

FLORA NATAPOFF

Flora Natapoff is an established American painter, represented by the Barbara Krakow Gallery in Boston Massachusetts. Though she has been living and working in London for the past eight years, with the exception of a one person show at Interim Art in February 1990 and mixed shows at Nigel Greenwood, and Riverside there has been little opportunity for people here to see her work.

Through her paintings, which have dealt with the same subject over the past twenty years - images of Boston and London - she has achieved a singular vision of the city in large iconic works on paper. The paintings have evolved from an eccentric pattern, and the wealth of associations which she draws into visibility in their making, has produced a body of mature work of great richness and complexity. Looking at her paintings at Interim proved to be a challenging experience.

I began writing this piece following visits to her studio in Hackney to examine more closely the unfamiliar combination of thoughts and feelings that her work evokes. In doing so I have tried to establish a link between her formative paintings (of the early seventies) and the most recent paintings made between 1985 and 1990. Between them they reveal a context for the current work, but also trace the shape of the rich metaphorical field which she has defined through patient re-interpretations of her motif.

"IT IS NOT A DISADVANTAGE TO BE A WOMAN IN THIS LINE OF WORK; YOU'RE NOT A MEMBER, NOT IN COMPETITION, IT IS A FREEING SENSATION NOT TO INHERIT THE TRADITION."

Flora Natapoff was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1936. She was educated at Cornell University and U. C. Berkeley, California; as a graduate in 1958 and post graduate in 1960. The tradition referred to above is New York School abstract painting. The situation described is her turn away from abstract painting (a dominant mode of activity in colleges at the time).

After leaving college she adopted a major theme to work within -The Tower of Babel -"To facilitate the possibility of making figurative paintings". The first paintings (fig.1) were made provisionally from reproductions of the Bruegel original which she had seen in Vienna, (fig.2) and were succeeded by more free-ranging compositions which resulted from crossing the Tower of Babel with studies of the

shell of a derelict nineteenth century factory from a nearby town. The factory, which had defied repeated attempts to blow it up, existed as a maize of arbitrary spaces, each displaying twisted assortments of pipes and wiring.

The image of the factory made special appeal to her - mentally uprooted from its physical constraints it stood in its own absurd logic as a mirror of a state of mind.

The sense of ferocity in her later Babel paintings seems partly to echo the demolition process and partly to display the crude collision of their modern and biblical sources. Within the ambience of Babel she was able to respond personally to images with feelings and associations "Not rational but powerful," whilst creating broad transformations of her subject.

The 'Tower of Babel' of 1972 (fig.3) bulges out toward the edges of the picture, obliterating the sky, tilting under the weight of incidental features. As the wrecked factory implanted into Bruegel's classical Roman shell, it presents a haggard, vaulted body.

Flora has always identified with the City, to the point that the City and her life as an artist, are inconstant exchange - it seems appropriate that she should have taken Bruegel as a suitable mentor, as a model of a larger power that could be brought to bear on small and specific details of actuality, to transform them into something else - "The reason that this image is so appealing is that when Bruegel painted Babel, he didn't just paint one image. He produced hundreds of images (in the tower) like facets of the mind."

The facets of the modern city of Babel are manufactured here almost mockingly, in rapidly torn and stuck strips of coloured papers, as ad hoc in design as "outsider art."

The stuck-on paper in the overviews (fig.5&6) works quite differently to that of Babel, and imparts a

a conflict of references within the painting. The bleak, aerial view of the city is stark, stripped of anecdote but the fabric of the imagery, the complex of blackish paper shapes, appears like traditional applique - slow, contemplative, drenched in human value.

Her images are evolved in a process of intense manufacture - her creative act is not to 'invent'. All her options are available; papers she has coloured into neutrality, away from names, several pastels, some watery paint.

None of the materials she uses have an intrinsic charm. Her policy of deliberate rejection of sumptuousness, which cuts out the fatty corporeality of oil paint, the lustre of expensive paper or canvas comes from her abhorrence of 'flourish'. "No first order seduction" she will say "Oil paint does it all for you." She does not enchant her imagery, but rather works inside an exhaustive schedule to ascertain and elaborate her subject.

The largest single influence on her work over the last 30 years has been Chinese Scroll painting. She had seen the Royal collection of Chinese painting belonging to Chiang Kai-Shek in 1960. Its influence on her work was mediated through contact with the abstract painters - such as Philip Guston - who had taught her at Berkeley. Its influence on her mode of work does not start clearly - there are no specific images or traditional styles which she has chosen to emulate. Without any real access to the native cultural associations inherent in the forms of Chinese painting, she was able to make free interpretation of their significance.

She was drawn to the qualities of Chinese brushwork - the translucency of which form the basis of all its imagery - to the subtle hue of variously diluted monochromes "where nuance bespeaks the colour."

In the early eighties when she could no longer continue to work on large collage work she would adapt traditionally Chinese approach to painting just as she had intuitively made translations of existing images of Babel to distance herself from abstract painting. In this instance the change was partly caused by freak fortune, when in 1982 she was struck by illness, and as a consequence

suffered temporary paralyses, which brought her to a standstill. In the bleakest period of her illness there was no certainty that she would be able to work again. Being physically unable to continue as she had, her practise and identity as an artist underwent an extraordinary metamorphosis in which the Chinese interpretations of the physical world - contemplative, non-corporeal, took on a new, personal significance. When her first bout of illness subsided she began small pastel drawings of her paintings, and groups of photographs of Boston and London. Her response to the city would be indirect and ~~un~~analytical reconstituting scenes in an imaginary, essentially abstract order. She would replace the importance of the painting 'event' with a 'schedule' in which intricate thought patterns could find their counterpart "In the structure of the world outside the mind."

I DON'T PAINT A PICTURE THEN FINISH. I START A HUNDRED THINGS IN DIFFERENT WAYS ... IN THE ACT ITS A SCHEDULE, BUT IT'S A SCHEDULE THAT YOU DON'T KNOW WHERE YOU CAN MAKE A CONNECTION BETWEEN THIS IMAGE AND THAT IMAGE ... NOT RATIONAL BUT POWERFUL. YOU NEVER KNOW WHERE AERIE GOING TO GET YOUR IDEAS FROM".

Flora's photo library fills several large boxes in her studio. From it she is able to select and arrange groups of photos into sequences; some are placed together randomly as laminates of different times and places in Boston and London, and others reconstitute particular aspects of the City a continuous chain over six or eight pictures.

From these she makes pastel studies on paper, about 3' x 1'; each one a component in a larger, infinitely, permeable study. These studies produce skeletal images of the city. In repetitions and variations of one touch she translates the imagery into a new, almost written form, equalising the importance of intervals, silhouettes, solids and spaces. The images are released into the drawings in clusters that form the organic units for the paintings.

The paintings started from combinations of studies made in this way which can be pinned to them studio wall as moveable sets. As the sets of paintings were banked up, re-arranged, re-painted, it became apparent that she was not only producing extraordinarily flexible compositions, but that her

experiences of illness culminated in a unique insight into the role of the body in painting. As she recalls: "All the work I had ever done, from the age of twenty had been my wholebody,.....the painting in front of me; feet planted on the floor, and even if I was doing something small....it had that reference. How was I going to paint? Sat down in a chair? And then it became clear *"I'd have to learn to paint without that reference."*

Her first tentative paintings no longer contained the previous reference to the body (where one continuous surface is made legible by passages for the eye, recreating the artists movements across the painting). Conventional 'passage' had been replaced with painting which intensified ones awareness of the position of the eye. 'The eye' could be dismantled; sections of paintings could be worked on in different parts of the studio, then repositioned in a rejigged painting, building imagery from disparate sources which, placed together, could stimulate new readings of a totality.

'Untitled' (1988 is the early form of scroll she used. Space is envisaged horizontally over its 20' length as overlapping vertical patterns: of wintery figures trailing into the distance, and the silhouettes of civic interiors and roofscapes which form above and below.

The journey of the eye along the painting's central strip recreates the journey through the City. But we are not given the reassurance of an agreed perspective that may indicate a way out of the painting. One is simply referred sideways or upward or downward and returned to the gallery wall and its interior space.

The City which is pictured in the top and bottom strips sandwiches and interiorises what we have imagined as an external space. While you adjust to a new perceptual logic, the figures press into the wall centrifugally. Below the feet of the figures a black interior chasm opens up, and above where one should expect to raise ones eyes to a roofscape one is brought down to repeat the experience of viewing from a street level. We are denied the satisfaction of ever reaching the top. The experience of climbing or descending the paintings vertical strata, only to have one view supplanted with another view of the place you just came from does not produce feelings of ascent or descent through

empathy. You stay put. This is a mental space where you always seem to be in a kind of echo of the experience you just had.

In the later untitled (1) and untitled (2) the instant of recognition of the city within the paintings further within the paintings is further withheld from the outsider.

The story of the city is relived in the viewers mind in an act of imagination. Details become inseparable from the overall experience. Close-to, in (1) the eye dwells on images of small streets, and sulphurous winter skies, unlit recesses between buildings, and then from a distance gets a shock as all of these things are swallowed up into six brooding black strips. The strange, austere beauty of their colour - thin earth colours, ferrous grey-brown, milky blacks, emphasises the physical weight they appear to have. Murky and deep, they become dark objects which the light seems to pass through.

Over the period she has worked in London her activity has remained singular. Made in a climate away from the intellectual and social circle she had known in America, the most recent paintings show the results of long periods of solitude and reflection.

in 1987 when she began making studies of Hackney's Ridley Road Market - a five minute walk from her studio - the distance between her paintings and the city began to be made more intimate. Her sense of isolation was transferred into hundreds of photos, largely of the first generation Caribbean and Asian women who use the market. Her private feelings toward these women - 'aliens', her own age - emerged in the studio as her 'parade of beauties' which filled one of her walls. Starting life as small individual portraits, they slowly filtered into large works as part of a city tapestry. In Untitled (fig 9) the personal value she attaches to these faces permeate the act of painting - the women occur, now as individual motifs woven into the paintings' overall mass.