

Dark Décor

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Camille Pissarro is supposed to have called Claude Monet “a decorator without being decorative.” Of Jackson Pollock one might say, conversely, that his work was decorative though he was not a decorator. In either case the painter’s genius, as it methodically or fitfully revealed itself, was bound up with a needful tension between these only fugitively, if at all distinguishable qualities, decorativeness and decoration. For a certain kind of painting—all the more appealing for being rare—this tension is still at work today. If its presence in Clare Woods’ work were not already clear, her new, mural-sized paintings make this obvious, for the mural is the decorative format par excellence. Decoration has two meanings: A painting is called decorative if it is superficial, if it is ornamental, if it fills a space. But the other sense of the word, the one that applies to Monet, to Henri Matisse, to Pollock, is nearly the opposite; it refers to a painting that makes space—a space that is so real that one feels it even when one is not looking at it. Matisse spoke of “an expansive force that gives life to the things around it.”

Both senses of the decorative—that which need not be looked at and that which has its effect even when not being looked at—come to the fore with the mural. We are used to thinking of murals as a public art in a didactic mode but this is something of a misconception. In 1918 Monet conceived a great suite of *Nymphéas* to be given to the French nation in commemoration of its victory in World War I—no stentorian allegories there, no triumphalism on behalf of the state and its proclaimed values, merely a demonstration of the happiness that work can bring in conditions of peace. Monet is certainly an important reference point for Woods’ work. The parallels between the two oeuvres are clear: both are based on landscape but both, contrary to the traditions of the genre including most of its modern avatars, eschew any reference to a horizon, and therefore proffer an experience of immersion rather than distancing. Both, too, are examples of high artifice. But the parallels only serve to highlight the equally obvious differences between Monet’s aestheticism, his amazing refinement of touch and of rich, close-valued harmonies of colour—a refinement so extreme as to constantly threaten to tip over into its opposite, vulgarity—and the raw and uningratiating surface qualities of Woods’ art, with her synthetic colours and the harsh, inelastic tactile quality of her glossy enamel paint. Woods takes on the decorative, but she works against it—or perhaps I should say, she pits it against itself.

A number of things account for these differences, including artists’ newfound fascination with vernacular materials and mass culture. Less obvious but just as strong is the importance of photography. Today, painting is almost inconceivable without the photograph. Photography conditions the way we see

painting; even more, it conditions the way painting is made. The photorealism of the 1960s, as exemplified in certain works by Gerhard Richter, Malcolm Morley, and others, made polemical use of this fact, but today, it is difficult for a painter to evoke the “look” of the photograph without provoking in the viewer an unhappy sense of redundancy. Making paintings that look photographic is now a familiar formula—why repeat it? But there are other, more veiled and unobtrusive ways of working self-consciously with the photograph as a reference point for painting, and four decades after photorealism, it is this oblique or reticent use of the photograph that works more powerfully. Woods’ work is a good case in point. It’s not just that she consistently uses photographs as source material. In her work, there are at least two main ways that photographic vision enters the picture. The first might be called the analysis of the image (using the word “analysis” its original, quasi-scientific sense): its breakdown into unrecognizable component parts, into pictorial molecules; the second would be the alienation of the image: its estrangement or distancing.

The contemporary painter’s analysis of the image by way of photography is an activity quite different from the traditional painter’s analysis of the motif by way of drawing. Drawing purifies, distills, and internalizes the motif, whereas the photograph (at least in the form of the quick snapshot that artists tend to use as a form of notation) tends to do the opposite. Its transubstantiation of a scene into an image generates a large surplus of visual “noise”—information that drawing would allow the artist to eliminate as irrelevant to the question she wants to pose of her motif. The photograph preserves what she wants to remember only at the price of half-burying it amidst everything that, at the time, might have seemed irrelevant—but which might well turn out to be interesting later. This photographic surplus accounts for what one might call, in honor of the Michelangelo Antonioni film, the Blow-Up Effect. The photograph produces a belated seeing, allows one to notice later what one had overlooked in the moment when it was taken (and which the taking of the photograph might even have prevented one from seeing). Woods incorporates this visual noise as part of her painting. Thus, the feeling of surfeit that one inevitably encounters in viewing the work. The picture is dense, almost clogged, as if one were seeing multiple views of the same thing superimposed, half-reinforcing and half-interfering with each other. At the same time, there is a sort of formal reduction at work: the image of nature has been decomposed into a collection of flat, puzzle-like silhouettes. One feels that one is seeing something specific but without being able to grasp it, because it moves in and out of focus because of this profusion of forms and colours. Just as Woods pits the decorative against itself, and just as she pits the genre of landscape against itself, turning it into a form of abstraction, she pits the photographic eye against itself.

It does not take long to realise that the first impression of profusion to the point of chaos is misleading; for while it is true that there is a massive quantity of visual information in any one of these paintings, they contain randomness and disorder without themselves being disordered or random. Woods is in control of everything that is going on, and the paintings are completely pre-planned; that's not to say there is no room for spontaneity in their execution, at least at the level of detail, but the intricate structure of each painting must be worked out in advance. Presumably this openness to the moment is one reason why Woods does not use assistants to help her execute the work, a decision that might otherwise seem madness given the grand scale of the three paintings that make up Deaf Man's House, her new suite for Chisenhale Gallery.

The title of the suite refers to the place where Francisco Goya lived when he made his late "black paintings"—a dark décor if there ever was one. It was Goya, after all, who gave one of his "Disasters of War" the caption, "This is not to be looked at." "It's quite weird, making a painting you can't even see," Woods remarked when I was visiting her studio to see *The Grump*, the first of the series. "No weirder than looking at one you can't even see," I muttered inwardly—for while the work's six panels just about fit along the studio's longest wall, that didn't mean there was any way to take in more than a bit of it at once. Of course the situation will be quite different when the paintings are installed at Chisenhale; but in the studio, the encounter with this work entails a certain amount of unknowing. Maybe that has something to do with the way this work provokes a reconsideration of just what looking at a painting entails—both the looking that goes into making the painting and the looking that goes into its reception.