

Artist's Choice Feature

David Strachan

'Two Women in a landscape' 1968

oil on canvas 40.6 x 51cm

Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane

Angels, landscapes and molluscs: the work of David Strachan by John Young (Young Zerunge)

I have chosen 'Two women in a landscape', a painting by David Strachan painted in 1968- or rather the painting chose me, at a moment when my companion and wife is expecting a child. The picture brings to me a time of reflection - a reflection I may be permitted to praise womanhood or rather, the anima¹.

And I say picture since I have only once seen this painting in its object reality. It is at this moment as I am writing, and as you are now seeing - a picture in a book. Yet it may still offer something, something other than the form; the scale, the surface, the luminal intensity through colour - in short the aura, which is, of course, lost in the reproduction. All these lost aspects you and I can only conjure in our mind's eye through experience of looking. Perhaps the only things that I can work with from this picture, that is, the structure and content of this work, are already violently and impossibly severed from the original union with its form in the artwork.

Strachan for me traversed three main paths in his life. The first path was from days of travel to Paris, Zurich, Majorca and Bricherasio when he paid homage to Andre Derain and Christopher Wood, this was also a time when he trained in Zurich at the Jung Institute. These early moments were a time of absorption, a recognition of one's shadow and persona (most evident in his Derain, Chardin and Zurbaranian still lifes), anima and animus (evident in the themes of the lovers), the vital feeling function and the process of individuation. This first phase was perhaps most suggestive with "The Silkworm Factory"

¹On completion of this piece of writing, and in discussion with a friend, perhaps it was necessary for me to articulate some parallel interests that my work holds with the work of David Strachan. Like Strachan, I like the works of Andre Derain. In the 80's my work pastiched only the works from the oeuvre of Derain in the 'Silhouette Series'. What interested me about this 'regressive' artist's oeuvre:- i) his about face at the avant-garde, opting for an 'eternal' style was really a remark against the linear, progressive conception of time of Modernism- in my own case, this dovetailed my interest in the synthesis of other temporal conceptions in my work, eg. the Chinese conception of retrogressive time. ii) the accessibility of the art object to a density of analysis stands in contrast to the single propositional works in Modernism. iii) through undergoing ten years of Jungian psychotherapy, I share that aspiration with Strachan. Finally, I feel that Strachan as an artist has been seriously neglected, and agreeing with Lou Kelpac's remarks in 1993, I feel Strachan has been done a disservice by the poisonously callous label of 'Charm School' applied to him and other artists such as Jean Bellette and Paul Haefliger. Of late I have also felt deeply that the conception of the linear progressive avant-garde merely service institutions and bureaucracies and less the artist in Australia- this conception has more than often exasperated a new generation of provincialist artists, trading on the latest codes for the purposes of short lived institutional support. Derain and Strachan's courageous about face to Modernism provides a very interesting heuristic or method, particularly as to what values we valorise at the end of this century and millennium.

painted in 1959 . The painting depicts buildings on the Daneo estate at Bricherasio, near Turin - the way it is rendered has an air of certainty to it.

Post 1960 works formed Strachan's second path - that is on his return to Australia, we see the overt Neo-Romantic feelings of the early phase gone, his interest now turns to the retinal sensory evocations of landscapes. Landscape series like the decaying gold town of Hill End, like Creswick painted around 1961 are landscapes cut open, as if that flat picture plane presents the hand mark of course paint scumbled over its surface, and thus also handmark of men over the land. This is a time when Strachan saw the world through a nation's eye that is, the sixties Australian eye.

Finally the third and perhaps most neglected path in the late sixties, where figures return, stripped bare of irony, whilst in their pantheistic simplicity makes visible that numinous, metaphysical resolution, a trans-personal world where innocence may dwell. This is the phase that the picture "Two women in a landscape" may be paradigmatic of.

"Two women in a landscape"-two figures, one in profile and one in three-quarter face occupies a space monumentally in front of a horizon of gentle, distant hills. Above the horizon is apparently an entire spectrum of colours in the sky. The figures themselves are silhouetted by an alchemically golden glow, and this glow touches the land and their bodies. All other colours in its proximity, like the rose madder on the figure's lips and the viridian head band are all touched by this tint.

Within the orbit of intimacy between the two figures we see the profile of a woman on the left. Profiles of faces are more often than not, an object of moral judgement - they are the object of our gaze. It is when the other's consciousness does not challenge us by their returning gaze. It is a wilful allowing of oneself to be morally judged by another's vision. We are reminded here of those affectionate close-ups and their iconoclastic nihilisation in Ingmar Bergman's film 'Persona'. Yet I say 'orbit' since no sooner than our realising of our judgemental gaze towards this profiled figure (which Strachan implicates us to) - do we realise we are inescapably within the proximity of these two women. Thus my gaze and the two figures form an intimate triangle or circle. I gaze at the left figure whilst the left gazes at the right figure who in turn is aware of my gaze.

Within the orbit of proximity, the 'I' that looks at this picture becomes a sub-personality amongst the two figures or anima sub-personalities, one judging, the other judged. What is being judged? We don't really know...perhaps their monumentality and beauty and how I look at that.

There is yet another possible story. What if the left figure is in fact in front of the right figure rather than behind her? Strachan indeed deliberately obscures this fact, by allowing a sizeable gap between the two figures. Now the blond woman gaze at the left side of the other figure's face, unknown to us, which is either bathed in golden light or cast in shadow, her psychological shadow- now she becomes the object of the blond woman's gaze, and in a sense it is their affair and thus we are excluded from their proximity.

These two scenarios that Strachan has set up for us; one a possible union with these two sub-personalities, another the possible disavowal by these two figures, hold us at a point of undecidability, not unlike Freud's Fort! Da! where a child's phonemic opposition was related to the presence and absence of persons and things. In a sense, we are really left

with an innocent, melancholic message that this undecidability is eternal, evidenced by the rendered monumentality of the figures and the golden light.

The sensory quality of the painting serves a harmonising function. Indeed Strachan cannot emphasise more the import of the senses; the eyes, nostrils, ears, mouth are all orifices on the surface of the painting, pushed into the deepest recesses by their raw umber definition. Yet, the last sense, that of touch, is not merely represented, but demonstrated - in the lines. For the definitions of the figures and landscapes are not achieved through incised organised lines, as in say, a Neo-classical Flaxman, nor are they edges, in the Modernist constructivist fashion, where lines are really abutments between two planes, two differing areas, nor are they egoistic expressive gestures which insists on standing alone on the surface. They are unions, union between head and sky, cheek and land, figure and ground - indeed through the scumbling with the same size brush, lines and boundaries are dissolved, like a lover's touch.

Within the simplicity of structure, the painting is bathed in a safe, luminous, golden glow. This golden colour is found in several paintings of this period, all painted in stark (but not generic) simplicity, stripped of naturalistic particularities. The paintings include "Head of a child with bird", "Nude girl sitting on a beach", "Figure crouching on a beach"- all painted in 1968. Stylistically, they tend not to refer to any other painting in history that I know of, the subject matter stands alone in their innocence, effecting a certain *a priori* feeling, or otherwise, a point of certitude and conclusiveness. Their stillness however, resounds in safety and fullness, rather than a loss, which earlier works tend to echo. The gold, usually signifying the eternal, here designates more not of the psychic function of feeling, or sensation, nor thinking, but intuition- the all embracing wondrous certitude. 1968 in Australia was a climate of newness, of the coming of Minimalism in "The Field" exhibition at the National Gallery of Victoria. Strachan would have most certainly known about it. Amongst all the foreign debates for the ethics of reduction, primary structures and gestalts from a younger generation (the cold children of industry), twice removed from him - David Strachan, two years prior to his tragic death, had arrived from his own path, not at the condition of clarity of words or of vision, but most importantly, a clarity of the heart.

The anima in her developed form id I man the capacity for love in contrast to the power drive. It is loving for love's sake in the highest form.

MARIE - LOUSIE VON FRANZ¹

