**THE EXCURSION**

Christina Calbari’s exhibition at the Arts Centre features large-scale paintings and a group of charcoal drawings. All her works revolve around light and how it evokes space in painting. The exhibition title is an allusion to Anna Seghers’ well-known novella *The Excursion of the Dead Girls*. The German writer was well aware of the vital role of light. In her doctorate she had studied the representation of Jews and Judaism in the work of Rembrandt. Seghers was able to appreciate the importance of light in painting but also in everyday life. In 1943 she was hit by a car and seriously injured in the head. She spent one month in hospital in a coma. During her recovery, she wrote *The Excursion of the Dead Girls*.

For Calbari, this book was a happy encounter, if not the inspiration behind her works. She identifies with Seghers’ vision, because ‘she has one foot in the past and one foot in the present; she’s looking back and realising things in the now. Essentially, that sensation was what intrigued me. That, and how she chose to tell her story during an excursion. She is not talking about an ordinary day; she sets the story in an idyllic setting, which in her narrative becomes utterly dystopian at the same time. A moment of epiphany occurs in this ‘outside.’ It is there, in those moments, outside everyday life, that you realise things. And that is what concerns me about light: illuminating something that was dark, which you try to grasp.’

Likewise, Calbari draws from the darkness – from the depths of memory – something elusive, barely perceptible, vague. In Seghers’ approach the artist finds an unexpected ally who helps her make sense of her own work. The atmospheric images she paints reflect that blurring of memory – that permanent fog before the eyes of the narrator of a riverboat day trip on the Rhine. ‘What I am trying to make is not representation. It is the trace of a reminiscence of an emotion. That is why the colour range is limited – because if I added more colour, it would be realism,’ she explains. Whereas now the image is like a faint memory, a faded photograph. ‘It is as if the painting is washed out by bright light. And it is like a moment frozen in time, when you suddenly have an epiphany.’

The starting point for Calbari’s images is not creative imagination; she scours the internet for old, vintage photos. Removing and combining elements, she never uses a photograph as is. Her images are produced through a collage process: A mountain may be sourced from a maquette, from a diorama, a figure borrowed from another source. Sometimes she removes faces, especially when there are too many elements. All the photographs date from the 1920s, ’30s and ’40s and originate mainly in America and northern Europe. ‘Since I want to talk about memory, remembrance, I don’t use modern photographs; on the contrary, images from the interwar period are of great interest to me,’ she notes.

Just as Seghers uses nature as a backdrop for talking about the function and possibilities of remembrance, Calbari treats setting in her paintings as a backdrop which frames the emotion she seeks to convey. The sense of gesture and texture, alongside the large scale of these paintings, changed the way she approached painting. Working on these paintings, Calbari feels like entering into the realm of the painting, becoming part of the narrative. Due to the large scale, the ‘now’ in her works is amplified: before them, you stand before a physical painted space. The artist isn’t merely recreating moments of the past, nor does she seek to evoke figures just as they were in decades past. On the contrary, she gazes out of the present into the past. Just like the narrator’s point of view in *The Excursion of the Dead Girls*, who is in the *here and now*, looking back, attempting to bring a memory back to life.

Calbari’s inner, psychic images are reminiscent of film stills, her paintings of screens. Similarly to the scenery she has designed for the theatre, there is something artificial about her landscapes. ‘It is like I have actually constructed the painted space, just like a diorama. It is like putting these figures inside these stage sets to trigger remembrance. This is how I see each work – as a construction. Playing with the small scale and the large scale interests me a lot. These works might well be scale models. That is why I want them to have this three-dimensional sense of space. Because I do think of the image as elements arranged in space – just like a scene from a film, as if a film director had set all this up, and we see an instant out of a condensed narrative.’

The figures painted by Calbari find themselves in contemplation. But they are not daydreaming. They have nothing to do with the actual, the everyday. They belong to another realm, to a fictional space. They give the impression that they are lost (in their thoughts). The woman standing before the blank sign is immobilised, frozen; you do not know – neither does she – whether she will move forward or back, or stay still. The three conservatively dressed students dancing on a large rock may or may not be ending their lives. The girl in the canoe, caressing the water (a dominant theme in several of the artist’s works), and the girl against a spectral mountain in the background do nothing to indicate their intentions, why they are there. However, these images are free of escapism; there is no romanticism. By painting these pensive figures, Calbari seeks to shed light on something, rather than escape from it.

Light is also a key element in her black and white drawings, which bridge her current to her earlier work. In them, she always works on both the horizontal and the vertical axis, both erasing and writing. It is a writing-like process, according to the artist, like writing on paper. And here, too, emotion is the key element. Calbari’s works are not symbolic; there is no point scanning them for hidden messages and symbolism. Her images are supremely poetic; we must approach them as open narratives that evoke strong emotions – perhaps a certain malaise, too, heightened by the pale, anaemic light, like that sometimes emitted by the moon.

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