

Stephen Friedman Gallery

Anne Rothenstein: 2017
Deborah Levy
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Anne Rothenstein has mastered a technique that is in conversation with the emotional language of Francis Bacon and the unassuming spontaneity of Outsider art. Her paintings give value to the weight of thought itself, embodied as much in the space between her androgynous, brooding protagonists, as anything else – a chair, a lamp, a window, an animal, the way the light falls.

While every painting is formally resolved – after all their composition is designed with the eye of a modernist artist – at the same time there is a refreshing lack of resolution to what ever it is that bothers her stylish personae. Their appeal is that her paintings conceal more than they reveal. It is this lack of disclosure that creates tension and provokes our interest.

At a visceral level, these are paintings that reward a great deal of looking. If their surface is deceptively decorous – mellow colours and sculptural shapes – they are also uncanny, both familiar and strange.

We gaze like voyeurs intrigued by the tempest inside the stylish exteriors of Rothenstein's protagonists, who seem to nearly always be the same person. This is again a similarity with Bacon, who often worked with the same subject across a series of paintings. After a while, we notice there are scratch marks on the flattened surface, the grain of the wood seeps through the paint to add another dimension; perhaps rhythm and depth, certainly turbulence. On further scrutiny we do not see Bacon's screaming mouths, so much as a mouth (slashed with red lipstick) clenched shut.

There are any number of beguiling scenarios to contemplate, always with a hint of sardonic wit at play in expression and gesture. Two figures walk past each other, but they know they are both there – an open window between them. We see these same figures engrossed in awkward conversation, electrified and numb, sitting, standing, reclining, getting on with the day. Rothenstein also experiments with scale, in which a man places his hands over the eyes of a shrinking woman. It's as if she feels smaller than he does. The message seems to be don't look, but we do, we want to look. What we see is his hand over his own eyes and the curve of a frail lamp in the stripped grey landscape beyond them.

Virginia Woolf suggested that in her own novels, she wished to show that "modern literature must present 'Life' the way it really is – blurred and distorted." Rothenstein presents life that is distilled and distorted, sensual but stern, calm but agitated. Her painterly language is not exactly naturalism, though a reality has been created to capture mood, memory, human subjects confronted by something that baffles them. Rothenstein's unique skill is to capture the ways in which thought shapes the worlds she creates in the present tense of every image. She does not paint like any one else, which is how it should be, although there are echoes of her influences – in particular, Bacon, Matisse and Braque. We see these influences put to work in the startling triptych in which a woman is seated awkwardly, looking out towards us. It is as if her body is dissolving across the three panels, seeking a new composition.