Defining beauty goes hand in hand with defining art. Since the Renaissance, philosophers and artists have tried to question the relationship between emotion, aesthetics, the universal and beauty. Kaye Donachie’s ethereal, nuanced and essentially beautiful portraits of women play on those ideas. Her work tries to define what beauty is and how women have manipulated the idea of aesthetics and self-representation.

At some point in recent decades, the idea of beauty with a big B became an unfashionable topic for art. Like still lifes or nudes, it was something from another era. Yet Donachie’s painting goes back to the idea and gives it new life. “Beauty is for me something that has a particular energy. That feeling, that intimacy, is not necessarily something that is aesthetic,” she explains over tea in a dimly lit Soho restaurant. In person, the 46 year-old Donachie is small, brunette, engaging and earnest. Born in Glasgow, she trained in Birmingham before completing her studies in Berlin and the Royal College of Art. Early in her career she won the John Moores Award, one of the most respected prizes for painters. Now living and working in London, she is an immensely talented painter who has shown with galleries such as Maureen Paley in London, Marianne Boesky and Sean Kelly in New York and was featured in the 2009 Tate St Ives exhibition The Dark Monarch.
Gavin, Francesca, *The Ephemeral Beauty of Kaye Donachie*, 

The focus is Donachie’s paintings are often on faces rather than the body. Her paintings are on a small scale and show you closer to the canvas. The portraits are hand-sized. “They are very sensual women. That close up and that focus on the eyes – I am interested in painting those intensities, that eroticism of looking. You are faced with the don-up of another face. Vouerism is quite erotic.”

The women she depicts are not specific but instead an amalgam of different sources. They are flambant, rosy, bohemian. In her earlier work, the artist focused representing on counterculture movements from the 1960s. Her more recent female protagonists also share this sense of being on the periphery. These are characters outside the social mainstream, presenting an alternative way of living. “This is this is this – 1960s, 70s, 80s. It’s getting closer to reality. For me the ideal is what is not quite in the consciousness.”

Paley also discusses the idea of the beholder. “In painting, for me, nothing is really real. It is all idealised in a sense. You ask yourself: what is that reality? Painting creates that really special space, which is different to film and photography. The latter are rooted in a different kind of realism, a conscious space. What I am striving for is idealisation within the space of a painting.”

Although there is fluidity that resembles watercolour in her approach, Donachie works in oil. Her sense of lightness is an attempt to create a dream-like space “where things are moving very quickly, not tangible.” Like all fantasties, her work appears fragile. Images or ghosts that appear as image and can easily disappear.

She is currently working on an exhibition at Le Plâtre in Paris which opens in May. Alongside her own work, she is curating a selection of images of her sources of inspiration. Her work will be contrasted by photographs of the artists, women and poets that feed into her paintings. The show will hopefully include loans of works by Dora Maar, Man Ray and the surrealists.

Although represented by one of London’s most important galleries, Maureen Paley, Donachie sits apart from much of the art world hype. As an artist and her practice feel at a refreshing remove. “I think the world is in a strange place at the moment. I was thinking to myself, what are historians going to think when they look back on us at this time? I’ve read so many articles about artists just retreating back to their studios. It is almost so horrific what’s happening – countries retreating and looking inward. What is it you are making in response to that? Styles are moving quickly, but there isn’t even a pause. How do we reflect on that?”

Painting as a medium is almost instantly opposed to this sense of contemporary speed, to the rush of fashion or taste. “As opening, people always say you what you are doing next. You’re not once in the present but also in the future.”

There is a timeless ness to Donachie’s paintings, which perhaps is why her work plays with the idea of beauty so well. Plato did not see a conflict between the pleasure of beauty and the goals of philosophy. In the 18th century, Francis Hutcheson insisted beauty was centred on the experience of pleasure. He championed a hedonistic beauty, a sensual beauty. Donachie’s paintings are an attempt to express a sensibility, an emotion. Here are the melodramatic joys of ephemeral experience.