Francesco Clemente
Gagosian West End

Made last year in Port Antonio, Jamaica, these 14 watercolours conclude Francesco Clemente’s ten-year series ‘The Book of the Sea’. In work that literally and metaphorically blurs boundaries, the image of the sea is especially apt. What’s surprising, though, is a sense of violence that runs contrary to the jewel-like colours and paradisiacal backdrops. Holding up her leg to reveal her crotch, the central figure in ‘Charm’ looks nonplussed; delving through the wound-like openings surrounding her, male hands attempt to touch her flesh. Shielding the seductress from her admirers is a snaking branch; barbs puncture those who try to grasp the forbidden fruit. ‘Pleasure and Pain’ similarly pits danger against desire and points towards the disjunction between rational and carnal thought. A patch of honeycomb denoting her vagina, a female nude points to her crotch with one hand and to her head with the other. To reach the honey pot you have to negotiate the swarm of bees that guards the queen. Women as remote, unreachable deities, sex as danger; elsewhere, the castration complex is illustrated by figures brandishing scissors.

Though emotionally troubled, these are the least contrived Clemente images that I’ve seen. Forms seem to emerge from nothing or bleed into one another effortlessly. In the catalogue Marina Warner gives a cultural history of the myths and legends of the West Indies and their influence on artists and writers through the centuries. Though fascinating, it is not especially enlightening. Occupying unstable territory, Clemente is in a world of his own. 

Mike Silva
Anthony Wilkinson East End

Mike Silva may not be a fan of grisly detail, but his paintings are not as sugary as they appear. Based on photographs of woodland (much of it recognisable as Hampstead Heath), the new landscapes display the soft, rounded, almost airbrushed quality of his earlier portraits of friends. By painting in a neuter, wet-in-wet style – rendering each spindly branch in a single, wavering stroke and turning patches of light into pale ellipses on the ground ringed by progressively darker colours – Silva nods to photographic defocusing. Imposing a debt to the plein air painters of a century ago, sometimes the stylised marks resolve into a perspectival view only from a distance.

But a computer could have matched his bright, synthetic colours, and the mechanical brushwork and photographic origins suggest the viewpoint of an urbanite who finds the experience of nature slightly surreal and hard to embrace. Typically, Silva orientates himself in the shadows looking outwards. ‘Landscape XI’ surveys the brilliant distance from the dark centre of a serpentine wood, and the copse in ‘Landscape XIV’ sports warped, leafless trees bursting out of lunar lilac soil. Even without Hampstead Heath’s usual quota of cadavers and copulation, it’s not exactly Monet. 

Shizuka Yokomizo
The Approach East End

For a previous project, Shizuka Yokomizo asked strangers to leave their curtains open at a specified time of night, so that she could photograph them from the street. Her subjects were pitifully in control of the way they were perceived, but the series obviously has voyeuristic overtones.

In Yokomizo’s new series, the people portrayed are friends and colleagues. Working collaboratively, artist and subject create a composition that portrays the sitter in a moment of self-reflection and, rather than imposing rules that predetermine the composition, indulges her subjects to the point where overt self-consciousness leaves one in no doubt that the images are not naturalistic. At times the results are modest or intimate, at others matter of fact. Sitting with her back to the camera, a woman is reflected in a darkened window; this spectre-like apparition has a perspectival expression. A young man is in his bedroom surrounded by objects with which he identifies – books, a guitar and battered old teddy bears. You might expect people to construct obscure or complex scenes, but most of the portraits seem to present archetypes. A woman at a kitchen sink and a man leaning on his car gazing out, as bored by their own predictability, Sally O'Reilly

Nicola Hicks
Flowers Central West End

Hanging in the window is a large drawing of a horse; a searching, scrawny, pedestrian pastel, it reveals effort rather than efficiency. Nicola Hicks is no George Stubbs, but when she jumps from two to three dimensions, visceral power takes over. The space is dominated by ‘Love Letter’, a bulking mass that stands nearly two metres high. Like all the sculptures, it is composed of plaster and sand; covering the surface is a deep oxide grit which gives the impression that the beast has been dug from a tomb or has emerged from a primordial swamp. The horse stands on a long, low plinth also covered with sand and trailing from its back is an extended tail that sweeps to the ground. Earth and animal are one and the same; pulled by a subterranean force, at any moment, the creature might sink back.

Less self-consciously dark or skittishly whimsical, these sculptures have a resonance often lacking in Hicks’s earlier work. Myths and fairy tales still permeate but, grounded in reality, the figures are more self-contained and more believable. Her larger-than-life ‘Self Portrait’ draws a fine line between fact and fantasy. Attention to details such as bone structure and musculature gives the figure an innate strength and sense of pride, but sprouting from the top of the head are cartoonish bunny ears. In the office a series of ‘straight’ drawings – of herself, her daughter, a chicken, a Shetland pony – suggest that country life might have tamed Hicks. On the contrary, this is a brave and confident evolution. 

Martin Coomer