Stephen Friedman Gallery

Anne Rothenstein: 2016

Tom Wolfe's extended essay, The Painted Word, was a notorious (and timely) attack on the domination of the New York art world by critics who argued the need for painters to have "a persuasive theory" to support their work. Without a theory paintings couldn't reveal themselves, they had to be mediated by experts. Bereft of the grammar and syntax of critical theory, an ordinary visitor to an art gallery was like a peasant locked out by the abbots, peering through the windows of a monastery at monks transcribing illuminated manuscripts in a scriptorium.

If there is less critical absolutism today, its legacy remains in the texts that are posted beside works in public galleries – the small cards and large placards that "explain" the work as if the pictures were there to illustrate the texts. The effect of this on me is to nudge me towards art that requires no information apart from the thing itself. The dancer Pavlova was asked what she meant when she was dancing: "If I could tell you," she said, "I wouldn't dance it." And so it should be with the visual arts.

The point of art is to draw us into a heightened awareness of other people's feelings and other people's lives, to put ourselves in the minds and eyes of other human beings. When we look at an apple we're looking at an ordinary and over-familiar object; when we see an apple in a painting by Cezanne we grasp its reality - its "apple-ness" - in an entirely novel way. That illumination of the world, whether it be objects or people or nature, is what I look for in painting. "Painterly" is an adjective often used as a pejorative, just as "theatrical" is used scornfully in the theatre, but I admire distillation of expression – the "theatre-ness" of theatre, if you like – just as I admire the "painting-ness" of paintings.

That's why I'm so attracted by Anne Rothenstein's work. She shows an undeniable loyalty to the power of the painted image to describe the world seen through her eyes. It's a world as full of the joy of painting as it is of the pleasure she takes in the people and things she portrays.

The first work I saw of Annie's was as an actor in a short film on TV directed by her now husband, Stephen Frears. It must have been around the mid 70s. The film was called Match of the Day, a droll pun on a wedding which was the subject of the film. There was a scene in which two defectors from the wedding reception sat under a table, all flirt and banter. The two actors were Annie and the author of the film, Neville Smith. I'd never seen her before, although she'd been an actor for some time. She was beguiling: gap-toothed, open-faced, a gamine face not entirely innocent but entirely without guile. Part of the attraction of her performance – and her – was that she seemed almost outside the scene, not in a dilettantish fashion but as if she were sceptical of the world that she found herself in.

That may of course have been true, because it was not long before she left acting behind and, following her genetic destiny and her mother's profession, became a painter. There's a legacy of her acting years in her painting - her interest in the human figure, in people. Of all the arts, acting is a refutation of modernism: you can't make an actor abstract, the human being stubbornly remains and it's a paradox for an audience that while they are looking at a performance, they are also observing a person.

Because they indispensably rely on people – actors – as their means of expression, film and theatre are immune to the modernist's claim that art-forms become either 'wrong' or 'irrelevant', I recently heard a contemporary sculptor derided for his "outdated humanism". By that measure film and theatre will always seem outdated: it can never dissolve its reliance on the sound of the human voice, the disposition of mankind to tell each other stories and on the presence of the human figure,.

That unrepentant humanism is in Annie's paintings even if her figures are not naturalistic. They are powerfully delineated, often with curving, almost geometric, backs, and solid slabs of rich colour in the clothes set against blocks of near-matched colour in the backgrounds. The design of the paintings is formidable: all the elements are conscripted to form wonderfully satisfying shapes which never dominate or subvert their content.

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The small faces above the forceful, weighty, bodies give her people an air of sometimes anxious vulnerability. They seem guarded – shy in the face of the painter – and often seem to lack confidence to assert themselves, sometimes even lacking the confidence to reveal their faces. Couples mask on another's faces, huddling in corners to preserve their privacy. If there's a feeling of spontaneity as well as human fragility, about Annie's work, there's also another characteristic that belongs to good acting: stillness. The paintings seem to have arrested time, giving them a sense of past as well as future.

We have three of Annie's paintings – two portraits and a collage. One of the paintings is of a young man, slightly troubled, pale face capped with black hair above a pale unclothed body, bleached chalky background. Something elusive and fascinating and paradoxical about it: etiolated and yet full of life. The other painting is a beautifully composed figure of a woman, all natural terracotta, reds and brown, her large, elegant body, one arm across her body, the other supporting her chin and her small quizzical face above. It's really quite lovely.

The collage is a hugely playful and satisfying abstract composition – a tree, a dark moon, child-like flat houses, an almost-face, and all against a marvellously graded and muted rose-red, almost pink, palette that's gives it the warmth of the last embers of a Mediterranean sunset. It makes me happy to look at it, the kind of happiness that Elizabeth Bishop wrote about: "Hoping to live days of greater happiness, I forget that days of lesser happiness are passing by."