

Charlotte Verity: Portrait of a Year

Simon Wilson, 2011

An artist residency in an institution is akin to a commission, and as the history of art vividly records, such things are frequently fraught with difficulty. It is therefore a tribute both to the Garden Museum and to the painter Charlotte Verity that her one year residence here has been such a triumph. The proof of that assertion is before our eyes in this very beautiful exhibition.

I should say that I am not surprised by this outcome, given the nature of the Museum and Charlotte Verity's outstanding gifts and particular vision as a painter. Indeed it is a matter of congratulation to the Garden Museum and its advisor that such a perfect candidate was found for this place.

I think it wonderful that an artist whose whole practice is based on working directly from the motif should bear a name that means truth. For as Keats wrote in those concluding lines of his *Ode on a Grecian Urn*, 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty'. I do not idly adduce here this famous remark. The classicism of some of the monuments in the Tradescant Garden that have caught the artist's eye might well alone have called it to mind.

But rereading the poem for the purposes of this essay, it also struck me that Keats's intense but delicate lyrical pastoralism, tinged with melancholy, seems peculiarly appropriate to Charlotte Verity's art. The opening of the third stanza, 'Ah, happy, happy boughs! That cannot shed/ Your leaves, nor ever bid the spring adieu', instantly made me think of her paintings of trees. Her boughs are bare it is true, and have bid adieu spring, summer and autumn too, but this absolutely echoes the mood of the poem which, while celebrating the life evoked by the images on the vase, paradoxically stresses the poignancy of these carved figures and trees, forever frozen in time. Not the least interesting aspect of Charlotte Verity's work is, precisely, the way in which, while painting from the motif, with perfect truth, she nevertheless imbues her work with meaning. In art historical terms she seems to me to be a kind of latter day Symbolist, although a very English one. In this respect I am reminded not so much of the Pre-Raphaelites, or even their predecessors the Ancients, both of which groups Charlotte Verity's art distantly evokes, but of John Ruskin, and of his theories rather than his drawings, although again one might well think of them when looking at her work in that medium.

In *Modern Painters*, his great six volume work of aesthetic polemic, Ruskin developed the idea of

‘truth to nature’ as the foundation of art, but integral to this was what might be called symbolic realism. There is a passage in volume II of *Modern Painters* in which Ruskin cites the example of Tintoretto ‘whose intensity of imagination is such that there is not the commonest object to which he will not attach a range of suggestiveness almost limitless; nor a stone, leaf, or shadow, nor anything so small that he will not give it meaning and oracular voice’. This is Ruskin in full flood, and allowance should be made for the rhetoric, and even hyperbole, but the underlying point is that a painter can imbue with meaning truthful images of the world.

This happens when an artist finds a way of looking, and a way of painting what they see, that is also a vehicle of expression for their particular sensibility and feeling for life. Charlotte Verity seems to me to look at the world with a kind of wide-eyed innocence, but tinged with a faint but distinct awareness of the ephemerality of all things. This places her flower paintings, as well as the paintings of leafless trees, firmly in the tradition of the *vanitas*, the image that reminds us of our mortality, although she rightly eschews that over-obvious use of the skull as a symbol, that the seventeenth-century *vanitas* artists were so fond of. However, her sense of the fragility of existence inevitably becomes more explicit in the paintings and drawings she has made of tombs and their inscriptions in the Tradescant Garden.

Charlotte Verity’s way of painting perfectly matches this vision. In her work things have a definite and concrete presence, but they are rendered with such extraordinary delicacy of handling, with such exquisite delicacy of tone, and in an atmosphere of such delicate luminosity, that they also seem almost to dissolve before our eyes. Her sense of colour is quite remarkable; deploying a highly individual palette of great richness, she has an extraordinary ability to create harmonies of close tones into which are somehow perfectly integrated sudden bursts of an intense hue, which can range from the almost dazzling white of her snowdrops to the glowing red of her strawberry tree fruit. The use of colour is one of the most striking characteristics of her painting.

With this goes a sense of composition in which superfluous detail is not so much eliminated as simply not seen. In this respect her work may be said to embody a strong element of abstraction. There is thus in it a balance, which is also an activating tension, between the seen presence of a flower tree or vessel, and the purely formal or pictorial or visual aspects of the work, what Gauguin once, in discussing this issue, called ‘the music of the picture’.

Gauguin made this observation at the very beginning of what we call modern art, at the beginning of that self-conscious exploration of the relationship between art – colour, form, line, composition – and reality that is central to modernism. The work of Charlotte Verity may superficially appear to belong to a pre-modern tradition of painting from life, but the sophistication of her approach

to the purely pictorial, to that relationship of the painting to the thing painted, places her firmly in the twenty-first century. She has, I would suggest, taken that tradition and updated it, and has done so, furthermore, in a distinctively personal and completing way.

Many of the paintings in this exhibition are small in scale as well as intimate in subject. This was partly born of necessity, since the only studio space the Garden Museum could provide was a garden shed. But Charlotte Verity works naturally on a larger scale, on which her trees and fruit and flowers take on a power and presence that can hold its own on any museum wall. This was born in on me with some force when in preparation for writing this text I went through with her the works in the exhibition. She first showed me the drawings and small oils, then picked up and placed on the wall a much larger canvas and stepped aside. I looked and received a shock. The painting was *Heron's Vermillion*, in which twisting lengths of autumn-red Virginia creeper lie simply on a table top whose minimal geometry, together with that of the wall behind it and the luminous curtain beside it, create a cool, ordered and complementary setting for the sensuous strands and their flaming orange-red chromatics. This and other paintings here on this scale such as the equally, although quite differently compelling, *Summer Rain*, are nothing short of magisterial in their confidence and poise, and in their sheer ravishing beauty that is given that ultimate edge by the extraordinary poignancy of these images of the ephemeral, in their empty spaces dissolving in tinted light.

When the reason for the title of *Heron's Vermillion* is known, the poignancy of that work is further enhanced, and a corner of Charlotte Verity's relationship to the recent history of modern British art is fascinatingly illuminated. Some time after the death in 1999 of the much-loved abstract painter, that great colourist, Patrick Heron, his daughter presented Charlotte Verity with what might in the context be described as a relic - Heron's remaining tubes of the vermilion - vermilion, orange vermilion and scarlet vermilion. Taking what must have been a difficult step for her, and in what I find also to be a profoundly touching gesture - not least in its intimacy - she has now begun to use these colours, creating a series of paintings the success of which can be judged from this magnificent example.

Her year in residence at the Garden Museum has clearly been for Charlotte Verity a rewarding one. It has resulted most visibly in this exhibition, which, she has said, 'will be a great big portrait of a year' ('great big portrait' in the sense of many canvases adding up to an overall picture). One obvious way in which this is true is that as you look at these paintings you see the slow cycle of the seasons. This is apparent both in the imagery - the winter of bare branches, the first hints of new life in the paintings of snowdrops, the fruit-tree blossom and lily of the valley of spring and early summer, the full-blooming roses and full-flowering borders of high summer, the ripe-

hanging fruit of fall – and in the way the paintings have somehow absorbed the dominant hues of each particular time of year.

The Tradescant Garden is an ancient graveyard, scattered with table-top tombs, and the artist has found interesting ways of including these both as reminders of the human present in nature and of the cycle of human life that so inexorably follows that of nature. Notable in this respect are the summer paintings, *June and Tradescant Tomb and Beyond*, in both of which, in a striking compositional invention, the flowering garden is viewed across the close-up surface of a tomb, whose worn inscription recording its long dead inhabitants and patchy patina of yellow-green lichen she has been careful to record.

In recent years, Charlotte Verity's paintings have been undergoing a change. Specifically, she has been evolving a new relationship with the subject. Her painting previously had been essentially studio-based, using carefully arranged motifs. She had found herself setting up still life to suggest her observations of a wider world, but painted entirely in the studio. Some of her paintings are still made this way. *Cornus* and *Virginia Creeper* are two examples. Of course there are many precedents for this: Cezanne's pictures of card players, for one, look as if they were done on the spot, but were in fact painted in his studio, set up to suggest the back room of a bar.

In order to avoid predictability, and to gain a more direct response to her own, in many ways familiar surroundings, and to her increasingly acute sense of the seasons, she began to paint outside as found, directly from the motif, as she puts it, which proved both appropriate and fruitful in relation to her residence at the Garden Museum.

Of course the most 'motif-based' of all forms of painting is portraiture and Charlotte Verity has also been thinking about that and about how she might approach this venerable genre in a fresh way. The fascinating result is that she has started to paint public portraits, her only previous exhibited portraits having been of her three children, and is currently working on her first commission. The portraits of her children were included in her 2007 show at Browse and Darby in London, where they were hung in a group in the lower gallery and made a stunning surprise as one descended the stairs. On the evidence of these, she now looks set to extend her art in a fruitful new direction.

Speaking of portraiture, in the National Gallery in London is one of the great self-portraits, by Salvator Rosa. Darkly romantic, the artist broods, silhouetted against a stormy sky, his face starkly lit, perhaps by a lightning flash, and one hand resting on a tablet on which is the Latin inscription 'Aut tace aut loquere meliora silentio'. This translates as 'Keep quiet unless you have something

to say that is better than silence'. The philosopher Wittgenstein put the same thought more epigrammatically when he said 'Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent'. In my experience most artists are at best ambivalent in their attitude to words about their art. Some are outright hostile, considering art indeed as something 'whereof one cannot speak', and it is tempting to see Rosa's painting as a specific manifesto of this, an explicit warning to those who would attempt to match words to painting.

I, certainly, embarked on this text with some trepidation. This has not lessened as I have written, and I am now going to take the excellent advice cited above and shut up, leaving Charlotte Verity's paintings and drawings to speak for themselves in their own very strong and distinctive voice.

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