

Stephen Friedman Gallery

An Essay
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A world of interiors suggesting the past, a dark mysterious place where colour is seen through the prism of time, where people and objects float and settle, anchoring us by their inherent familiarity, but disturbing us with something unsettling and provocative that is left unsaid.

Anne Rothenstein's work is deeply sophisticated, but even more deeply vulnerable. Calling on subtle influences from outsider art and traditional figurative painting, she transforms them to her own ends: a unique combination of sophistication and innocence.

Landscapes play with colours, shapes and texture in a strongly patterned design – flat box-like houses, trees going off to one side, bits of balcony, apple trees with branches like black forks. The colours jostle and nudge each other, collations of muted reds, greens, blues, browns and mauve. The colours call us down a corridor of memories and associations: childhood perceptions of different spaces – rooms, cupboards, light falling inside a room at night, the seaside, emptiness.

Anne's figures draw thoughts and emotions towards them. The figures are sometimes in pairs, more often alone, caught between play, relaxation, sleep; staring straight out, patient but guarded. There is little naturalistic in these figures: they are usually represented by flat blocks of colour suggesting garments; sometimes with decorative marks scratched into the surface of the paint itself; sometimes with small brushstrokes. The languor of the curved back, the pill-box hat, the carefully placed hands; the faces primitive, almost doll-like concealing, contemplative.

The figures with strange small heads are often androgynous. A sense of clumsiness combines with frail humanity in the way that their white hands, almost glove shaped, lie well mannered on the table or seem attached to a cloth, serviette or handkerchief that falls stiffly across their laps. Yet however symbolic the figures are, there is always an uncanny soundness about the weight of the body, the direction of the limbs.

Something immensely human is hinted at obliquely but never allowed to dominate the whole picture, which has to work as a painting first and foremost. There is a tension between concealment and revelation, suggested with extraordinary economy of shape and line. While unsettling elements disturb the gloss of apparently benign established painterly traditions, they never subsume the pictures, each of which exists powerfully in its own right, luminous and sombre, rich and mysterious.