

A CALCULUS OF FORMS

FINDING NEW LIFE IN OLD FORM

BY ANDREW LAMPRECHT

Tom Cullberg’s ‘Finding New Life in Old Forms’ sees the artist breaking new ground in the balance between abstraction and representation and between narrative and painterliness. It is as if each canvas is a slice through time, a calculus of forms if you like, and the viewer is presented with an exquisite moment of tension that refers obliquely to something that has passed whilst offering a glimpse of what is to come. I have always loved this aspect of Cullberg’s work: the way tension is so carefully balanced on the surfaces of his paintings, and his latest body of work exploits this magisterially.

The backgrounds of these works are, for the most part, abstract and expressionistic *tours de force*: deft, almost calligraphic swathes of paint surmounting a deeper level of colour and form. But breaking through this abstraction and surmounting it are moments of almost painful realism: faces (evoking Italian Renaissance disembodied heads of putti); quotidian objects; printed matter; architectural structures and landscape. If one looks carefully however, it also appears from time to time as if the realism is the base and the abstraction is what is overpowering and encumbering the realism. A very fine

balance indeed and one that Cullberg handles with aplomb.

Several of the paintings show chairs of various forms in different arrangements, usually in pairs. They are always empty, as if challenging us to fill one and select someone to join us in conversation or merely companionship as we gaze out into the cosmos or look over the terrain before us. These are, quite literally, conversation pieces and once again evoke the ability of this artist to allow the viewer to insert themselves into a potential narrative that

they encourage. When I suggested to him that he is a painter of exceptionally ‘open’ works, freeing us to bring our own interpretation to bear, Tom Cullberg insisted that the works are actually quite specific in terms of their personal meaning for him. Though these meanings are deeply private in some cases, they are made with something very specific in mind. I think it all the more remarkable that they almost demand that the viewer take a stance and position themselves *vis-à-vis* the surface (and depths) that they stand before. Specific, they may be in conception, but



Tom Cullberg, *Nature*, 2017. Acrylic on linen, 45 x 56cm. Courtesy of the artist & Barnard.

open in terms of how we may relate to them as outsiders and readers.

This, for me, speaks of the calculus of forms I alluded to before. It is as if the various naturalistic elements operate as integers on a mathematics of abstraction and a different result will come about depending on one’s own perspective, emotional state or even the lighting conditions in which the work is seen. For me Cullberg’s work speaks of infinities, and not just in terms of his allusion to starry skies and open expanses abut in the sheer potentialities that each painting offers.

The chairs are often open structures that need to be filled; a motorcycle needs to be ridden somewhere; a pencil needs to make its mark. Similarly the images of magazines, books and the like (subtly reimagined by Cullberg from their original source) offer the promise of data and information against a backdrop of woven linen. The origin of the word ‘text’ is the Greek ‘textus’ the same as for textile and reminding us that a text has weft and wove and the printed letters mean nothing until uttered, read or activated by human agency.

I guess that is what lies at the heart of Cullberg’s work: a deep compassion for the human and for agency, whether taken by the artist himself or by us, fortunate enough to be in their graceful presence, making our calculations in relation to their subtle algorithms.

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