

When is a piece ‘modern’?

Portrait of a Woman, c. 1913-14 (Tate)

[‘Portrait of a Woman’, Helen Saunders, c.1913–1914 | Tate](#)

Vorticist Design, c. 1915 (Tate)

[‘Vorticist Design’, Helen Saunders, c.1915 | Tate](#)

Helen who?

I am taken by Helen Saunders: her gender endangered in her *ism* (Vorticism); her radical, beautiful geometric expressions – confident and cubist, abstract and assured, yet not devoid of tenderness in places; the way the correct pronunciation of her name is hidden beneath its letters (*Sarnders* not *Sawnders*); her obliteration by Wyndham Lewis – another hiding, a story for another time.

She was a modern rebel, Helen. Take *Portrait of a Woman*, a graphite and watercolour work on paper, circa 1913-14. Here we see the sitter’s friend, Blanche Caudwell, described using cubist ideas – a three-dimensional head of faceted forms and angular planes, telling of an artist amidst the whirlpool (Pound’s *vortex*) of the early 20th century avant-garde and foreshadowing Saunders’ move to abstraction.

As a Vorticist work with its planar composites and hard edges, *Portrait of a Woman* aligns with the Vorticist Manifesto, published in *BLAST* in June 1914. About the Manifesto, relation and scholar Brigid Peppin tells us, ‘*It proclaimed that since England had invented the industrial revolution, Vorticist art must embody, rather than merely imitate, the bareness, hardness and dynamism of modern cities and machinery.*’ (Peppin, cited in Sloan, 2022, p.12). We see it here, made manifest in Saunders’ rendering of Caudwell – a landscape-like barrenness of pencil and wash, energetic angles, machine-woman. But let us not miss its delicacy: a tender, graphite jigsaw, prophetically Frinkesque. A fragmented, futurist friend?

The influence of Picasso and Braque’s modernist explorations is noted when thinking about a similarly sculptural portrait of Caudwell circa 1913, shown in the Courtauld’s recent exhibition *Helen Saunders: Modernist Rebel*: ‘*Saunders was certainly aware of the work of Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, and this portrait seems to acknowledge, if not directly respond to, the numerous painted and sculpted portraits Picasso made of his companion...*’. (Sloan, 2022, p.54).

A year later, Saunders painted *Vorticist Design* – a graphite, ink and watercolour work of interlocking angular forms. The ‘*diagonal trajectory of the composition*’ (Tate, 2023) and upward thrust of its shapes and lines enclosing a receding centre – for here we have colour and its chromatic consequences – create a geometric eddy, pulled as we are past the picture plane and *into* the work. Whilst we spin, let us notice its avant-garde language: non-figurative dynamic forms, bold,

stark outlines, the movement of the modern world made optical – Lewis’ *‘heart of the Present’* (Tate, 2023).

And being *of the heart*, this cardiac work beats a modern rhythm. Writing about Saunders’ art of the time, Alicia Foster explains, *‘In a series of works on paper she orchestrated dazzling juxtapositions of colour that pulse on the page.’* (Foster, 2019, p.34).

The bigger vortex spinning at the time was World War I, ending this *ism*. Saunders’ abstraction became figuration; her reticence, truthful independence. *‘She evidently thought of painting as a continuing exploration of ways in which she could truthfully respond to the visual world; a personal journey of discovery, spurred (to quote Kandinsky) by ‘inner necessity.’* (Peppin, 2022, cited in Sloan, 2022, p.18).

Helen who? Helen *‘Saunders’*.

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