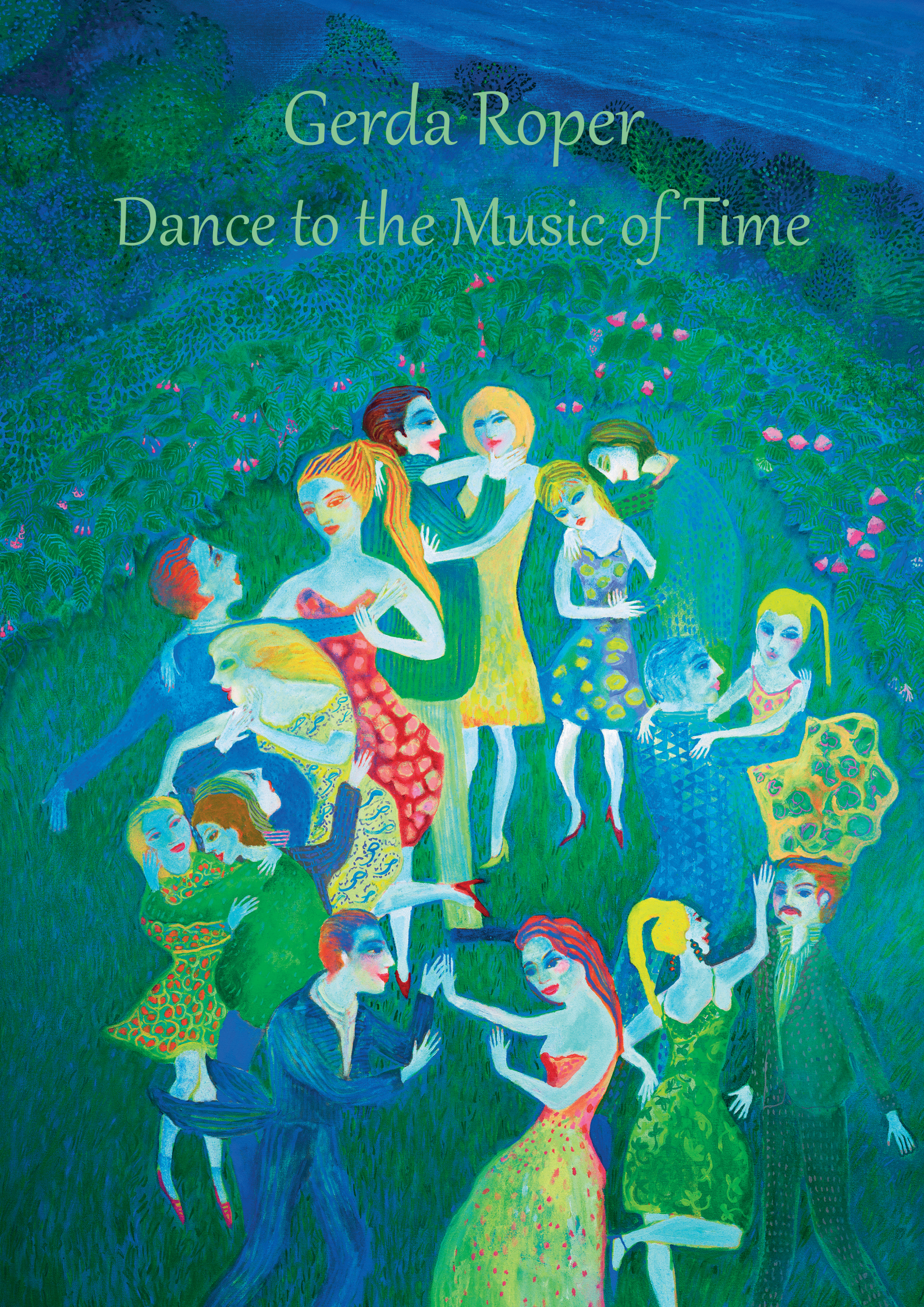


# Gerda Roper

## Dance to the Music of Time







‘The Listeners’

Front cover: ‘Dancing at Dusk’  
Part of the National Art Collection at the National Library of Wales



# Gerda Roper: Dance to the Music of Time

Gerda Roper captures the essence of her remarkable collection of figurative artworks by referencing *A Dance to the Music of Time*, the title of a seventeenth-century painting by Nicolas Poussin. In the mid-twentieth century this also defined Anthony Powell's series of novels exploring human manners. Poussin depicted Greek personifications of the seasons and these have also come to represent aspects of the human condition. Gerda's paintings, characteristically, explore the reality, perceptions and sensory experiences of women.

Her paintings are rich in pure colour and are structured emphatically around reassuring patterns. Usually floral, these might depict a garden or trees although they also evoke wallpapers, carpets and curtains. Elegant figures harmonise perfectly with such settings and, in doing so, seamlessly convey a particular state of mind. The artist describes how works may emerge from an initial combination of ideas and are refined until a certain calmness is achieved. They frequently show enclosed, safe spaces such as tents, gardens and domestic rooms. She refers to a work's 'tranquility as its grace'.

Beyond surface appeal and repose, however, these works may, by sleight-of-hand, elicit deeper feelings. Never far away are allusions to things unseen yet felt, yearnings that might be for home, love or music. Gerda describes how her paintings 'show fortune tellers, visionaries, dreamers and sleepers, some seeking knowledge of what is to come, others dreaming of a parallel universe.' Her paintings 'reflect both an exterior world of what is there and an interior one regarding how the world is perceived'. They metamorphose from the tangible to the transient.

Gerda's ideas may originate in a painting, poem, photograph or film. Often the stimulus is a memory. Classical influences are also present as in Daphne becoming a laurel tree to escape the attentions of Apollo. Elsewhere, observed in a Piero della Francesca fresco, the emperor Constantine is assured by an angel of victory in battle.

Her artworks reveal gentle humour and a fascination with performance as in a circus act or exhibition opening. A sense of presentation emerges when curtains are drawn back or fashion and jewellery contemplated. Drawing and painting are distinct activities. She does paint in watercolour but mostly uses oils, where possible avoiding brush marks. Her drawings are delicate in a range of greys. All her work, often created in series, is intimate, deeply observed and deserving of careful contemplation.

**David Moore**





'I Sleep Alone'



'Silver Sleeping'





'Lament'





'Portrait Class'



'The Life Class'











'Through a Glass Darkly'



'L'heure Bleue'



'A Little Chaos'



'Odalisque'





‘Portrait of a Lady’







'Summer Nights'



'At the Seaside'





'Reading the Cards'



'And So They Spun'



*'...there's no such thing as a grown-up person'*  
[André Malraux, *Anti-Memoirs*, 1968]

Roper's drawings are deft and light of touch. We can easily imagine the sound of the artist's sharpened pencil tip on a soft sheet of buttery-cream cartridge paper. There is rhythm here, gentle caresses and quick-witted lines for us to enjoy. Without the distraction of colour, tone and form take shape; a button, a heel on a shoe; a soft, wolf-grey wisp of a girl; a few men in solid, armour-like suits mingle amongst 'the women'. But there is also a suit-wearing woman here. Separated from the herd, she has turned her back and looks at a painting of uncertain content alone. The others, exhibitionists and voyeurs – who have come to be looked at as much as to look – have made an exhibition of themselves. And here they are cut down to size, a picture at an exhibition.

These drawings are like tiny jewels, love letters and party invitations from the artist to join a miniature and minutely observed world of magical, doll-like figures or circus animals (where pigs do indeed fly). It is a world of *fun*. And yet, as in all fairy tales, there is a dark side too. There is a sense that the crocodiles are not far behind us – or perhaps ahead of us, or even dangerously beneath our feet. They are, in fact, everywhere lying in wait to snap at our ankles. Chop-chop, and the feet are gone. As in Hans Christian Andersen's magnificent tale *The Red Shoes* (and oh! the shoes, the fabulous shoes in Roper's drawings – to say nothing of the frocks and fabrics) we must all perform and make something of our lives until the final curtain drops. Whatever, sooner, or later, we all fall down. Once upon a time will inevitably become The End. In the meantime, for Roper, the angel is in her love of detail. The drawings are wistful, and mischievous too, as if something of the artist as a small girl remains.

The child of course lives in a rich tapestry where fantasy and reality are intricately interwoven, and where fantasy still has the power to trump reality. This is a world of *play*, and it is this imaginative world that artists also inhabit. In Roper's work, such a world is only a hop, skip and a jump away.

This sense of restlessness, merged with a certain

calm, haunts the larger paintings. There is a sense of figures on the move, as if somewhere between where they have come from, or are going to, neither children nor quite adults. While we cannot go back, neither can we ever fully go forward. Grown women are stuffed under tables. They may be playing (or then again, maybe not). These scenes are often of domestic interiors, ambiguous places of both warm, and sometimes cold, comfort. In Roper's dreamlike paintings, washes of cobalt and ultramarine blues, verdant and leafy greens, toffee apple reds, gamboge and cadmium yellows – an entire liturgy of sensuous colour – beckon, inviting us into a luminous and enchanted world that is somewhere between reality and fantasy. There are chequered floors (and lives), and outside there are seas and rivers and boats of escape that carry the lovers – but to where? In the game of hide and seek it is never really clear who is hiding and who is seeking. The subjects are to all intents and purposes lost to each other. One can imagine a commandment: Hide and ye shall seek; Seek and ye shall hide. We remain mysteries not only to others, but also to ourselves. Hide as much as you want and you will be found out. Seek all you want and there will still be something hidden.

Psychoanalysis teaches us that the unconscious changes very little over time and therefore largely remains the repository of infantile wishes and desires (hence the priest's conclusion in Malraux's *Anti-Memoirs* that there is no such thing as a grown-up person). These are simple things, the very stuff of life, where murderous intent co-exists with a love supreme: I HATE you; I want to kill you and I LOVE you; I could eat you up. There is something here of the Garden of Eden after the Fall, especially in the paintings, with their reflective mirrors and figures covering their eyes so that they may not directly see the naked truth (or the Gorgon's stare?). But of course just like the child we must look, in spite of everything we know as adults, and every single day to *be* in the world means risking being expelled or devoured – part or whole. Roper reminds us that after all the shenanigans, the fun, the games, the bread and circuses of life with its pleasures and its pains, we are *human*, and if we have good fortune, and play our cards right, we will grow old. Until then, what can we do but dance to the music of time?

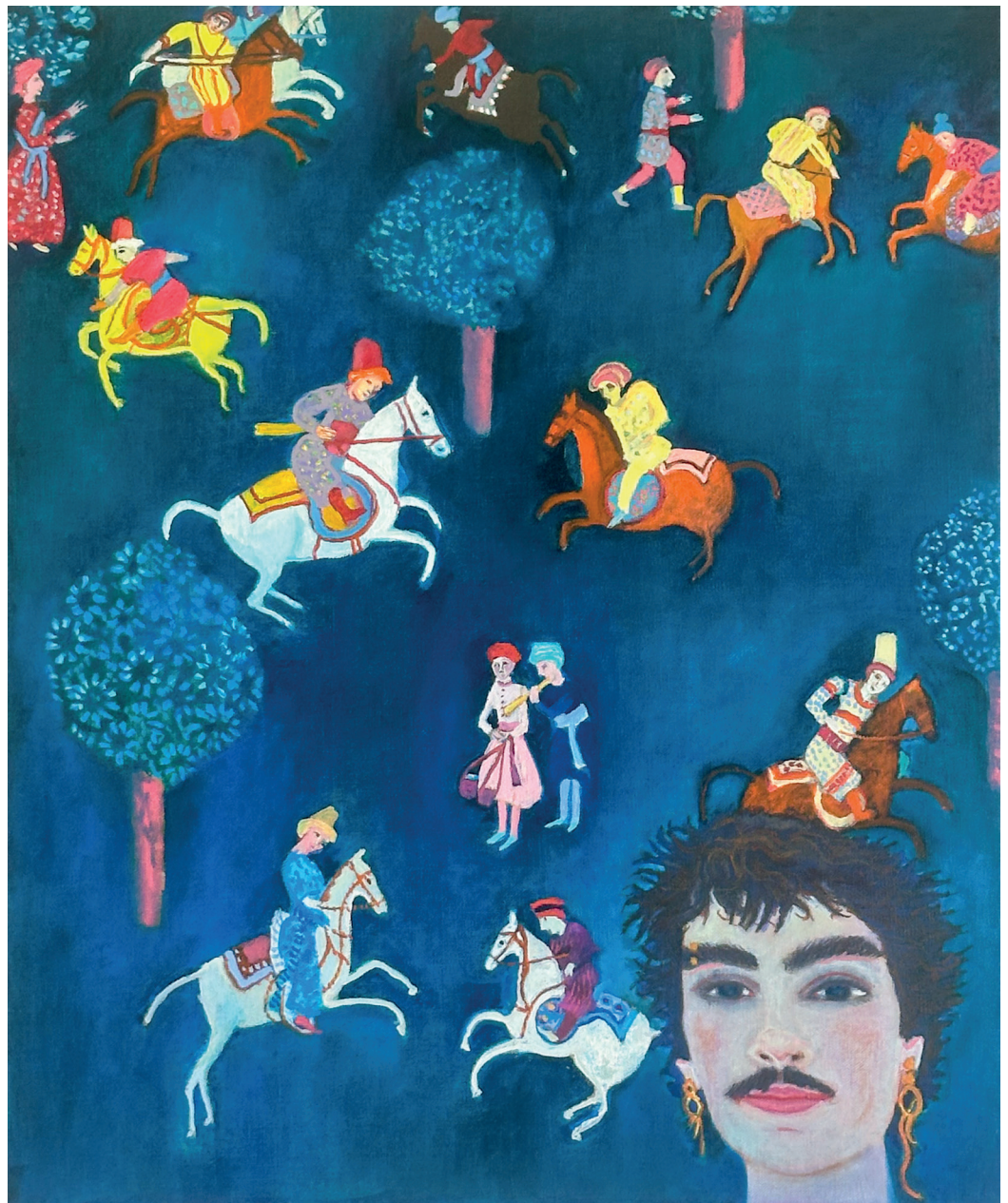




'Hide and Seek in the Morning'



'Daphne'



'Apollo Day Dreaming'



In her latest series of works, Roper continues with the metaphor of the circus and circle of life. The title of this exhibition, *Dance to the Music of Time*, is a reference to Nicholas Poussin's Classical painting, *A Dance to the Music of Time* (c1634 – 1636).<sup>i</sup> Except that here there is no article, indefinite or otherwise. A noun becomes a verb, and even perhaps, a command: *Dance!* Poussin meets Andersen. The spell is cast.

In these studies of canopies we find ourselves in enchanted fields. What are we to make of the tents and orchards, the sleeping beauties and earthly saints? What do the images reveal when the canvas curtain is pulled back? Tents have a long history, not only in military campaigns, but also as places for the display of medieval chivalry, as well as their use in travelling circuses and popular entertainment.

In *Silver's Dream of Constantine*, it is a simple girl we see, and not Constantine the Great on the eve of the battle for Rome as painted by Piero della Francesca. The story depicted in his painting *The Dream of Constantine* (c. 1466) shows Constantine's divine vision of an angel bearing a cross and promising victory in battle. Constantine does indeed win, becomes Emperor and the Roman Empire is Christianised. Perhaps Silver too sees a sign in the sky with the words *In hoc signo vinces* (In this image conquer). And over there, sure enough, a triumvirate of modern *Conquistadors* stands triumphant. There is no Father, Son and Holy Spirit here, only bold girls, resplendent and resilient ready to face hardship and peril as well of as any man, and to play their part in colonial exploits. They refuse the feminine nomenclature of *Conquistadora*. The feminist slogan of a 'fair field and no favour' suspends the question of for whom? Feminism has its dark side too. Women, as Roper reminds us are no saints, and no better, or worse, than men. They too crave power – and the world is no Garden of Eden.

These images show us a land that is bewitched and betwixt; it is a place between heavenly delights and earthly pleasures, one that is neither fully past nor totally present (as in life, the distinction is always unclear. The present is in the past all too quickly and the past keeps interfering in the present). The

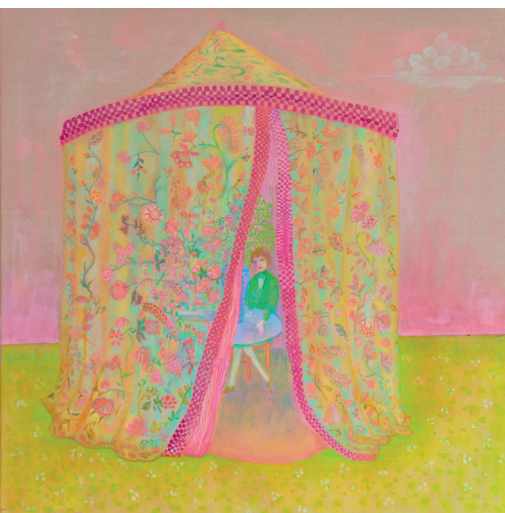
images also lie between night and day (who can easily say in the twilight if it is dawn or dusk)? And are the women young or old? (The figures in Roper's work are often of indeterminate age and this also complicates the question of the relationship between the quick and dead). These characters, predominantly women, resemble marionettes. Here they also appear as changelings who possess the odd uncanniness of dolls laid to rest in their cradles and, like dolls, their eyelids have rolled shut. But equally those eyelids might suddenly spring open as they arise, and in *The Conquistadors* they do, even if the image is an exception in a series where characters sleep as if suspended between life and death.

Roper employs the flowing and rhythmic first line of a poem by William Wordsworth as a title, 'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal' (1798) with both its aural and visually alliterative triple 'SSS'. The sentence stretches out in a shape that is both sinuous and sensuous, and just a little slithery. Roper puts this to good use. Her figures are wound with nature, snakelike in garden or forest. A girl is laid out on a divan – or is it a floral bier? Her eyes closed, she sinks back into the landscape. In the end, as Wordsworth continues, we are 'Rolled round in earth's diurnal course/ With rocks, and stones, and trees'. We are of this earth and will return to it, homeward bound, rolled sound. We are born, we live, we die. None is more important than another and as surely as day follows night, an end is also a beginning.

## Roberta McGrath

<sup>i</sup> Poussin's painting *A Dance to the Music of Time* depicts the four stages of life as four seasons, as well as its cycle of wealth and poverty, pleasure and labour. In the painting it is Aurora, the Roman Goddess of the dawn, who surveys the earthly scene as she pulls her chariot across the heavens. *A Dance to the Music of Time* (1951–1975) is also the title of Anthony Powell's work of literature, a sustained multi-volume meditation on the vagaries of English life and manners in the years between 1914 and 1971. Roper is comfortable with both.





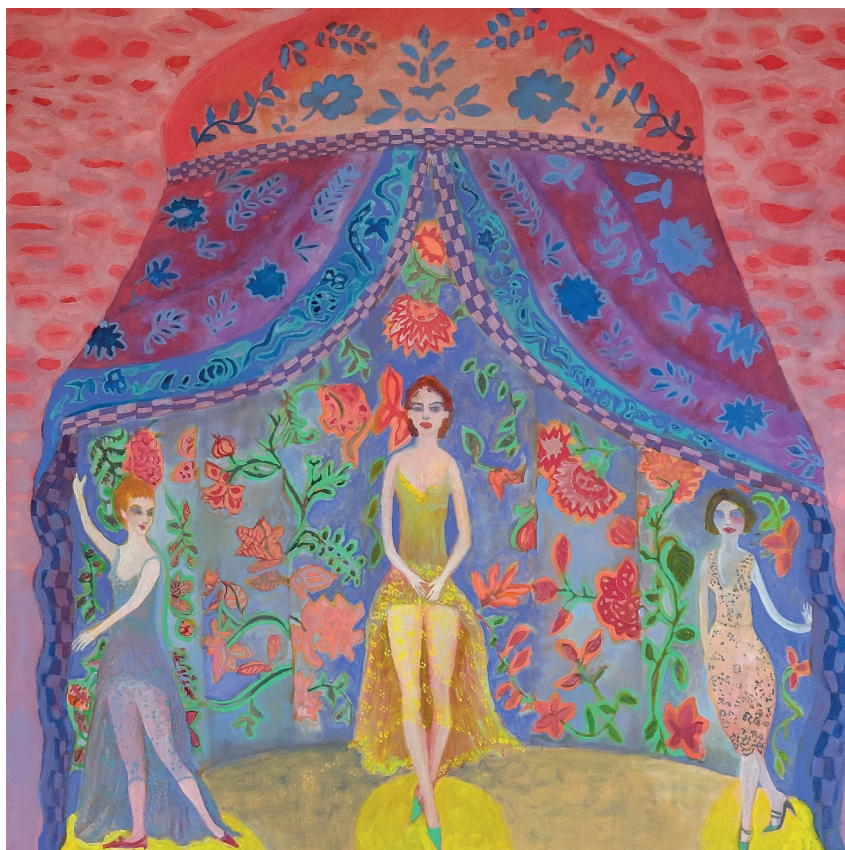
'The Golden Tent'



'Silver's Vision of Constantine'



'The Sleep of the Just'



'The Conquistadors'



'A Slumber did my Spirit Seal'





'The Consistency of Pleasure'

Dance to the Music of Time  
Art Gallery, Oriel Mon - 20th Sept to 2nd Nov, 2025

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