Stephen Friedman Gallery

The Mysteries of Mortal Existence
Richard Cork
2021

The Mysteries of Mortal Existence

When she painted the first version of End of the Movie, Anne Rothenstein was caught up in separating from her husband Stephen Frears. Since their relationship had lasted over forty years, the divorce was bound to be a momentous experience. And in all three of Rothenstein's End of the Movie paintings, she emphasises the dark, solitary feelings which afflict everyone there, apart from a woman and child holding hands as they walk in the countryside. By the time Rothenstein finished this series of images, the corona pandemic ensured that cinemas were closed all over Britain. As she recalls now, her life with the distinguished film director Frears 'had been dominated by movies for many years', but in 2020 even the most determined film-goers realised that their customary access was largely denied. Rothenstein herself no longer wanted to go out: 'I like being alone, and my studio is at home', she explains. 'Suddenly, time has become my friend.'

Cinematic references can still be found in her work, though. A recent film, Portrait of a Lady on Fire, contains a dramatic sequence when the lady's dress bursts into flames. Rothenstein found this image on her computer and used it in a large, elegiac painting called Dusk. Here, a fair-haired woman walking on the beach pauses to contemplate sea and sky alike, while a foreground figure presides over the strange burning of a branch. The sense of melancholy is powerfully conveyed, and yet Rothenstein does not want the overall meaning of her images to lack mystery. 'I like other people to make up their minds when they look at my work', she declares, before revealing that 'my art takes on a life of its own.'

Dramatic changes often occur during the act of painting. The Art Gallery began as a work where the two figures walked away from each other. But Rothenstein subsequently decided to show them both moving towards the centre of the picture-space. The feeling of tension was thereby increased, along with the distinct possibility of an encounter between the woman and the man. In the finished painting, though, they both appear lost in their own thoughts and unaware of anybody else. They might even be sadly contemplating the imminent closure of the gallery in response to severe governmental lockdown.

Another painting which reflects on the current pandemic crisis is called, appropriately, Solitude. A pale and haunted figure sits on a chair in an austere, seemingly empty space. As if responding to the imminent arrival of somebody else, this figure's head twists round in expectation. Even so, the possible advent of a companion seems highly unlikely. Naked and vulnerable, the slender figure sums up the feeling of isolation suffered by so many people at the moment. Nothing is certain here – not even the gender of this contemplative person. Although clearly young, and displaying an experimental hair-style, the figure could be either female or male.

Rothenstein points out that 'I am very intrigued by androgyny', and she is equally open about the sexual 'ambiguity' of the person in Walking the Dog. Ostensibly a man, this figure ambles towards us with a cigarette in one hand and the dog's lead in the other. The position of the legs suggests an element of surprise, as if the dog-walker has suddenly realised that someone nearby is taking a photograph. The longer we look at this painting, the more we notice elements suggestive of a woman. Make-up can be detected in the youthful face, especially on the brightly coloured lips. But nothing is certain.

By no means all Rothenstein's paintings display a preoccupation with ambiguity. The title of one panoramic work, Two Girls Four Suns, makes clear that we are looking here at females. They are related to the equally interlinked figures at the centre of the End of the Movie series, and similarly involved with walking through countryside. Sometimes, we even realise that a painting like Hyde Park is devoid of people altogether. Dominated instead by a very arresting tree, this image reflects Rothenstein's feeling that she occasionally needs to 'take a break with a landscape.' Her preoccupation with 'painting figures' can occasionally feel 'rather exhausting', but she returns to them soon enough.

In a poignant painting called Love Song to a Field, we see two very separate people meditating with sadness on the atmospheric emptiness of their rural surroundings. Rothenstein, who now lives only in London and 'never goes out', recalls that 'we had a house in Dorset where I became obsessed with gardening for a while.' Yet during

The Mysteries of Mortal Existence
Richard Cork
2021

her increasingly reclusive existence in 2020 she 'suddenly realised I hadn't seen a field for a couple of years. I became aware that it had gone from my life.'

The most mournful of Rothenstein's recent works are the two potent images called Smoking Bride. Nocturnal in feeling, they both show a lonely young woman seated on a bench as if stunned by the absence of her husband. Although she may possibly be waiting for him to return, the likelihood is that they have left each other before she even had time to take off her wedding dress. The bride might even have fled from the party, and on another level both these heartfelt paintings are clearly related to the emotional experiences Rothenstein went through during her divorce.

Rothenstein's parents divorced when she was very young, and the experience of being solitary today is movingly transmitted in her recent painting Leap of Faith, where a naked woman with outflung arms hurls herself into unalleviated darkness. Life is seen essentially as a great mystery in Rothenstein's work, even when she tackles subjects as ostensibly playful as Blind Man's Bluff. But underlying all her new art is a fundamental urge to arrive at the truth about mortal existence, and in a challenging work called The Painter she stands before us naked, as if determined to cast off everything that might prevent her from achieving such an admirable aim.