

RESPONSES POLARISED

Scenes that evade words to speak in the silence

Lucinda Jolly | Cape Times. 17 June 2014

“Pictures are really just thin paint on canvas.”

Kirsty Cockerill, the curator for Deborah Poynton’s exhibition, “Model for a World: A Survey of 25 Years of Painting”, has suggested that “no-one really understands Poynton’s paintings”. Cockerill has a point. For Poynton’s paintings tend to elicit two polarised responses. Either a deep regard or a powerful disdain. Her paintings are disregarded by the uber hip and super cool as simply works copied from photographs in the realist tradition. But these works are not reportage. They are reconstructions of places that do not exist except in the virtual reality of the painter’s mind and their only connection with the photograph is that they are stitched from photographic sections. Alternatively, viewers are so seduced by the technical skill of her surfaces they are unable to move beyond them. Neither extreme provides an adequate basis for receiving the paintings, let alone understanding Poynton’s work. The key lies in the shifting areas in between which are indicative of the otter agile and obsidian blade sharpness of Poynton’s intellect and conceptual prowess -and the subtle way she plays with paradox.

Whether repelled or attracted, few remain totally unaffected by the intensity of the force field of her paintings. “They used to suck the oxygen out of my world” says Cockerill. A dramatic way of saying that they are super intense. And they are. Her sheer technical mastery which gives rise to densely embroidered surfaces, makes them so. These surfaces hint at the paradox of content which in Cockerill’s words “promise everything” -rather like the Hollywood movie tradition- and yet contradictorily “give nothing”. Operating from the artist’s “cool strip” which she considers both her “Achilles heel” and her “cutting knife” the paintings may “not be emotional but they evoke”. It’s a Herculean task of restraint to get beyond the Siren’s song of the sheer scale of seductive surfaces – the glossy leaves of imagined places, the sensual spill and tumble of fabric, the flotsam and jetsam of domestic debris, the bloom and wear of young and old flesh. But make like the Iliad’s heroic Ulysses. Close your eyes – metaphorically that is – to the surfaces like the hero who stopped the ears of his men with wax and tie yourself to the mast of the ship to resist the lure of

the surfaces instant gratification. Few pass through this narrow passage. Survive it and you will find it well worth it. For when you emerge it will be in interesting, challenging climes. Poynton’s themes will start to become apparent. Construction is one of the key approaches. She favours the holding of a “contained universe” or a structure in which she is safe and free to elaborate within. Watch out for the playful bits of red herring which appear as connection but ultimately operate as

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disconnection. She also talks about the self-consciousness of looking at an image. Hold on to the fact that the works are paint on a canvas.

Ultimately the paintings operate as liminal feeling states which evade verbal explanations. Earlier works include naked figures who appear locked into their own closed loop of existence unable to relate to each other. Appear that is, for the artist provides no narrative. But you are welcome to come up with your own. And to avoid the discomfort of not having a narrative to hold

onto, there is a strong tendency to come up with your own. This exhibition also contains three new works which will be part of an exhibition in Johannesburg in early February next year in at the Michael Stevenson gallery titled "Scenes of a Romantic Nature". Poynton loves the word scenes. "It's a word loaded" implying notions of the theatrical and the contrived. Romanticism is the broader context of this exhibition, as in the Romanticism of the 19th found in the transcendent homages to nature by the painter Caspar David Frederick. Here Poynton's approach is deliberately formulaic. "I am not trying to do anything new" she says. These works contain a paradoxical awareness. On the one hand "almost ripping off what it is to do a picture but at the same time acknowledging that it's still a picture with power and beauty". Although once again these places are paintings as if observed from reality, two boys in boat in a stretch of outdoors, two boys building fire in a forest or a quarry with an amber pool of archetypal resonance and a cluster of horses, they have "nothing to do with reality." Instead they are a cool clear look at the "cravings and pitfalls of the idealised", a "harking back" a "nostalgia" and a "longing for a wish fulfilment state". The artist and ultimately the viewer knows they have nothing to do with reality."

They are after all paint on canvas. She says "You cannot live there. That's the whole point of it. And yet one cannot help but be moved by it". The exhibition has been masterfully and seamlessly curated. Cockerill achieves her aim which is "to open spaces between the work for the public" Although the show is not chronologically laid out, there is a strong sense throughout of Poynton's progression and development, starting with the precocious little drawings by the artist aged nine. Paintings are grouped loosely with the intention of engaging with each other both thematically and as elements which complement each other. The exhibition was conceived as one large installation or environment for Cockerill recognises that "the show has to be bigger than its components".

Finally, one can hold forth, analyse and theorise until the cows come home but until one has stood in the presence of the paintings and received them as images of wordless feeling states experienced on the retina and through the skin as a full body experience, there are no words. And even afterwards words are a poor substitute. And you know that this exhibition has worked its magic, when as Cockerill writes, "you start seeing Poyntonesque paintings in everything, everywhere". If there is one exhibition you see this year make it this one.