

Counter Current.... and all that jazz

Essay published in Jennifer Goodman exhibition catalogue *Counter Current*, November 2014

Counter current exchange is the mechanism by which a property of fluid, for instance heat or electrical energy, is transferred from one fluid to another that flows in the opposite direction. Flows need to be in close proximity to maintain the concentrated gradient necessary for maximising movement from one to the other: two elements come together to generate a more effective energy force than that capable of being produced by one alone.

Jennifer Goodman's exhibition title indicates that the two visually different currents in her recent paintings, although apparently oppositional, should be considered symbiotic. This signal is affirmed by her strategic occasional pairing of a work with its counter piece. Like non-identical twins the coupled works' distinctive individual features disguise a consanguineous interconnectivity established at the time of conception and maintained throughout the work's evolution. Her close-proximity placement of works such as *Delphic 1* and *Delphic 2* inevitably elicits comparisons between two tendencies of abstract formulation and compositional structuring and this obliges the viewer to step from one to the other (they are large works and so should be experienced in fact rather than in reproduction) or to move far enough away to view them contiguously. The to-and-fro required for such an encounter is both rewarding and frustrating. It is, given the scale of the works, impossible to experience both simultaneously: the empty space between them acts alternatively as obstacle and link. Henri Matisse also painted works in pairs (between 1905 and 1916) but his were two versions of the same work, his way of searching for alternative solutions to given pictorial challenges. It is only recently that these pairs have been exhibited together and analysed.¹

The genesis of Goodman's imagery for this suite of works is collage: cutting selected coloured art papers into desired shapes and adhering these on either a dark or light ground, a process popularised in the early 20th century by Pablo Picasso, employed by many later artists, notably including Jean Arp and Ellsworth Kelly, but epitomized in Henri Matisse's *Jazz* cut paper works. Unlike preparatory drawing that stains a surface, this piece-by-piece method of composing maximises manoeuvrability of component parts. Jean Arp supposedly tore sheets of paper into various shapes and scattered all of them, randomly, onto a blank sheet and Ellsworth Kelly cut his own drawings into same-size units and reassembled them without predetermining the placement. Jennifer Goodman's cutting however results in two varieties of shape: the drawn (Matisse stated that his scissors were his drawing tool) and the normally discarded remnant, both of which have been retained and used separately in separate works.

The biomorphic painted shapes in, for example, *Delphic 1* and *Flow 1*, are scaled-up versions of the drawn collage elements while the sliver-like shapes assembled in the counterpart works *Delphic 2* and *Flow 2* constitute the residue of her collage process: those leftover odds-and-ends one might, without thinking, consider insignificant. Her

¹ D. Aagesen, R. Rainbow (eds.) *Matisse: In Search of Pure Painting*, 2012, exhibition catalogue, MOMA, New York & Yale University Press, New Haven

2012 paintings exhibited as *Senses and Thoughts* contain only biomorphic forms similar to, but different from those in the current works; here the off-cuts are not utilized. This extra element is a significant move away from a single iteration to what might be described with the phrase borrowed from musical composition, ‘variations on a theme’.

While illusory movement is perceptible in both ‘styles’ of imagery, each is antithetically nuanced. For instance, the overall fields of coloured forms in *Blush*, *Luna*, *Sweep* appear to arrest a mercurial, magnetic energy that seemingly resides at the edges of the painted forms, forms that may have been lured together only momentarily and that might – perhaps while the viewer’s back is turned – begin to oscillate and coalesce into quite diverse configurations. Paradoxically, this sensation is apparent despite the works’ sombre, weighty colours and strong tonal contrasts.

Conversely, the fragmented, slender forms that weave in and over each other, dispersed on a creamy ground in *Delphic 2*, *Flow 2* ought to convey a discernible pulsation. Despite their illusion of weightlessness, separation from each other and from their ground these shapes appear to cling to the ground colour, their activity permanently stilled.

These works elude easy categorisation, description or even explication, as do most enduring and appealing artworks. Perhaps, as Mieke Bal has argued, these paintings ‘...are both narrative lures *and* obstacles. Seducing, then frustrating the viewer eager for stories, they are the temporal devices that slow down vision – but beyond a modernist, purist standstill.’²

Art is a visual experience in which, Bal contends, efficacy is more important than essence. Jennifer Goodman’s paintings are visually elegant in their abstraction, eloquent, subtly composed, and yes, beautiful. If the totality of her endeavour has issued in works which persuade us that beauty has intrinsic value³ then she has indeed accomplished something valuable.

Wilma Tabacco

©

September 2014

² Mieke Bal, *Louise Bourgeois’ Spider: The Architecture of Art-Writing*, 2001, University of Chicago Press, p 116

³ Ivan Gaskell, Margaret S. Winthrop, Remarks on Alexander Nehamas, *Only a Promise of Happiness: The Place of Beauty in a World of Art*, 2007, Princeton University Press