

Sky blue and thunder blue

Jess Levine at Tokarska Gallery, 1 – 10 November 2012

Jess Levine works in oil paint and collage. She is showing a large body of work in both media, at Tokarska Gallery, Walthamstow until 10 November. East London is a geographic departure from a forthcoming series of exhibitions in the South East in Whitstable, Alfriston, Eastbourne and St Leonards on Sea.

This artist does not mess about. A gallery booking prompted by Internet research, progressed with succinct exchanges, a decisive hang. Within moments of introduction at the private view, I am to write, without a doubt, and can I do so quickly, as it is not on for long.

Jess is open and direct. Living in Hastings, mother a painter, grandmother a potter. Courses in Art Therapy and Fine Art left unfinished due to overwhelming experiential drag on the academic side as a slow reader with dyslexia. The artist's oeuvre is now progressed via Tunbridge Wells Adult Education Centre.

Small paper and mixed media collages are displayed as a collection. Each less than A5, involves tearing of large initial paper layers, building up, refining detail and texture. Kurt Schwitters *Merz* or 'psychological collages' influence. Jess works from memory: *Corn Field* and *Venice* contain a series of abstract elements with colour sensitivity to their subjects and hints of barely recognisable form within the design; a fragment of map, a bird on the wing, architecture. These are compact compositional experiments in colour, form and texture; works in their own right, artistic exercises that build towards the larger works.

The oils are always A1 with a predilection for stiffened cartridge over traditional painterly surfaces. More than twenty-five works are exhibited, generated within the last three years. Each bears a single word title: *London*, *Cyprus*, *Figures*, *Dancing*, *Waterfall* and no specific date. Unlike the collages, which occasionally offer visual clues, the oils are orchestrations of paint in abstract mark making with colour, composition and texture at their heart.

The collages draw from memory, the oils from response to visual and perhaps auditory information. Each session at adult education begins with a slideshow, with group discussion, after which the stimuli cease and the artist begins a two hour engagement with paper on board, at easel, with tools of choice; decorators brushes from half to three inches wide and oil paint as given, with reliance on white to give thickness and opacity.

In the days preceding Jess Levine's show I witness an artist insisting that their primary pursuit is surface and pure orchestration of paint, despite the work oozing recognisable landscape imagery from studies *en plein air* that shout in protest against the aspiration. Within Jess' abstractions the viewer is truly left to imagine away, to attempt to perceive form clued by the title, to enjoy passages of colour, textured impasto paint and mark making with occasional drawn lines or marks through the surface made with graphite or charcoal.

Formal preparation of surfaces for paint, involve rabbit skin glue and meticulously laid chalk grounds. I wonder about the long-term durability of a Jess Levine on unprepared cartridge, the risk of oily seepage. However, even Titian scumbled chalk ground onto unprepared linen for oil painting. Needs must.

I imagine the physicality of covering the surface with larger brushes and loading the paper to sagging capacity with gestural paint. The only evidence is a slight cockling of the paper within its mount and frame.

These choices are driven by the artist's need for the paint to flow across the paper uninhibited, a compulsive urgency to complete, cover, fill with form. Each work is prompted by something that

'sings' from the presentation, something visual, a note of colour, which insists on being taken forward. Emile Nolde sought shape, colour and texture over representation. Here linear mark making exists, not to describe form, but perhaps to address a lack in structure or coherence at a point where the presentation stimulus, the first note is forgotten and the work is an autonomous orchestration. It is a compositional device.

The earliest work is titled *Self Portrait* from 2009. It is of course A1, hung portrait and framed within mount card and the white framing used consistently throughout. It hangs somewhat significantly at the end of a corridor. The colours are non-fleshy grey, rust red and alizarin green with some facial form suggested by sweeps of white. Faces need minimal depiction for recognition and this offers minimal. I am delighted to be told that the face is any face, not the artists own at all. The artist abstains from subject at conception and realisation of the work. The descriptive red herring undermines the relevance of other titles. However, *Passion* does indeed prompt an impassioned discussion of source, the hand of the maker, even the gender of the mark maker.

A series of five works are hung as a group, linked by timeframe of production and a personal odyssey on lemon yellow. They are *Contemplation*, *Harmony*, *Cyprus*, *Summer* and *Waterfall*. Pairings and groupings emerge as the artist lives with the works, seeing colour and visual relationships. I am drawn to *Contemplation*, which is a subtle and seductive form of lemon yellow, sombre violet and touches of blue. It is beautiful and I want to look at it, know it, and own it. I ask Jess about the subject and have to accept that it is forgotten, now irrelevant, gone, and open to me as viewer to define or not. The subject is therefore mine and indeed it could be mine for less than £100.00 unframed, as the artist currently under prices her work.

My strong sense is that for Jess Levine the pleasure and respite is in the focussed physicality of doing the work, underpinned by a systematic process of stimulus, material engagement and compositional completion. Once done, they are done. The joy of the works for the viewer lies in pure colour and freedom from representation: their very undoneness.

The hang of this show contains each highly coloured painting within a white and white frame, which boxes the sensation of colour and composition as a rectangle, portrait or landscape. Hung closely in series, the effect is crisp, contained, colour-by-colour swatches. I wonder whether *Contemplation* deserves more room, less containment by frame, to be exposed unframed, have its edges seen as they peter out. It could be given more status. However, I reflect that the presentation as offered; a non-hierarchical grouping of the work mimics the nature of the slideshow that started the artistic process. We have come full circle and the viewer must find the note which 'sings', to his or her, passionate or contemplation soul.

There is silver blue, sky blue and thunder blue. Every colour holds within it a soul, which makes me happy or repels me, and which acts as a stimulus. To a person who has no art in him, colours are colours, tones, tones [...] and that is all. All their consequences for the human spirit, which range between heavens to hell, just go unnoticed.

[Quoted from *Nolde – Forbidden Pictures* (exhib. catalogue), Marlborough Fine Art Ltd., London, 1970, p.9]

Catherine Linton
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