

THE MEMORY OF WATER, Liverpool Everyman & Playhouse (opens 25 February) • Pergolesi's STABAT MATER, Southwark Cathedral (5 March) • JOHN PIPER IN THE SOUTH COUNTRY, Wiltshire Museum, Devizes (opens 7 March) • A PALE VIEW OF HILLS, based on the novel by Kazuo Ishiguro (in cinemas 13 March)

## Chasing demons away

Inspired by California, Cornwall and an expedition to the Calais Jungle with a carload of nuns, Marguerite Horner's almost photographic work reflects an obsession with water and light. **Frances Spalding** explains why she chose to exhibit the artist's work at her Cambridge college

**O**NE CHANGING ASPECT OF life in Cambridge in recent years has been the steady growth of interest in modern and contemporary art. The number of galleries in colleges has increased, and the need for curators is growing. A current programme of seminars deals with professional issues such as the servicing, storage, display and maintenance of collections and their catalogues. The latest digital assistance is inevitably to the fore.

Clare Hall is not the grandest of Cambridge colleges, but during its 60 years it has shown a lively interest in running a programme of exhibitions. It has also been gifted with a large museum-quality collection of British studio pottery. A graduate college, with a strong commitment to visiting fellows from abroad, it has never had a designated gallery. Instead, its exhibitions are hung in public spaces in its main building and are open to the public. As chair of Clare Hall's art committee, I like this freedom because it suggests a sense of shared ownership by members of the college.

Our current artist is Marguerite Horner. We knew she was bringing 43 paintings in three different sizes for hanging, and that the unifying thread would be her fascination with light falling on water and her interest in working in near-monochrome, or *en grisaille* as it is sometimes called.

We also knew that around 2017 she had entered a prize-winning period, and in 2018 had received the British Women Artists Award. Previously, in 2015-16, she had engaged with a humanitarian project, driving a carload of Comboni nuns to the first "Calais Jungle", the refugee and immigrant encampment in northern France much in the media at the time. They went bearing food and clothes; each wore two coats in case they met someone in need. Horner recalls that some five trips were made in all. Occasionally she made drawings while there, from which later came four striking paintings.

In time I came to see that in her pictures, light and water are given not only a physical and pictorial role but also a metaphorical one, stemming from her Catholic upbringing and faith.

In 2012 she took a foundation degree in pastoral mission at Heythrop College, then part of London University. Ideas, whether



Marguerite Horner's *Together Apart* (2025), left; *Get There in the End* (2025), below



found in life, literature, art or science, intrigue her, and are one reason why she organises the pre-lunch lecture on Saturday mornings at the Chelsea Arts Club and chooses all the speakers.

I began to feel she would have got on well with Ralph Erskine, the architect who designed Clare Hall, neither being short of

charisma. Erskine, who was British, had been trapped in Sweden during the 1939-45 war and opted to remain there when peace returned. In 1955, he bought an old London sailing boat, turning it into a "floating studio", restructuring it to accommodate 10 architects and draftsmen. It was moored at Drottningholm, an island on the outskirts of Stockholm, and it was there that Clare Hall was designed on paper, in the late 1960s, in Scandi-modernist style.

Erskine specifically stated he wanted art and music to be part of the life of the college. And he especially wanted the corridor around an internal courtyard, at the back of the main building, to provide space for exhibitions – it offers a quietness and intimacy that allows art to speak.

Marguerite Horner's haunting show currently inhabits that space, and was largely inspired by a train journey she made along the Californian Pacific coastline. Whenever she looked westwards, across the immeasurable sea, she was obsessed by dazzling plateaus or speckled pathways of light on water. She

found these not only in California but in other places too, including Cornwall. Out of much travelling and observing came a body of work partly reviving holiday memories, partly exploring what the brush can do, partly hinting at the divine and at notions of transience.

This subject appears to have been to the fore all the time while spending two weeks with her daughter at Beachwood Canyon, before she travelled further along the Californian coast, to Del Mar, to stay with friends. By then it was winter and the sun was low in the sky, casting spectacular effects: huge shadows lengthen behind figures and low-angled paths of light shimmer with refulgence as they cross the sea. Several studies were made while sitting on the bluff above the beaches.

**MANY VISITORS** walking into the show and seeing Horner's recent work for the first time have thought they had entered an exhibition of photographs. It is only when they looked more closely at the surface texture that they discovered the subtlety, precision, tenderness and skill in the paintwork. Everything is hand-painted, either in oils or watercolour, and in near-monochrome. Sable brushes have been used in the watercolours so that she can catch the shimmer of light on the horizon, as well as the tiny touches of broken white on the waves.

Exhibitions are energising, bringing a change of mood into a college and helping to enhance its reputation. The title of Horner's show, "All of Your Demons Will Wither Away", is part of the lyrics found in Fatboy Slim's

### She was obsessed by dazzling plateaus or speckled pathways of light on water

song "Demons" (as sung by Macy Gray). The full line reads: "All of your demons will wither away, ecstasy comes and they cannot stay." Though different interpretations can be placed on this line, when read in full, Horner sees it as speaking "to transformation – to the quiet promise that illumination offers".

Many will be reminded by these paintings of their summer holidays, while the titles can add oblique or suggestive humanitarian content, even when the scenes are empty of figures. The artist's use of near-monochrome provides a haunting quality: when visitors look closely at the various textural effects, they discover tenderness, persistence and precision in the artist's marks. For her, Horner says, painting "is an embodied act of witnessing ... an attempt to hold still the shimmer of impermanence, to suspend time with gesture and light".

*All of Your Demons Will Wither Away*, at Clare Hall, Cambridge, is free of charge and open until 26 February on weekdays between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m.

**Frances Spalding** is an art historian and a former editor of *The Burlington Magazine*.



Rosie Sheehy and Robert Aramayo

#### THEATRE

### Pregnant with horror

An emotionally gruelling experience

MARK LAWSON

#### Guess How Much I Love You?

ROYAL COURT THEATRE, LONDON

**S**O-CALLED "trigger warnings" about theatrical content annoy many playwrights and performers – seeing surprise as a vital part of their craft – but please those, in our #BeKind times, who believe no one should unknowingly encounter upsetting material. My own response is: imagine the great Greek tragedian Euripides scowling at a warning on the amphitheatre wall that Medea kills her children. He *wanted* viewers to be horrified.

An interesting test case is Luke Norris' new play, *Guess How Much I Love You?*, which, the Royal Court website warns, "contains moments of full blackout ... discussion and depictions of pregnancy complications ...".

I have edited the caution from a feeling that the dramatist, and director Jeremy Herrin, would prefer theatre-goers to choose foreknowledge of the story by finding the Cassandra paragraph on the website rather than by a critic blurring the terrible twists.

But that digital picket line doesn't approach the full horror; sudden lighting effects are the least fear. *Guess How Much I Love You?* is the most emotionally gruelling play I have ever seen – even though its storyline doesn't touch my own experience, which is what watch-out notices supposedly protect against.

Yet I say this not to discourage ticket sales but to encourage them for a production that will surely transfer to the London West End and Broadway – although the complexity of tipping audiences off is shown by my duty to add that some readers of this publication might be most appalled by very strong expletives and debate about faith.

Norris' play follows a 30-something married couple – identified in the script, presumably for universality, as Her and Him – through 95 minutes across six settings: two hospital rooms, a bedroom, a bathroom, an institutional office and a sunny poolside. We first

see the wife with top pulled up and ultrasound gel glistening on her belly after the sonographer has left the room suddenly during the procedure. Does that mean bad news? If not, we know there would be no play.

The precise prognosis and its consequences should be protected for future viewers. But a scene in which a doctor examines a baby must be among the bleakest in drama, the audience not merely silent but scarcely daring to breathe as the implications of seemingly innocuous words and actions gradually become horrifyingly clear. Every possible angle of neonatal biology and morality is considered; even, via the man's Irish parentage, fear of hell and limbo, which surely even few Catholic couples consider these days. At its breaking heart, though, this is a play about love and grief and how the second can turn the first close to hatred.

**ROSIE SHEEHY's** Her has a capital-letter personality in which affection is expressed through snarling sarcasm and pain through rage and tears of extraordinary rawness. In a stage debut, Robert Aramayo, star of the Tourette syndrome movie *I Swear*, which gained five Bafta nominations last week, radiates a boyishness that becomes doubly poignant, showing how a son of his might have been – but, in the father, this manner is abruptly catapulted into adulthood by tragedy.

The authenticity of the performances is matched by Grace Smart's design, exact even down to the recycled toilet paper beside the couple's loo. In another scene, what might be the couple's living room, except for some incongruous box files and bland framed prints, is revealed to be a waiting room in a sombre venue.

The production is remarkable for the writer's, director's and actors' control over audience response. It's relatively easy for a play to start funny before freezing the guffaws in our throats. More complexly, this script moves from big laughs through a period of exceptional silent tension to scenes where, despite the narrative, there are jokes again. Sheehy and Aramayo land gags in the most improbable of circumstances, true to the experience of many of us that there can be humour even in a living hell. One of the first new plays of the year has set towering standards.