

I will meet you there

Desire and Longing in the paintings of Sue Williams A'Court

'There seems to be no end to this wood, and no beginning, and no difference in it, and worse of all no way out' **Kenneth Grahame** (*Wind In The Willows*)

THE PAINTINGS OF SUE WILLIAMS A'COURT are exquisite and reflective. They are quiet, very quiet. This is probably due to their apparently Arcadian and rather distressed appearance. They seem to reflect past cultures and lost worlds. They capture landscapes that can be imagined but not accessed; places that can be visualised but are utterly unobtainable. Sights of desire. These are pristine, unviolated landscapes. Wherever or whatever they are, they're inaccessible. These paintings really are 'objects of desire' and there can be no better way of addressing desire and longing than giving them tangible form. These paintings are what they depict.

Colour, what little there is of it, is subtle and calcified. These paintings are almost monochromatic. They are tonal and reminiscent of the academic grisaille. Although Sue Williams A'Court's paintings are ostensibly landscape paintings, they are paintings of landscape paintings. This means that they are, by definition, second order objects. This is appropriation, and appropriationist paintings embrace and celebrate their borrowing from other paintings. Appropriationist paintings also involve an acknowledgement of, if not an acceptance of, conceptual and post modern theory. This can often become meretricious and didactic, but the paintings of Sue Williams A'Court's manage to achieve this synthesis in an understated and succinct manner. These paintings are clearly intended to be 'their own objects'.

'Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery.' **Ludwig Wittgenstein**

The wonky vignette 'motif' is a key element of these paintings. I'm sure that with practice Sue Williams A'Court could draw a pretty good circle, but it's self-evident that she has chosen to do something else instead. Her vignettes are irregular, as if hastily cut out using scissors. They have the clumsiness of images cut out and stuck in a scrapbook. They are organic, resembling pebbles rather than circles. This is a canny move, as these days a landscape framed in a circle gives the spectator the impression of the view from the window of a plane or a building. Context is everything, and everywhere.

These paintings are familiar and yet remote. The familiar is made unfamiliar by a finely judged mix of the archaic and the contemporary; the precise and the incidental. These paintings are meditations on landscape painting. Only our eyes and imagination can occupy this territory. It's as if we can never inhabit this otherwise familiar space. But that's the rub. It's not a place. It's a proposition – an historical one. Back to a familiar but distant, almost mythical, past. It's a construct or state of mind, just as all those Elysian fields and groves once were.

'The Good are attracted by Mens' perceptions / And think not for themselves.'

William Blake

Just as Sue Williams A'Court's paintings are clearly appropriationist and celebrate references to Thomas Gainsborough, it's important to consider what influenced Gainsborough himself. He quotes from romantic painters, such as Claude Lorrain, Nicolas Poussin and Hercules Seghers amongst many others. Sue Williams A'Court's work is essentially romantic because it attempts to reclaim landscape as a signifier of desire. These landscapes, like so much that is idealised, seem to be resistant to the seasons, the passage of time and ultimately death. In Sue Williams A'Court's paintings it is eternally summer. The trees are invariably in full and varied foliage. The style and execution of the landscapes and the painting of the ground, which owes a debt to tachisme, are wilfully incongruous. They're poles apart historically, intellectually and aesthetically. The location is a generic northern temperate – the default setting for painters of the classical past. This is nowhere and everywhere. Well – almost – as mountains are visible in the distance, which probably rules out Gainsborough's native East Anglia as subject matter.

Sue Williams A'Court started making these paintings in late 2012 when she discovered the work of Thomas Gainsborough. It wasn't the humanity or naturalism of The Linley Sisters that impressed her but the style in which the landscape in the background was depicted and the manner in which it was painted. Sue Williams A'Court wasn't immediately aware of the extraordinary pedigree of Gainsborough's foliage. She found the way in which Gainsborough painted foliage mesmerising and it's this that makes her work so fascinating. Gainsborough's landscapes, and particularly his foliage, appear to be painted in a rather rhetorical style, which some regard as decorative and a little mannered. He doesn't seem to have shared John Constable's love of the natural with its air of authenticity. Gainsborough, like so many painters before him, looked not to nature but the history of painting for a template.

'The question is not what you look at, but what you see.' **Henry David Thoreau**

This involved the rendering of trees, shrubs and meadows that had graced painting for centuries and had helped in a small way to give romanticism its 'look'. This set of conventions had emerged at the birth of European landscape painting. Here are Albrecht Altdorfer's oaks, the beech of Hercules Seghers and the ash of Meindert Hobbema reiterated over generations. Over the centuries, generic, painterly woodlands have evolved, becoming almost ubiquitous. They can be found in medieval tapestries and heraldry, the acanthus being one example that has its roots in the Greco-Roman.

The paintings of Sue Williams A'Court also affirm the primacy of vision and it is this that makes her paintings as visually arresting as they are eclectic. Sue Williams A'Court's paintings are effectively an appreciation of the European worldview and our relationship with place. The landscape as a sight of collective reverie. This is landscape not as topographical record or a state of affairs but

landscape as a state of mind. The term landscape is a construct derived from the Dutch word 'landskip'. Initially 'landskip' and the anglicised word 'landscape' referred exclusively to the genre of painting. It wasn't until the 16th century that it was more widely used to describe what until then had been called 'countryside'.

'There is simply too much to think about.' **Saul Bellow**

There is something wilfully worn and almost second hand about the tachist-like surface of the paintings. Tachisme was abstract expressionism's rather less emphatic European cousin. In the paintings of Sue Williams A'Court there is erasure and reworking rather like the work of artists such as Antoni Tàpies, Jean Fautrier and Hans Hartung. Sue Williams A'Court's paintings also have a patina like that of those grubby off-white constructivist paintings from the early 20th century, reminiscent themselves of something misplaced and rediscovered in the back of a damp cupboard. They are a seamless mix of precision and apparent neglect, and both are equally engineered.

'There's something about flying a kite at night that's so unwholesome.'

Marge Simpson

The make up of Sue Williams A'Court's paintings is wide ranging. They create a world of exquisite minutiae reminiscent of a model railway layout. A world of constants. A world where no one suffers and no one dies. An alien and fictitious world in which you provide the narrative. The viewer can't help but be drawn in by the masses of fascinating details that put them in mind of Constable's pencil studies.

It is also worth bearing in mind that Fra Angelico's paintings didn't only depict devotion but were themselves acts of devotion. It is the experience of application or devotion that makes any work of art both memorable and precious. Further evidence, if it were needed, that painting is a discourse.

'He could not die when trees were green, for he loved the time too well.' **John Clare**

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