

Emma Bennett  
Volcano Lovers

No. 3



Emma Bennett  
Volcano Lovers

Private View  
Thursday 17 October 2019

Exhibition  
Friday 18 October – 16 November 2019

CHARLIE SMITH LONDON

# CONTENTS

*Volcano Lovers* - Dr. Frances Woodley

12



*Moments of slippage, when anything seems possible and not  
everything makes sense.*  
Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*



*Maybe it is not the destructiveness of the volcano that pleases most, though everyone loves a conflagration, but its defiance of the law of gravity to which every inorganic mass is subject. What pleases at first sight of the plant world is its vertical upward direction. That is why we love trees. Perhaps we attend to a volcano for its elevation, like ballet. How high the molten rocks soar, how far above the mushrooming cloud. The thrill is that the mountain blows itself up, even if it must then like the dancer return to earth; even if it does not simply descend—it falls, falls on us. But first it goes up, it flies. Whereas everything pulls, drags down. Down.*

Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*



*Torrents*, 2019 Oil on canvas 170x130cm

# VOLCANO LOVERS

by Dr. Frances Woodley

Emma Bennett's exhibition, *Volcano Lovers*, marks a departure from her previous flaming leitmotifs such as domestic hearths, blazing bonfires and combusting fruit. This exhibition introduces the theme of the volcano in Bennett's practice.

This new body of work follows paintings concerned with memory. These, the artist says, focussed on 'intimate interior scenes which were more about a mood or atmosphere than a specific place. With the interior elements appropriated from film-stills I was thinking about still and moving images - painting and film and their relation to time, memory, intimacy.'

Infusing these recent paintings is *The Volcano Lover*, a work of fiction by Susan Sontag with a tenuous relation to historical truth. It is a tale that hangs precariously between love and lust, possession and abandonment, the sublime and the quotidian. The volcano emerges here, as it has done so often in literature, as backdrop, portent and metaphor. What appears to be held together by power-play and convention proceeds to explode along with the volcano itself. The mountain's subterranean workings are unleashed, its lava bleeds out, and its head of steam blooms—powerful metaphors for forces of nature and human passions.

Emma Bennett's paintings, like Sontag's fictions, 'dip into myth, ideas of form and formlessness, alchemy, science—parts of the paradoxical existence of the volcano both in its own world and within the human psyche'.

*Forcella*, 2019 Oil on oak panel 20x25cm



The past ten years have seen Emma Bennett's painting quite literally warm to its theme. Volcanoes, those big beasts of nature, have floated into sight. They are almost as ghostly as their emissions, spewings and vapours. The space in which she suspends them provides no light, no dimension or location. These volcanoes and the things that accompany them exist in limbo, a dreamy in-between state of blackness of which the artist writes:

'I start with the black. It provides an empty space that I can get into. ('Why enter?!') It's as if the black space suspends time . . . slows things down. The blackness creates tension and maintains the ambiguity of the space. Edges aren't easy to make out, like when you're walking at night and things are hidden in the shadows. Your imagination plays tricks. As soon as I place anything into the blackness the space becomes energised. It's not an empty void anymore. It has the potential to be lots of different blacknesses—the night, the universe, the stage, the screen etc. Objects are suspended, but my job is to get some sort of balance in the composition. Everything I paint after the black intrudes the space. The more ambiguous these intrusions are, the more unsettling they feel.'



*Wait Until Winter*, 2018 Oil on canvas 110x140cm

Certain motifs reoccur in these paintings. They come from the wellspring of the artist's memory, a heartfelt empathy for certain subjects and her familiarity with art of the past: Caravaggio's dark and dangerous beauty, Jusepe de Ribera's image reversals and doublings, the Neapolitan painters of still life and those European painters, notably Pierre-Jacques Volaire and Pietro Fabris, who recognised in Vesuvius the potential for picturing the cataclysmic sublime.

In Bennett's paintings the volcano is seduced, but not entirely tamed by the presence of still life. The natural finds itself in a precarious balance with the cultivated, the raw with the cultured. Still life, or rather a compilation of fragments of still life painting, continue to make an appearance in Bennett's work: fruit, flowers, hung hares and game birds, drapery and mirrored objects. Such leitmotifs drape, curl and float as can be seen in *Wait Until Winter* (2018), a painting that immediately precedes her current work. They are motifs with which she knows we feel at home.

Still life and fire have coexisted for some time in Bennett's paintings. The flame and the flammable held in a precarious balance. With the appearance of the volcanoes such motifs have been drawn into a more dramatic relation. Now, as Sontag writes, 'the colossal show begins, the plume reddens, bloats, soars, a tree of ash that climbs higher, higher, until it flattens out under the weight of the stratosphere'.



In *Four Years* (2019) Bennett puts interior and exterior into play with one another by means of a looking glass in which is reflected a domestic curtained space and a glimpse of a sunlit world outside. A hare hangs akimbo, floating or falling behind a small inverted festoon of roses and bindweed. It is a painting that explores the feelings of helplessness in the face of what cannot be looked at directly. It is through the representation of various states of vaporescence, flow, formlessness, weightlessness and the absence of gravity that she makes these feelings felt here.

In 2017 Bennett painted *Something Stirs* (2017), a domestic arrangement on the point of combustion. Breaking out at its centre is a concocted fire. White heat threatens to scorch the fruit that encircles it. The pleated tablecloth below suggests a staging reminiscent of the Neapolitan delight in fabricating models of Vesuvius for festivals made from chocolate, cake, bread or sausages. Has Bennett unconsciously constructed herself a volcano long before she ever painted one?

Now Bennett is in love with real volcanoes. Volcanoes erupt, smoulder and liquify, they go into meltdown. Vesuvius, Sontag tells her readers, is 'a central, ever visible metaphor for uncontrollable forces - of love, of violence, of burgeoning revolution'. Bennett's paintings have long focussed on these themes but do so now more forcibly.



Something Stirs, 2017 Oil on canvas 122x91.5cm

*I passed the whole night upon the mountain . . . I approached the mouth of the Volcano, as near as I could with prudence; the lava had the appearance of a river of red hot and liquid metal, such as we see in the glass-houses, on which were large floating cinders, half lighted, and rolling one over another with great precipitation down the side of the mountain, forming a most beautiful and uncommon cascade . . . In the day-time, unless you are quite close, the lava has no appearance of fire; but a thick white smoke marks its course.*

Sir William Hamilton, *Observations on Mount Vesuvius*







Susan Sontag's novel *The Volcano Lover*, the catalyst for Bennett's *Volcano Lovers*, is a tale of the interwoven passions of eighteenth-century characters played out in the shadow of Vesuvius: the Cavaliere (Lord William Hamilton, Viceroy of Naples and eminent collector of antiquaries, 'crystalline vitrifications', pumice, 'marbles and flowered alabasters' . . . 'a superfluity of objects, to ensure that the senses will never be unoccupied'), 'the hero' (Admiral Lord Nelson), and Emma (Lady Hamilton, wife and mistress, indulged enchantress). Vesuvius is a passion for the collector, as inflamed as his wife's passion for 'the hero'. Bennett identifies with the conflicting forces that such passions unleash, how they drive, constrain, and destroy people. Her birds and animals, fruits and flowers, are their personifications.

'Vesuvius was once a man, who once saw a nymph lovely as a diamond.' Sontag tells us, 'scorched by his attentions, [she] jumped into the sea and became the island today called Capri. Seeing this, Vesuvius went mad. . . . And now, as immobilized as his beloved, forever beyond his reach, he continues to throw fire and makes the city of Naples tremble'.

Naples, survivor of centuries of attrition, corruption and urban sprawl, is a place of beauty and anxiety. However, Vesuvius is no longer its only volcanic threat with the awakening of Campi Flegrei—the 'fields of fire'. The precarious and passionate Naples conjured up by writers Norman Lewis, Elena Ferrante and Roberto Saviano clings on.

*The Skirmish*, 2019 Oil on canvas 50x40cm





A volcano's eruptions and outpourings are akin to humours, or human temperaments, and thus provide ready metaphors, emotional and alchemical, in Bennett's recent paintings. For Bennett 'it is the perpetual movement and random nature of volcanoes' to which she is drawn. 'I feel very tuned in to these tensions that somehow heighten all emotions—the good and bad. Perhaps it's our sensitivity to, or awareness of, our proximity to the volcano (real or metaphorical) that makes us feel more excited, more afraid, more in love, more angry, more serene, more tempestuous'.

A volcanic eruption is a spectacle of nature that has to be seen to be believed. William Hamilton knew this so had his artist protégé, Pietro Fabris, depict Vesuvius in this way. Though Bennett's volcanoes erupt, they do so by puffing, expressing and bleeding in a pitch-dark void, witnessed only by the painting's viewers.

Prior to William Hamilton's *Observations on Mount Vesuvius* (1774), descriptions of the volcano tended towards the allegorical and poetic. Athanasius Kircher, in *Mundus Subterraneus* (1665), described Vesuvius' emissions as coming out of 'the breath-pipes of Nature'. Hamilton climbed the mountain daily, observed obsessively and recorded scrupulously 'the operations of nature, of which I was myself an eye-witness'. It is worth noting, therefore, that for Sontag, the feminist, and Bennett the painter, Vesuvius' 'energies are precisely those which cannot be collected, organised or tamed by intellect'. They are felt.

*A Tremulous Stay*, 2019 Oil on oak panel 20x25cm





Athanasius Kircher's early engravings of Vesuvius show the volcano's inner workings and connections to all the wellsprings in the earth. Water, the antithesis of fire, is the element in nature that tames the volcano. Bennett's volcano is tamed too, by being dwarfed by the black void in which it floats in limbo, a garland of fruit placed around its foot to hold it in check.

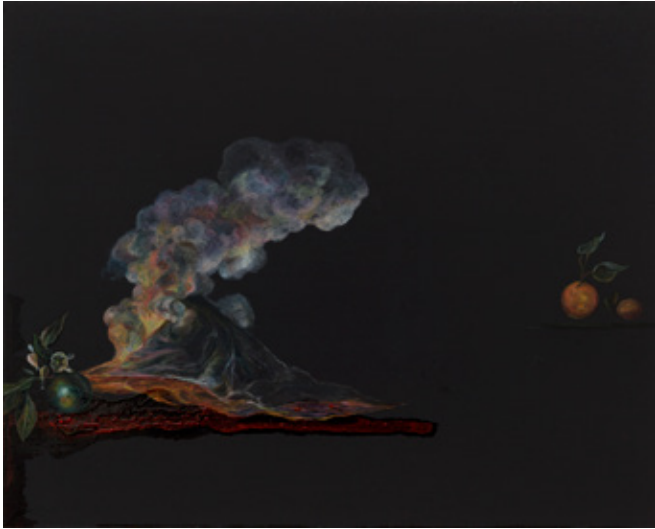
'I have fun with the scale', Bennett says, 'I enjoy nestling plumbs and oranges within the rocky foreground, playing with the overflow of sulphuric-green bubbling grapes, the spill of ribbon, the outcrops of lemons and I like there to be some ambiguity . . . are those cherries or red-hot rocks?'

Sontag's is a story of passions but also of viewpoints, those not always steady positions from which we presume to view our world, our past and ourselves. It is the women characters in Sontag's tale who are given the last word, but it is Eleanor Pimentel, the revolutionary, who spins round their viewpoint, and ours. Bennett knows that a change in viewpoint divests us of our usual coordinates; a foothold is sought when there is none, we are left suspended, without gravity, lost in space. 'Assigned orders dissolve and the balance of power is suspended' is how she expresses this. The volcano exists here not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a poignant idea that changes our point of view.



*Felicity, Faith, Fear*, 2019 Oil on oak panel 25x20cm

*The volcano was not to be patronised, after all, by such stale categories as grandeur and interest and beauty. This was terror-blackening day and bloodying night. In the evening sky, a roar of broad flame streaked sideways and upward, as if seeking to flee the diagonal orange slash of the descending lava. The inky sea turned red and the moon blood-orange. All night the swathe of descending lava widened. In the brief interregnum of pale dawn, ropes of pitchy smoke were unfurling, climbing, fattening at the top into a sky-high funnel of smoke and fire, which became steadily more columnar, first materializing a stack of bulging rings of smoke around its stem, then widening to engulf them. By midday the sky had gone dark and the sun was a cloud-blackened moon. But the roiling bay was still blood red.*  
Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover*



For Bennett, 'the volcano is at a distance, but its presence is always felt. In *Torrents* (2019) it's hovering over me and is at the heart of my imagination. It is quite calm, this volcano, but it still confronts me. The portrait format of the canvas stands tall, facing me. It asks me how I relate to it. It asks me if I'm strong enough. It asks me about my composure, my desires, fears and anger. It's not a major blast, but the blooms of white clouds hint at what's possible. I've tried to paint it as if I love it!'

Hamilton, having descended into the volcano prior to its eruption, recorded its interior as a place of calm in which 'cattle grazed . . . and boars frequently harboured'. He describes passageways that lead to pools: hot, corrosive, bitter, salty, and pure. Bennett explains that 'the fruits of the land that feed us and quench our thirst are used more explicitly in these paintings—Vesuvius' mineral-rich soil made its vineyards and lemon groves famous'.

Nature as 'harbinger[s] of catastrophe' and still life as symbolic allusion, familiar tropes to the Neapolitan painter, are subverted here by Bennett. Garlands of fruit, removed from her filmic interiors to the volcano's edge, are not derived from nature in the raw but appropriated from other paintings, postcards and the internet. Like Sontag's revolutionary, Bennett spins things round.

*Stray*, 2019 Oil on oak panel | 25x20cm



Foreshadowing the consequences of our actions on this earth, while reminding us of our own in consequence, is the Cavaliere's wish to possess the mountain. He 'wanted to see fire. What he saw was the blackened, levelled summit . . . The mountain entombed, lying in its rubbish. He saw for a moment . . . the terrible future. The bay without fish, without the swimming children; the mountain's plumeless top a desolate cinder heap. What has happened to the beautiful world, [he] cried.'

In the end, whether in Sontag's work of fiction or Bennett's paintings, it is perhaps the humility and constancy of the Cavaliere's bloodhound that pulls at the heartstrings. In *Stray* (2019), Bennett has the dog perched in thin air, head lowered in subjugation, caught in eternal expectation of solid ground. But we are stopped from getting too close; the ghostly swag keeps him at a distance. The blackness, however alluring in the theatre or cinema, is here unwelcoming and unsettling. Familiar things, the stuff of nostalgia, go up in smoke, hang in limbo, dribble away. What then can we cling to?

'The operations of Nature are slow: great eruptions do not frequently happen; each flatters himself it will not happen in his time, or, if it should, that his tutelary saint will turn away the destructive lava from his grounds'. So writes the real Lord Hamilton in his *Observations*.

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Sontag, Susan.

*The Volcano Lover: A Romance*. Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1992.

Hamilton, William.

*Observations on Mount Vesuvius, Mount Etna, and Other Volcanos*. Hardpress (Facsimile).

*Our Nature*, 2019 Oil on oak panel 28x34cm



*I am always trying to find a way to represent precarity and unpredictability in my paintings . . . I paint spaces that are undefined (inside or outside/imagined or real); I play with scale so the image is illogical (is it a small volcano or big fruit, is it near or far?); the space has no obvious/singular source of light; I locate things precariously with no floor, land, or ledges; I paint fruit and flowers just before they wither/decay; I manipulate the paint so it creates recognisable forms but the illusion only just holds together, it's not really real; at times the paint slips into a liquid and the spilt medium leaves ghostly traces of gas/vapours. I always question how much to reveal, how much to let slip . . . just a hint? A little more than a suggestion? If it's too much the tension is gone. When I started working with volcanoes I felt the tensions within my painting became amplified...perhaps this was in response to the stories set in Naples that all have this ever present threat of violence.*

Emma Bennett

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**Acknowledgements**  
Tim Greany, Stuart Croft

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Produced by Destroy Projects

**ISBN**  
ISBN: 978-0-9570459-5-8

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