

- FLORA NATAPOFF- THE CITY AND THE INDIVIDUAL MIND.-

The complex nature of Flora Natapoffs' paintings derives in part from a major change in structure they went through in 1982 when as a result of illness, the artist had to choose either to stop painting or make much less strenuous work. During this imposed break she produced several small sets of Conte drawings as linear abstractions of her paintings of Boston and London which were pinned up end to end to make long scroll-like studies. By disassembling, rearranging, then re-working these drawings as preliminary studies for paintings, Natapoff began to break down the confines of working within the single rectangle ("Three Bridges" is typical of her earlier paintings) and resume in a way which would cause a complete renewal of the act of painting.

"All the work I had ever done from the age of twenty had been my whole body.....the painting in front of me, my feet on the floor, and even if I was doing something small it would have that reference. And then, slowly, it became clear that I could learn to paint without that reference."

The curious re-birth which her paintings undergo at this time is radical but not borne out of thin air. She had been fascinated with Chinese

Painting as far back as 1960 \* but when forced to make less physical work, she made an eccentric link between her moveable sets of drawings and the tradition of scroll painting, to begin paintings on strips of paper that could be made with an economy of movement and which were light enough to be moved with ease. The compulsion to work outside of the constraints of "the body reference" has subsequently permitted Natapoff to express an urban vision (stemming from her transcriptions of Bruegels' "Tower Of Babel" twenty three years ago) not only in the act of painting but through several transformational processes that begin in the street with photographs and transfer into small paintings and drawings, culminating in the final compositional drawings, like those shown here. The eventual paintings are made on 3' by 1' rag-paper sections which build up in batteries to shapes that can exceed 15' in length.

The Chinese influence on her work has not been so much a stylistic as conceptual one - there are no specific images which she has chosen to emulate, and without any access to the culture that gives the forms their original meaning, she has been able to make free interpretation of their significance. Comparing "Three Bridges" of 1980 to

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"Untitled" from 1990 we can see how the landscapes of Tao Ch'i and Tung Ch'i Ch'ang could provide the framework for her later work. Natapoff responds to what she calls a "mental space" in their painting, which visualises not only "the world outside the mind" but also the intricate thought patterns of the artist. In the change she has developed a more synthetic means of depiction which is openly schematic; the interlocking black shapes and vaulted spaces from "Three Bridges" occur in the later work but now as simple and recurrent forms, re-assembled in an imaginary, essentially abstract order.

The slower burning Chinese influence is perhaps most apparent in her touch, which grows increasingly lean. With a spontaneous stroke that stops short of open gesture or gratuitous self-expression, the painting style is fluid but never breaks the limits set by the edge of the scroll. The strokes weave fragments of motifs rhythmically into the overall fabric of the painting recalling more anthropological art forms like tapestries or commemorative wall-hangings; forms which are older and long in the making.

The cornerpieces, installed over two walls emanate a rare, austere beauty. My response on seeing these works for the first time a year

and a half ago, would echo earlier this year through my first visit to Boston where I found the coloured greys of her paintings in the elemental colour that recurs across Massachusetts' streets and buildings; dusty cerullean blues that flake from timbers, pale slate, mustard, the bitumen tiles on exterior walls, the green copper facings on bridges and shop fronts. It struck me how Natapoff had effected a synthesis of these two cities directly and non-rationally by association through colour. That in the paint, thinned to a coloured water she could dissolve the memory of one city through the other; the folk-colour of New England through the raw Umber hues and rich blacks of a wet London.

The density of Natapoffs' vision is reproduced here most clearly in the "Studies" (1988) which show the divergent, urban approach she has taken to <sup>Dang's</sup> Chang's "mental- space". <sup>Dang's</sup> Chang's mountainscape unfolds in sets of convex shapes which we can re-construct from our distance as a walk up and through the landscape. We remain separate, and in open-air. In the Natapoff studies we are right amongst the city, close up, sometimes at point-blank range. Yet views of whole streets that should take up our peripheral vision are shrunken into a telescoped space. One view is hemmed in by

another. We don't get any higher above the city by raising our eyes;

instead we are referred back to another succession of chambers. The city is interiorised.

Though it may seem a circuitous route to have taken, through the advent of her recent scroll-paintings Natapoff has returned full circle to the epic interperatations of the city which pre-occupied her in the early "Babel" paintings ( the appeal of this image lay always in Bruegels' ability to take one image and from within it "paint hundreds of images- like facets of the mind.") Natapoffs' modern city however, unlike Bruegels' "Babel", isn't pictured in its entirety from outside but rather in cross-section from the inside. The will to re-construct her identity as an artist, has caused her to refine her understanding of the weave of the city to the extent that her motifs and her life as an artist drift into one another. Like the memories experienced through the act of painting, the chambers of Natapoffs city remain, as the title of one recent scroll suggests: -"Shadowy To Those That Dwell Not In Them."\*