

Elizabeth Talbot: the art of return

Elizabeth Talbot's paintings are both familiar and strange. Her scenes trigger echoes of landscapes visited, read about or known through reproduction in the form of postcards, prints or illustrations to old books. These last are in fact the source of her imagery. She may only use a fragment of a scene, but it is nevertheless a fragment that has already been processed through another's eyes or through the single eye of the camera. To others, such source material might seem tired or trite, but Talbot reinvests these scenes with a slow-burning mystery, often turning to a highly disciplined use of monochrome or near-monochrome in her handling of paint. Her paintings are the product of steady deliberation, developing slowly over a considerable period of time and gaining a stillness and intensity that far exceeds in quality the original source material. Time is necessarily an ingredient in painting, and if a picture is to last it must achieve duration, a sustained resonance that may change and deepen as time goes on. Much contemporary art acts as a barometer for the climate of the day, but quickly stales. Elizabeth Talbot's paintings, however, belong to a different category.

What is especially compelling about this work is the way that the artist's twenty-first-century strategies relate to how we live now. The revisiting of material already archived, by photographers, print-makers and illustrators reminds afresh that there is no such thing as an innocent eye. Talbot's layered landscapes affirm that in this age, almost over-obsessed with heritage, our experience of nature, even at its freshest, is always mediated by culture. Still more so now that we are living in what Arthur C Danto has called a 'post-historical' period where development in the arts, and particular in painting, seems to be circular rather than progressive. Thus we respond to Talbot's paintings as images in the here and now, while also sensing the cargo of mood and memory that they bring with them, which somehow makes even her most serene landscape subcutaneously disturbing.

Gary Schneider recently observed that the most radical thing one can do now is to stay at home. It is predicted that in the course of the next decade we will be deluged with major scientific breakthroughs. At the same time, environmental issues make it likely that we will be learning to live more modestly, practising the art of return, recycling past habits for present needs. It is this capacity to blend old and new, to layer experiences while uncovering new feelings that makes Elizabeth Talbot not just a painter of real stature but also an artist for our time.

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