

Charlotte Verity

Anna Moszynska, 1990

Like many artists before her, Charlotte Verity uses the genre of the still life. Over her career she has developed and refined a limited number of objects to work from. The current series of paintings includes shells, the painter's palette, poppy seed heads, branching buds, stems from Lily of the Valley, dried lily pads and paper leaves – all of which rest, more or less isolated from each other, on table tops. It is not difficult to trace an artistic lineage for this concept of the 'table piece': one may find historical precedents in Caravaggio's bowls of fruit, the culinary details of Velazquez's 'bodegón' paintings, the seventeenth-century Dutch still life tradition, Chardin's kitchen ensembles and Cézanne's heavily laden fruit arrangements, to name but a few. Although the table top has continued to feature in the art of the twentieth century (one thinks of the Cubists, Matisse, Morandi, the Nicholsons, and Caro, for instance) there are perhaps fewer artists today who have chosen to concentrate so wholeheartedly on the timeless imagery of the still life while yet producing a thoroughly contemporary treatment of paint surface and form. To my mind, Charlotte Verity is one of those who has succeeded.

Her own path to the still life was not a direct one however. At the Slade School she worked from the figure and at the same time developed her interest in landscape. After leaving the Slade, she lived and worked in Italy on a scholarship where she particularly admired the work of Masaccio and Giotto in Florence, Piero della Francesca in Arezzo, and Agostino di Duccio in Rimini. Echoes of these artists are still found in the quiet monumentality and pared down simplicity of her formal arrangements and in the unified placement of isolated objects on the picture surface. There is even a hint of Giotto's blue in the deep hues of *Untitled* (1990).

Following her return to England, Verity's paintings developed from the landscapes that had been at the heart of her previous work, to the careful observation of objects in a still life setting modified by the fall of daylight. Her compositions at this time reveal an interest in the textures and fall of drapery, of curtains and tablecloths, as well as in the objects themselves. By the time of her first exhibitions at Anne Berthoud in 1982 and 1984, her paintings had come to concentrate on a centrally placed and clearly defined table, draped with a cloth, on which a few, carefully selected objects appeared. A tension was established between the two or three items placed at a distance from each other; between a Portuguese jug and scallop shell for instance, or an empty glass and a half moon dish. Shape and volume, colour and size, opacity and translucency were kept in balance on the full depth of the table surface.

From 1987 to 1988, she spent a year in Berlin with her husband and young family. This stay appears to have been something of a watershed for her art. Once out of the context of contemporary English art, she became aware of the different values and emphases of German painting and of its Northern heritage. In the rigorous atmosphere of West Berlin, given her own particular sensibilities, she found herself making adjustments to her method and style of painting. The use of bigger brushes and the availability of a coarse-grained canvas helped to produce a thicker, freer stroke, and with this degree of painterly freedom came a decreased reliance on observation and description. She was able to compose more intuitively, allowing the imagination to play a stronger role in determining composition. The images at this time float free of the gravitational pull of the table top, taking on an almost anthropomorphic presence, and there is an expressionist energy in the handling of the paint. The references in the imagery and titles become more organic – in *Flow* for instance, a palette is transformed into an embryonic form, while titles such as *Bellied Fruit* and *Vessel* suggest a similarly fecund theme.

Turning to the work in the current exhibition, which has been painted over the last two years, we find that it marks a further stage in her development. In this group of paintings, we see the best of both worlds: a continually evocative range of imagery and a fluid, painterly surface which reveals her particular, individual signature as an artist. The recent work displays an unconventional compositional arrangement and a greater use of asymmetry. There is a tendency to concentrate on an aerial view of the objects in which the horizon line is often completely obliterated. In fact where the end of the table is still visible, as in *Palette View*, *Reservoir* and *Untitled* (1990), it acts as a boundary to a field, tipped-up and usually parallel to the picture plane. The table cloth, where used, gives no suggestion of the fall and texture of the material – only of its intense colour. Thus the table top and the surface become one unified field creating the idea of a landscape which continues beyond the confines of the picture plane.

The objects themselves are considerably pared down and reduced in number, especially in the smaller, darker canvasses. *Shell* is a simple scallop traversed by a poppy seed head; *Untitled* (1989 – 90) and *Two Paths* reveal a single branch, cropped at both ends, which casts a shadow on the reflective surface of the table/field. Light also plays a crucial role in capturing the particular nature of each object. The shell, for example, takes on a different character with when it is placed on end and confronts the light, assuming presence, compared with when it is shown closed or flat, as if receiving and absorbing the light passively.

Where more than one or two objects feature, the placing of them is always most carefully judged. There is a consistent tendency to isolate, and where overlapping does occur, it is kept to the most shallow minimum, as in the cross-patterning of shells in *Lunar*, *Paper Leaves* and *Stems*. Rather than

Cézanne's baroquely three-dimensional arrangements of still life objects, Verity favours a modernist flatness. (One is reminded here, albeit that the imagery and style are greatly different, of the isolated and flattened objects in William Scott's still lifes.) As in the earlier work, interest resides in the relationship between the isolated forms. There is a beautiful balance and delicate structuring of compositional elements which is constant in her painting. In *Paper Leaves*, for instance, there is a strong formal similarity between the leaf shapes of the title and the small shells which sit on their surface. A comparable relationship is set up in *Palette View* between the shape of the dried lily pads with their long stems and the sheet of paper leaves which lie adjacent to them.

However, attractive though it is, the merit of Verity's painting does not lie purely in its aesthetic and decorative qualities. Although the number of objects may be few, they carry a rich diversity of metaphor and cultural reference. The scallop shell resembles the moon in shape and bears an inevitable mythological association with the birth of Venus – as such, it suggests both the feminine and antiquity; the dried lily pads and paper leaves invoke Japan and the Orient; the palette is the ageless symbol of the artist's presence; the iris, the branching buds, the Lily of the Valley stems and particularly the seed heads represent the rejuvenative power of nature. Throughout this body of work, there is a sense of pervading timelessness – nothing from the contemporary urban world destroys the natural equanimity of the scenes before us. Where other artists intersperse icons of our technological age into their still life ensembles to undercut the historical connotations of the genre with a contemporary taste for irony and appropriation, Verity adheres to classical imagery and values.

Rather than maintaining a distance from her subject, she allows her own sensibilities to permeate through. There is an aura of quiet celebration and unruffled calm that distinguishes her painting, and what is remarkable is that this is achieved without the work becoming facile. Her work is very much of this age. Not only is the broad sweep of cultural references discussed above a symptom of our times, so also is the fluidity and activation of the painted surface. The wide cross-hatching and the conscious leaving of traces of earlier images which are locked into the texture of many of the paintings, show a contemporary willingness to accept change and transition in the painted surface. Rather than finding hard edges and precise contours as we might in earlier modernist painting, here we discover the shifting ground and uncertain boundaries that have marked other painting of the 1980s. The line of the table is never straight, the sides of the branch uneven. There is always a bleeding edge where one contour meets its surrounding background, and in this shifting territory we have to question our perception of space within the picture and indeed of the world around us.

Despite the aura of tranquillity which is found in all the work on show, there is a significant darker strain in some paintings. The canvases can be divided into two groups: the brightly coloured table arrangements in which the objects are set within blue or ochre grounds, and the group of dark

paintings which show a highly reflective surface and which mark a new direction. While the polychromatic works show a more restricted and subdued palette than hitherto (the colour range is limited predominantly to greys, ochres, pinks, whites and blues), the tonal range is extremely closely balanced, as can be seen in the four paintings which feature the paper leaves. In the 'dark' paintings however, the contrast between object and ground is much stronger and starker. In *Crown* (an important transitional painting) the table surface encroaches emphatically upon the surrounding space, and on its largely sombre expanse the pale seedpod preserves a poignant singularity. In other 'dark' paintings, the table top occupies the entire canvas, and the brightly-lit stems, shells and branches are thrown into sharp relief against its surface. The objects assume larger proportions than those in the earlier work. They assert themselves defiantly against the confines of the picture edge, and although cropped, assume an evocative and bodily presence. Meanwhile, a new sense of shallow depth is achieved by the use of intriguing, and at times autonomous, patterns set up by the shadows or reflections of the objects. With the contrast of dark and light, there is a strong suggestion that the objects themselves are in the process of emerging from the surrounding obscurity. (Revealingly, in her studio, Verity has pinned to the wall a black and white photograph of Rembrandt's painting, *A Woman Bathing in a Stream* from the National Gallery: this image of a figure emerging from a dark block of shadow seems a natural prototype for her own use of chiaroscuro.)

With the new interest in dramatic focussing, attention is drawn more to the shape of the objects themselves, highlighting a quality of 'otherness' and opening them up to metaphoric associations. The stripped branch looks skeletal, and I am reminded of an earlier watercolour (not exhibited) in which a delicately painted clam shell placed in front of a glass stem takes on the appearance of a skull. There is a suggestion here of the early tradition of the 'memento mori' in which such 'vanitas' symbols were seen as a poignant intimations of mortality. Although an evocation of such content may not have been a conscious one, it does show how painting continues to have the capacity to embrace a significant subject – a belief that the artist herself holds dear. The timeless quality of the work in this exhibition reminds us of painting's ability to deal with the unchanging realities of human existence: time and transition, creation and decay. In Charlotte Verity's hands, the 'still life' remains capable of sustaining such a wealth of interpretation: it can be both the 'stilleven' of its Dutch semantic origin, and the 'nature morte' of the French tradition.