

Slumped beneath Bar Italia's famous neon sign on a cold October morning, it's easy to forget that this once grubby, bohemian zone is now perhaps London's most frothy. With a van conveniently blocking the frontage of Caffè Nero across the street, one can almost imagine Bacon or Freud traipsing past post-sesh. Sat outside this remnant of Old Soho, it's hard not to pine for a shittier, less aerated past. That is, unless your companion happens to represent something of what's currently good about the city's art scene.

Mary Stephenson is a bright-eyed, white clog-clad North Londoner who first turned heads with her 2017 show *My Man*. The work featured portraits of the artist with young men sculpted from clay and arranged in a series of 'perfect date' scenarios. It seemed both a rejection of female subservience — the men were very definitely the objects — and of the idea that openly desiring a romantic relationship is something to be embarrassed by.

*My Man* was picked up by a number of international publications, including the *New York Times*, rare for an artist's first proper show. This seemed to vindicate Mary's decision to place herself front and centre of the work. And yet, critical acclaim was swiftly accompanied by that familiar modern caveat: online abuse. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given its focus on female desire, *My Man* was creepy troll fodder. "People were writing things like 'this woman should die' and 'she needs a good shag' underneath my work. My mum saw it and burst into tears, but I was weirdly unfazed."

Is that because it's part and parcel of being a woman with an online presence? "Slightly. But also, the truth is, if you want to put your work out there, you have to be thick-skinned about the fact that people will give you instant feedback, and it won't always be positive." Despite the trolling, to have *My Man* take off like that must've been affirming, but Stephenson now feels a postnatal aversion to the work: "It was great because it was the first time I'd so openly confronted my insecurities surrounding relationships but, in hindsight, it feels a bit whimsical." This last point is telling because, since then, something about Mary has changed.

Her latest show, *Egg Roll Play*, is a collection of darkly phantasmagoric paintings. Like *My Man*, they feature dinners and picnics, but in place of inanimate men are animate objects: smirking Stilton and sullen-faced glasses of wine. Though they represent a change of direction, the paintings aren't Stephenson's first foray into the surreal, "I've always found security in the uncanny. It feels like a return to childhood, when you make up fantastical things to fill the gaps in your understanding of the world."

So did she used to think there was an anthropomorphic block of cheese under her bed? "Well, no, but a fox did jump through my bedroom window the other day and try to get under the duvet. That was surreal because I feel like he wanted a hug but was probably just looking for something to eat — which shows it's not really about the object, it's about us and the motives we assign to others. With these paintings I found that all these negative feelings could be channeled into the absurd, it was like a rehearsal."

At the time, Stephenson had no idea what exactly she was rehearsing for; but it's interesting that her darkest work yet was produced on the cusp of her being accepted to study at the Royal Academy, that great paragon of propriety. She found out in April, a month before the show opened, that she'd be taking part in its three-year Schools programme, whose alumni include Turner and Blake. Stephenson is overjoyed to be standing on the shoulders of such giants, and believes the programme's famously thorough tutelage — which includes lectures on anatomy, philosophy, and memes — will stoke rather than temper her expressiveness.

Her mum used to let Mary and her four siblings draw and paint on the walls of their house. “Mum always talks about another mother at our primary school who said, ‘you want your children to be happy and I want mine to be successful,’ she was a bit upset by that but I am happy that I get to spend all day painting — though sometimes I think I might be happier if I was a dentist with a Saab.”

Mary is frank about her mental health and believes a willingness to look again at the darker aspects of her life is what encouraged a surrealist bent. The profusion of objects in *Egg Roll Play* was inspired by her late father's hoarding: “my dad would go from high to low and during his highs he would buy things, which is a common symptom of bipolar. I think possessions can give purpose and create a kind of mass distraction from what's going on off-stage.”

Stephenson isn't the only British artist currently using a surrealist aperture through which to understand 21st Century life. Works by Polly Nor and Henry Hudson also juxtapose the real and fantastical in order to depict the fractious present. Much of this bears the hallmarks of magical realism: a phrase coined by the critic Franz Roh to describe the work of artists like George Grosz and Otto Dix, whose bleak paintings satirised the decadence and turmoil of Weimar Germany.

As well as its socio-political disorder Weimar was a time of great flourishing in art, music and literature — all three of which seem to be enjoying renewed interest in this country, with this summer's *Weimar Berlin: Bittersweet Metropolis* at the Royal Festival Hall following hot on the heels of the Tate Modern's *Magical Realism: Art in Weimar Germany* exhibition. Might it be that the chaos of the Weimar years offers parallels with our current predicament?

For Mary, who saw the Tate show after she'd already begun work on *Egg Roll Play*, the German artists' work was more of a supplementary inspiration than a direct influence. “A lot of my recent work is about that middle ground between control and chaos, like when you're getting drunk. It was interesting to think about when disorder leads to a yearning for control, which in Germany ended in fascism, the ultimate hangover.”

Does she yearn for control? “Not at all — which is good, because I don't really need to drink to feel out of it. These paintings are an outlet for that inner turmoil.” It's true that the woozy nature of her work belies Mary's warm, personable nature. In fact, it possesses a dark intensity which gives credence to the notion that going down the rabbit hole can sometimes help us better understand what's going on above ground.