

Colour, Metamorphoses and Formal Metaphor in the Art of Clare Woods

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Molten, liquefied, centrifugal, elsewhere as though poised to pool and drip; circular-cyclonic, organic, frilled like ribbon seaweed or bulbous cumuli or phallic unfurling leaves or the symmetry of internal organs – amplifications of volume, weight and presence. The blood-lipped, bone white face shape, with mould-green shadowing on magenta spider's web. Hybrid, mutation – dense interior mystery.

Form in the art of Clare Woods brings transmutation to mind. That which might first be a view into the interior of a small wood, verdant, a burst of pale pink blossom, narrow mud path and a brackish stream, its surface holding placid reflections – might then be something different, yet somehow related: a distant transmission of a subject that becomes instead a more intuitive exploration of mood, form and vision. This exploration adventures close to home, entering a monstrous state – the subject no longer itself but transmogrified.

Colour seems to be a principal agent of these metamorphoses. At times, the delicacy of hue might surprise us - like a shower of rain (pale tangerine, sea water grey green, vinegar mustard yellow – sensitizing the

composition to better take small islands of jet black); but also the unlikely merger of vivacious sensuality and profound, near decadent richness:

burgundy and plum, sand, peach, algae, blood red, damson blue, the near fluorescent green of young fern; oyster, rain-brightened rust, pale crimson to pink; a calm sea of silver, wavelets barely discernible. A peach and emerald whirlwind; vanilla ice cream coloured folds.

This relation between form and colour, in the art of Woods, creates visual sensations of immense energy, stasis, epiphany, vortex, intimacy and distance. Subject matter may appear channelled as essence; form seems pursued as both shape and thought - transmuted to a pictorial place where the seemingly organic begins to metamorphose into abstraction.

Likewise, the viewer seems to be seeing a world in which the non-negotiable processes of Nature are depicted as trauma and pathology, as much as explorations of colour and form.

Here then is a formidable fusion of confrontation and the barely knowable but deeply felt. The confrontation exists in the shock of semi-organic forms in relation to tonal lushness – the effect heightened by the seeming tactility and vigour of the applied paint: swerves and dips and drags and loops – a sculptural roughness and energy, smooth fluidity, fading strata as in the hues of archaic confectionary or geological veining. The forms declaim their assurance – their atmosphere; their possible remote kinship to a more prosaic familiarity.

The mystery in these paintings derives from their eeriness and intense atmospheric charge: the balance of overt declamation and seemingly inscrutable indwelling spirit. Exuberant, in places dandified, tonally opulent – the painting process itself seems given over to a state well-described by a phrase borrowed from Vargas Llosa, borrowed from Flaubert: the “perpetual orgy” of the form’s extent and capacities.

The viewer is faced with images (Ted Hughes territory, almost: deciduous primal - bird, dead birds, a dead rabbit, what seem to be bandaged or hooded human heads, strangely inverted pendulously bulbous shapes, a nest, undergrowth, pools, what appear to be nameless submarine, anatomical or vegetable phenomena) which are mutating into varying degrees of brightly coloured abstraction: transforming deeper and deeper into *painting* – as an act and process of translation – as opposed to paintings of a particular thing. The subjects, in one sense, have become alibis for thematic, emotional and aesthetic explorations.

So why the unease? For there is something troubling in many of these paintings – some sense of horror even – the heart of darkness; a particular intimation of the place of suffering – even violent, unexpected suffering – in the course and consequences of experience. Does the indifference of nature (or of mortality itself) to individual fate, seem sub-sonically conveyed within these exuberantly vivid, anthropomorphic studies and arrangements and shocks of form? Urbane poetry, surprisingly, may help to answer these questions.

For over-familiarity does nothing to lessen the strength of the verse:
“About suffering they were never wrong, the old Masters...” – beginning
W. H. Auden’s famous poem, ‘Musée des Beaux Arts’. The words possess
a metrical musicality that renders them so intimate – conversational, as
though resigned yet wise, and thus true: a pronouncement. The poem
continues, “...how well they understood its human position..” – thus
making an advance on the poem’s theme; and the tone, part reverie, part
sermon, is maintained. Art’s relationship to truth (emotional honesty and
moral vision) is the not-too hidden sub-text.

And so we also might remember Alan Bennett’s masterful depiction of
the art historian and spy, Anthony Blunt, in his play ‘A Question of
Attribution’ (1988); and the equally masterful manner in which James
Fox brought the character of Blunt (embodying a locked middle ground
between truth and lies) to vivid reality: aloof, charming, urbane,
inscrutable – and, like the opening of line of Auden’s poem, resigned, yet,
wise, and therefore, half way at least, true.

Thus while lecturing to a group of students (and one police officer) at the
Courtauld Institute, London, and showing slides (as they were then) of
medieval and renaissance paintings, Sir Anthony remarks, sniffy and
witty, “About suffering they were never *right*...” – pointing out
apparently illogical or even absurd details in venerable depictions of
martyrdom or antique disaster. Odd, seemingly incongruous expressions;
near baffling alignments of perspective.

But perhaps from the ‘wrongness’ came in fact (Sir Anthony, if I may) sublime *rightness* – about suffering or anything else; the weirdness, the irrationality, the absurd even, is the “one defect” (as Hamlet states of human frailty) in the picture that brings it to life. Thus that which for Bennett’s Blunt seemed blatantly unreal, for Auden was the beating pulse of realism.

And in painting, the notion (and reality) of a pulse seems important: that which grants the work its living presence – a complex arrangement, as hard to unravel as medical biology, yet without doubt the evidence that a painting (in whatever ‘style’) is realised as itself, free of the artist, freed by the artist, to be itself. And in this, is Sartre right, that “subjectivity must be our point of departure” ? Oh dear, yes – for the painting, whether right or wrong about suffering, must be for the viewer (who knows nothing of its source) above all else alive.

Woods’s paintings pulse with life, to the point of seeming sentient. In being alive, Art holds the viewer in the present, becoming a moment of being – as though the pores of consciousness were opened more widely - in which the common distractions of memory and anticipation (past and future) fall away; for the living art work stills and inhabits time: it has a gravitational field beyond the pictorial – the young woman in the white dress looks away, the fields full of sunshine; the diagonal diamonds appear to rearrange themselves in a diagrammatic grid, flickering with scintillation; the humanoid shape seems to engage the viewer’s gaze,

slack-mouthed, back-dropped by luscious rushing circles of candy-floss pink and buttercup yellow...

And what then might the viewer intuit from their experience of being in the presence of the art of Clare Woods? That these paintings confront the viewer in different ways, yet unified by sensibility, all active – beginning by seeming to adjust their distance from the gaze: are their subjects in the foreground or the middle ground? Or are we being shown a glimpse of somewhere or something as though through some fissure in a veil between worlds? All of the above, doubtless; but *representation* – or so it seems – has indeed become an alibi (see above) for some other concern.

But what?

We are looking at what seem to be swirling, spiralling concentric circles of luxuriant, near toxically bright colour, their hue still closer to Nature than chemistry but their tonal sensibility sharing something of both: young grass green and daffodil yellow, an oozing isthmus of burgundy plum and chocolate brown; magenta and mud; wealds of air force blue, whip-lash cross-hairs of hazelnut and loose crochet arcs of oily olive. Colour seems to become action and psychology in Woods' paintings, making overt her the subjective innards of her subjects – at times with vertiginous vibrancy, as though centrifugal to a vortex at their centre; at others vernal, as though events in dense undergrowth.

In the art of Clare Woods, colour can thus become at once elegant – the pinks and greens and silvery ice blue of hand-painted wallpaper – and

redolent of butchery or flaying. The viewer is seeing what feels to be Nature heightened, as though Platonically more “real”, and in being so, both shocking and somehow unreal – and so “about suffering” the wrongness becomes right. Trauma, wound, event, surgery, catastrophe in miniature befalling man, land or creature – are incidences extraordinary to our experience of reality; consciousness shuttles between absence and heightened presence.

This seems confusing, aesthetically – but Roger Fry may have helped us, writing in 1905 (then controversially) on the Impressionists [*en passant*, much of Modernism, historically, was a presentiment of the future we are still pursuing]:

“These artists do not seek to imitate forms, but to create form, not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life... ..in fact they aim not at an illusion but at reality. The logical extreme of such a method would undoubtedly be the attempt to give up all resemblance to natural form, and to create a purely abstract language of form – a visual music.”

For Woods, it appears as though this slippage between figuration and abstraction is constant, and at times less a process of transformation from one to the other and more an oscillation between two. Her art, it seems, comprises both states: semi-representational and extrapolations of form, shape and colour. What results are brooding pictorial masses, angry cyclones, inversions and weights of form. These forms can appear anthropomorphic or biomorphic, sculptural, anatomical-zoological:

natural scientific states, fused into semi-abstractness, yet with living presence. “...*not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life...*”

If we tried to contain the art of Clare Woods within an art historical lineage, one might find affinities to post-impressionism, surrealism and the influence of both upon a strange, hybrid form in which abstraction – and the handling of paint, and the gestural process of painting – comes somewhere close to sculpture: the shaping and planing of surface into both painting and object. From this confluence of informants a potency of atmosphere and strangeness of image emerges – still tethered to representation, but freed to pursue its own extravagant pictorial destiny.

The ‘Neo-Romantic’ artists of British modernism (including Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland, John Piper and Michael Ayrton) for whom surrealism might relate to both organic forms and charged or traumatised numinosity, are perhaps the ancestors of Woods’s intense psycho-pictorial idiom. Sutherland (whose painting “Red Landscape” (1942) might be seen as a precursor to the particular abutment of form and colour in work by Woods) offers a helpful insight, opening Fry’s academicism to the relationship between trauma and the artist’s vision. This centres around transmutation:

“...At another time, the sordidness and the anguish implied by some of these scenes of devastation [bombed out houses] will cause one to invent forms which are the pictorial essence of sordidness and anguish – dirty-looking forms, tormented forms, forms which take on an almost human

aspect, forms, in fact, which are symbols or reality and tragic reality at that... in either case the forms which the artist creates... will transcend natural appearances.” [1]

Such a process appears deeply embedded in the art of Clare Woods – echoing also Sutherland’s identification of what he termed ‘formal metaphors’ in the transformation of geological or organic details into other forms. Malcolm Yorke cites Sutherland’s fascination, for instance, with drawing a collapsed lift shaft:

“...in the way it had fallen it was like a wounded animal. It wasn’t that these forms *looked* like animals, but their movements were animal movements. One shaft in particular, with a very strong lateral fall suggested a wounded tiger in a painting by Delacroix.” [2]

Woods identifies, one feels, with such an observation. The art historical label ‘Neo-Romantic’ implies notions of transcendence – albeit, for modernists faced with total war, transcendence to twilight places where ancient history, country lore or medievalism seemed in league with presentiments of an apocalyptic future. The art of Clare Woods comes from a colder age, and seems less romantic than forensic and metaphoric: a study of evidence, but no less a study of forms transcending natural appearance.

Notes

1: Sutherland, Graham. 'Art and Life' – the 'Listener' 13th November 1941, p. 657. Cited by Yorke, Malcolm, 'A Sense of Place: Nine Neo-Romantic Artists and their Times.' Tauris Parke, London 2001 (first published, Constable, London, 1988) p. 124

2: Tassi, Roberto. 'Sutherland: The Wartime Drawings' – translated J. Andrews (London, 1980) p. 19. [Cited by Yorke, Malcolm, *ibid*, p. 125]