

Blue Fruit

Alexis Soul-Gray's *The Orange Eaters*

By Gemma Blackshaw

My children are around the same age as those who appear in most if not all of Alexis Soul-Gray's blue paintings, *The Orange Eaters* included. They are my children and they are child, too, in the art history of my mind: their faces round, their cheeks dimpled, their bellies full, their bodies sexless, their hands sticky with juice.

I watch them when they are sleeping or when they are absorbed in a task, like sucking the juice from an orange cut in half, then in quarters and finally in eighths because their mouths are small, their fingers little. Food and fruit especially – which necessitates their waiting, their practicing of patience as skin is washed, as pith and pips are removed, as segments are separated or sliced, a process which fascinates – elicits a quiet, a calm, a moment of study like none other, more than colouring, more than making, more than unmaking, activities which preoccupy them too only somehow less so. I watch, amazed at how I disappear, at how there is only the orange, which offers its own world and its own time, which is delicious, which is handled with the care most often reserved for the dead, for bumble bees and ladybirds, for woodlice and once a mouse brought into the kitchen by the neighbour's cat, all of which are laid out on tiny funeral beds of garden leaves and flowers. They are as tender with the orange, as attentive, as reverent. Perhaps it is because this fruit, above all fruits, is offered so rarely. My children cannot be left to eat oranges alone; I am needed to select and prepare them, to wipe their faces clean, or so I like to think. I am their mother, and I am mother, too, in that same art history of my mind.

Soul-Gray's *The Orange Eaters* of 2021–2, painted on linen with oils scrubbed back with bleach, made and unmade over a period of many months in studios and gardens, thought and unthought on easels and kitchen tables, between mothering and travelling, studying and painting, cooking and cleaning (faces and brushes, floors and pans), is a window that provides a different view on to a work of art I feel I know well, returning me to an art history that feels so long ago, the memory of which can be bitter-sweet. The colour orange was named after the fruit brought to Europe from Asia by Portuguese traders in the fifteenth century. (As Larissa Pham writes: 'How did it feel to taste the tang of citrus, to let the segments explode – new, beguiling – in one's mouth? It is this moment that the colour orange was given a name in the only language I speak.'¹) It is the colour I remember in John Singer Sargent's painting *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* of 1885–6, a painting inspired not by the sweet oranges that grew in groves in China long before being shipped across the sea to the courts and wealthy houses of the west but by the Chinese lanterns hanging among trees and lilies which Sargent saw on a boating trip down the Thames on a late summer evening – September, when light is fading and leaves are glowing, when all is orange and mauve and blue – of 1885².

Through Soul-Gray's painting of little girls and boys devouring globes of a colour I do not see but read as orange, I remember Sargent's lanterns, held in the children's hands, and Sargent's lilies, opening their white petal-mouths wide to show their orange stamens, not as lights and blooms but as fruit. The contem-

¹ Larissa Pham, 'For the Love of Orange', *The Paris Review*, 13 August 2019.

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sargent-carnation-lily-lily-rose-n01615>.

porary work of art by Soul-Gray opens on to the past; to London's picture galleries; to teenage imaginings of what a family of my own might be; to histories of art remembered suddenly, differently, intimately; to gardens desired; to paintings *tasted*; to memories of harvest festivals and fading light, of immaculate white dresses streaked with the juice of oranges, of loving, scolding mothers, who can be so careful, and so careless. Such ambivalences of care lie at the heart of Soul-Gray's work, which asks how painting itself cares for (and does not care for) people, surfaces, materials, histories of art, for the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, for the mothered, mothering self. Painting, then (which is pored over, wiped off, made and often violently unmade, which is scraped back or tossed away, left outside in exasperation, which is subject to the artist's tempers), becomes the means of reflecting on what is care and what is, at the same time, carelessness in life as in work.

Lily pollen stains. Oranges stain, too. I think of Soul-Gray's bleach. Of tiredness. Of scrubbing. Of works that take so long to realise because who can work like Sargent? (Though Sargent took his time too, painting outdoors while the light fell in the dusks of September to November of 1885, while flowers died and children tired; the painting had to be abandoned until the following autumn when the twilight was once again right.) I think of children and of chores across time; of women looking but not painting; of women painting in spite of it all. I think, too, of what disturbs me in Soul-Gray's painting, which is not only how orange fruit *turns blue*, but also and more so, how there is no mother here, choosing, weighing, watching, peeling, wiping. The children who are *The Orange Eaters* have no need of one because they have, instead, each other. They stand shoulder to shoulder while eating oranges as apples, biting through the bitter skin – hungry, unflinching – whole.

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Illustrations:



Alexis Soul-Gray, *The Orange Eaters*, 2021–2.
Oil and bleach on linen, 1300 x 1500 mm.



John Singer Sargent, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose*, 1885–6.
Oil on canvas, 1740 x 1537 mm (Tate London).