

DEBORAH POYNTON

paintings

biography

reviews

*Deborah Poynton in conversation with Michael Stevenson***Michael Stevenson**

in: 'Deborah Poynton', Michael Stevenson Contemporary Gallery, 2004

Your work is centred around the well-worn phrase of the 'human condition'. However, it is much more than the portrayal of humans, or 'figurative' painting, because even when you paint a still-life, or an empty landscape, or a bare interior, your work resonates with fragility, fear, vulnerability, sensuality, uncertainty. In your words, 'a painting must sing' - is it when it provokes these emotive responses to our brittle and transient lives?

Perhaps a painting sings when it has a tautness of surface but also of meaning, when it contains contradictions. Then it resounds and reflects. I think every painting of mine is about the fear of death. It is about longing. About my longing, my fear. But we recognise these things in each other. Throw humour, passion, beauty, intricacy into it, allow a dream into it, and it will start to sing. When heart and mind are working together, it starts to sing. This is what I wish for, and I am always coming closer or getting further away. Beyond all the small decisions and considerations that go into a painting, is the driving question - does this feel right?

Your work often unsettles viewers; they find themselves in an uneasy space with elements they recognise, that are familiar and known, interspersed with references that are disturbing, unfamiliar, twisted. In this sense there is - if I can risk being reductive - a dark dreamlike quality to your imagination. How do you see your imagery in this regard?

I am uncomfortable with things that are simply beautiful. This response irritates me, it seems so silly. But I keep wanting to provoke, and prod, and say, feel this, look at this. Feel what I am feeling. Perhaps loneliness comes into it. Painting takes the sting out of loneliness for a short while, it is the best drug, because you can invite strangers into your dreams.

In this era of ever-larger works, the issue of scale also seems, to my eye, to be an integral part of your distinctive aesthetic. However, it is easier to enlarge a photographic image to a large format than paint on that scale. At times viewers cannot immediately reconcile your technique with the sheer size of the canvases - are you not daunted by scale or do you find it exhilarating?

The size of the viewed in relation to the viewer creates a power relationship. You can force intimacy or deny it.

I cannot imagine you working in any medium other than oil yet in contemporary (particularly South African) art practice, the tradition of painting is often considered moribund. Or are you not particularly concerned with the transient fashions of contemporary art?

I have always loved drawing and painting what is around me. I am not very interested in trends because I would do this anyway, whatever happened. But I feel that there is space for what I am doing, that I can make my own rules because I am working outside those perceptions.

Yes, you are in a sense an 'outsider artist' - you only lasted a few weeks in the system at Michaelis in Cape Town and then worked on your own for almost a decade before ever exhibiting, and in recent years you have lived a relatively isolated existence in the countryside outside Bonn juggling the demands of motherhood and painting. Hence, you have been - consciously or unconsciously - removed from the South African art world, and working in a very individualist and personal way. How do you think this distance from the 'formal' art world impacts on your work?

I move from painting to the children and back again and each day is crammed. They're at that age too - I know it will ease up later. Hopefully I'll learn to ease up too. I feel that for me now the distance from the formal art world helps me to feel free. That is the most important thing. I'm too much of a good girl to survive lots of contact. I would start trying to get it right, and please people, and I'm not sure if that's possible, for me anyway. I might start feeling ashamed or self-indulgent.

How do you realise these complex compositions? Do you first sketch on paper, then map out a canvas and work up the imagery or is the process more open-ended, organic, unstructured?

It varies. But usually I start with a small, rough sketch in heavy pencil that I attack and shift around with a rubber. When I have the light and dark and movement more or less where I want it I make a more detailed drawing, or several, and finally the working one that notates the composition. I start the canvas with gesture in a light colour and work over most of the space with a few lines to place things, and then get stuck in. When I feel clear about it I sometimes almost complete one area before starting another. When it feels murky and I'm not quite sure about what I'm doing, I paint most of the surface with a larger brush and start making changes, hacking and attacking.

The whole act feels manipulative, I enjoy the power rush but the reverse of that is it sometimes wants to defeat me and I have to make major cuts and remove highly worked areas. That is freeing and relieving. When I feel anxious and stuck I know with some dread that all must be rethought. I have left paintings by the wayside. Sometimes they do defeat me, or I defeat myself because I can't let go enough.

There is an element of the baroque tradition of painting in your work: it is mannered (rather than expressionist), it is usually imbued with symbolism, it is rich in visual references, and there is a self-conscious quality to the imagery and the technique. Is it a period of painting that you are drawn to? Or what painting excites and stimulates your mind and eye?

The painting that took place between the mid - 15th and 16th centuries, when space started breaking out of that linear perspective. This 'collage' aspect, as Hockney calls it, as if the eye of the beholder can float about and step in where it wants, combined with exquisite observation, an elasticity of composition where disparate elements hold together within one frame and present an overwhelming reality.

Your life has been fractured between countries and continents yet you are continually drawn back to South Africa and imagery that resonates with this country. Do you consciously explore the complexities of South Africa in your work or do you find yourself unconsciously drawn to narrating these complexities?

South Africa is my home. In German there is a word we don't have - Heimat. I hated it at first because it has this patriotic edge and also everyone referred to South Africa as my Heimat and I felt I would always be seen as a foreigner first. And they seemed so smug about their Heimat, Germany. Now I am accepting that. And South Africa is my Heimat. I love the place, and feel angry with it and myself that I can't live there right now, and I come back often. The imagery feels right to me. It expresses what I want, it is all bound up with the concepts of home, safety or lack of it, belonging or not belonging, that drive me. When I was nine I was forced to move to England. It was a most painful experience. When I returned at nineteen the familiarity was a balm. Culture runs so deep. It is in our thoughts and words and deeds. It is a language of images too. So I use this language because I am comfortable with it.

© Michael Stevenson 2004