by Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock at work on his drip paintings. Ayres responded by laying great boards on the floor and splattering them with hard-

ware shop enamel paints in black, sienna, flame red and prussian blue. The high spirits of this experimentation still bubble up through the yellowed primer and rucked Ripolin of the early paintings but give little sense of the tensions that impelled it or where it meant to head, beyond the general hankering for the sublime that

'You forsook a bit of your flame in order to light our candles.' Their children have a father now, and an identity; the women have businesses, their own lives and homes. 'There are marvellous things in what you have built, Rami. Tony is a collector of women, but you are a collector of anguished souls . . . You're a limitless source of power.'

Although Rami still suffers, she is a saviour to the women she has helped, and their children. Whether we call that feminism (Chiziane doesn't claim the term) or something else doesn't matter. Rami gains something vital from witnessing their economic independence, which she helped cultivate. She gets a new sort of pride, to compensate for the loss of the ancestral pride she felt as the only wife – and a chaste one. But losing traditional rewards is never easy. In one scene, Rami gazes in her mirror. 'Dearest mirror, is there a woman in this world sadder than I?' It answers: 'Yes. There are millions and millions throughout the world.' □

ands of dabs cluster irregularly. Monet's pond paintings appealed to many painters in the 1960s: the spawn filling this analogue to them, being mostly purple, take us to some exotic, blissed out order of experience. This picture seems to have been kept rolled away in storage, along with others, ever since it was exhibited in 1971. Mel Gooding, in his monograph on Ayres, records the gallerist John Kasmin asking her: 'What am I meant to do with them?' 'You're a dealer: I'm a painter. I must get on with what I want to do.'

The tone of that is typical. One-foot-out-the-door-ness flavours the whole Ayres operation and has, despite Kasmin's exasperation, contributed to its appeal and its viability. In the Cardiff selection, this dislocation is heightened by a few curios that seem to follow quite other modes of abstraction. You feel that, loosely at least, Ayres has tracked every trend in postwar abstraction, from the hard-edge style of Robyn Denny to Larry Poons's encrusted canvases; you can even imagine *Æolus* as her response to 1980s graffiti art.

But the looseness is the point. Ayres told Gooding that the spectacular internal arguments into which she threw herself while living in the old rectory near Pwllheli took their point of departure from Hans Hofmann, father figure to the New York School. But they feel intentionally removed from any metropolis, including London, where her paintings were being sold. (Still less, for that matter, do they interact with the Wales of R.S. Thomas, stationed at another rectory a few miles down the road.) *Sea, Sea the Shepherd's Queen* is one of Ayres's whimsical titles: a misspelling of a Jacobean madrigal applied to a tumultuous wrestle of colour in which marine blues win out. The choice of words seems to indicate the attitude. 'Arenas for freedom' may have been the phrase ideologues liked to reach for in the heyday of British abstraction. But what they really meant was pastorals: glorious, gratuitous elsewhere.

The outstanding example of Ayres's earlier work in these galleries is a vast untitled canvas, 24 feet long, on which thous-

Julian Bell

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