

art | southafrica

Q104ISSUE02SUMMER2005



A ROAR LIKE SILENCE

DEBORAH POYNTON'S COMPULSIVE POWER LIES IN THE WAY SHE CONVEYS BOTH THE BEAUTY AND TERROR OF EXISTENCE, REMARKED LLOYD POLLAK IN A REVIEW LAST YEAR. WE ASKED HIM TO PICK UP ON A CONVERSATION WE INITIATED WITH THE ARTIST IN GERMANY



ASA Where were you trained and by whom?

I went to Rhode Island School of Design from 1987 to 1989. I had a favourite professor, Gracia Melanson. She was a philosopher, taught drawing and the theory and psychology of colour. In those two years I learnt printmaking and drawing; I only did three paintings. I can remember each one very clearly still, the challenges they presented to me. After coming back to South Africa at the end of 1989 I transferred to Michaelis. But I didn't like it, so I left and started painting.

ASA Was it a difficult transition from student to practicing artist? What were some of the obstacles you encountered?

I've been a full time painter since I was 20. But it took five years of painting to learn a few important things. At first I didn't have the confidence to finish anything properly. I also tried various styles and approaches, influenced by painters I admired. I did not exhibit at all until 1995. I was lucky enough to have time to learn to recognise what I wanted for myself, and begin to trust in it.

ASA Where are you currently based?

I work in our house in Germany. It's a 150-years-old school, in a village in the countryside between Frankfurt and Cologne. Fifty children

of all ages used to be taught in my studio, including most of our neighbours. Before the war, the Nazi youth did their exercises in our courtyard. The village surrendered to the Americans from this house, and afterwards, whole families lived in our basement. The village is surrounded by fields and forest.

ASA Any plans to return to South Africa permanently?

We are moving back to Cape Town at the end of this year. But I don't think in terms of "permanently" anymore. We're keeping our house in Germany and I plan to have working retreats here on a regular basis.

ASA Can you describe your studio process? How long does a painting take you to complete?

I have an initial idea in my mind for which I choose particular people or settings, take photographs, set up still lifes, and make many working drawings, trying all kinds of compositions. When I have everything prepared I start painting, with faint gestural lines. I don't project, or make tiny grids. Once the composition is in place I start painting, with larger brushes and then ever smaller ones. Sometimes I have to make major changes when a piece seems almost finished,



"SCALE IS SUCH A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY TO EXPRESS THE WHOLE THROUGH THE PARTICULAR"

which involves a lot of cleaning off and panic if time is tight. In the last 14 months I have done six paintings.

LP One of the paintings from your upcoming show at Michael Stevenson, *For Ever and Ever*, is a diptych with two panels measuring 200 x 300cm each. Why do you favour such gigantism?

The scale is such a wonderful opportunity to express the whole through the particular. I also like it because it has a human dimension. Instead of looking through a window we can step through the surface, or be kept out.

LP *For Ever and Ever* hints at the decline of western culture, the painting conveying a joyless and gruelling freneticism. Everyone appears immured in solitude, and no contact, either physical or psychological, seems possible.

That's right, but it's not a moral lesson, and it's also about something far more universal – the sadness and helplessness of longing. I think we all feel that, because life is limited by time. Now that other constructs have in part fallen away, we clothe ourselves in the remainder, and wonder why it doesn't mean much. The man in the right hand panel is like a prophet, handing out tiny images which speak of this sadness.

LP To me the prophet is the ghost at the banquet, an unwelcome reminder of judgement, mortality and the precariousness of our country's harmony. By flashing images of soldiers who may have died in order to provide the revellers with the freedoms they enjoy, he becomes the voice of conscience.

Yes, the prophet reveals that the event is a lie, a dream. The action in the painting seems frozen in a moment that lasts for ever and ever. The crowd are in the black space of before and after. If the painting had sound, then for me it would be a constant roar, a roar like the roaring of your own blood, like silence.

LP Generally, your paintings combine grandeur of scale with teeming naturalistic detail. Did you make painting your metier because such virtuoso feats of illusionism are inconceivable in any other media?

That's part of it. As a child I always drew compulsively as this gave me control over my own and other realities with their own logic and endless possibilities for enlargement and greater content. Drawing gave sense and meaning to the uncontrollable situations in which I found myself. So I make paintings and painting makes me.

facing page
For Ever and Ever,
2005, oil on
canvas, 200 x
600cm

this page
Betrayal, 2005,
oil on canvas,
200 x 600cm