

Seeing the hours fall



"From the Island" (Night)
Mixed media on canvas
24" x 24". 1994
Private collection (UK)

Geoff Dyer

Before arriving at the distinctive style of work represented in this exhibition, Cecilia Vargas was a figurative painter of imagined landscapes. In a sense she still is.

If these moody early works were characterised by a strange absence, the abstract paintings she has produced since then, especially the works of the last three years, are marked by a palpable presence. Though abstract, the emotional tug of these paintings is always towards an experience, an event, a scene: a landscape, perhaps, which has arranged itself according to some perceptual code we understand without deciphering. To the senses, to the eye, these paintings explain themselves comprehensively. In writing about them, however, we have to translate this silent language of the eye. And to do this, to articulate the experience within a painting, it is helpful to step outside it. Vargas was born in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1957. Her father is an architect and when she was three, the family moved into a Corbusier-style house that he had designed. This "dream house" - with the later

paintings in mind Vargas's phrase could hardly be more appropriate - was a place of white angled walls and modernist geometry but, she adds, there were also different textures of colours of wood and stone. Framed by the walls of the house was a small interior garden. Sunlit with bamboo trees and a tiny pond. Pebbles. Thin green leaves. The water holding reflections of the walls. The sun flinging shadow-water onto the wall's framing whiteness...

How crucial, I asked, was this experience to the paintings she has produced thirty years later? I grew up in this house subliminally aware that there were thoughts behind forms, that my father had drawn some lines on paper and that we were living inside those lines. Albert Camus, reflecting on his work which was shaped to an extraordinary degree by the world of poverty and sunlight in which he grew up, concluded:

A man's work is nothing but this slow trek to rediscover through the detours of art those two or three great and simple images in whose presence his heart first opened.

Instead of squinting at transparencies of the paintings I find myself walking on the Via della Scala, looking up at the sheets and towels hung out to dry: shifting squares of colour that move but remain fixed and framed by sky. A few hours later they are gone but whether they are there or not they are always there.

I also find myself wondering about the painted shutters on the Via della Scrofa. These shutters, I suspect, are not simply painted pieces of slatted wood which have faded. Better to say they are sensitive to light, like photographic paper in which the image takes decades or centuries to fix itself. And what is recorded in the rectangles of blue or yellow is the experience of these colours, over time:

*The successive suns of summer,
The succession of the sun and of its summers...(1)*

The shutter is a representation of the scene of which it is a part: it is the memory bank of the street. There are no yellows or blues in these shutters - or Vargas's paintings - only the memory of yellows or blues.

Were this shutter to be removed from its setting and placed elsewhere, in a gallery, for example, it would still be a representation in light and colour of the history of the street in which it had been found. Once removed from its original sunny location, however, it would no longer go on developing. It would soon become dull.

Vargas's paintings continue to breathe, to live, after they are finished, after they are removed from the studio in which they were made. They are not images but after-images. They are memories made from memories, paintings derived from previous paintings (abandoned, painted over). Sometimes they are paintings of memories she has never had, memories which did not exist until they had been created. Sometimes they owe their inspiration to - or, to revert to an earlier phrase, they pull us towards - the work of other artists.

Although it may not be immediately obvious from my finished works, I get inspiration from several sources, not only visual

(Bonnard, Picasso, Matisse, Rothko, Morandi, Diebenkorn, Ryman, Sean Scully, the pottery of Lucie Rie and Elizabeth Fritsch, among others) but also from poetry, for example. The influence of poetry has been unsystematic but a lot more specific. Octavio Paz's poems usually create an atmosphere that dictates images to me. They are wonderful sparks for paintings: the ideas, the moods, the power of the proximity of such distant words as incestuous trees

(from the poem Ustica).

A 1990 painting was entitled I Hear the Hours Fall, also from one of Paz's poems, because it was exactly about the passing of time, of a watchful awareness of time ticking away. A less direct presence of his imagery in my work comes from another of Paz's phrases: Sun-drop petrified. Ever since I first read this line it made a very strong impression on me. I think the shifting meaning of this has nurtured more than one painting. It is probably the dark or yellow circles in some of the pictures. It might be the overall layer of bright light against a darker surface in another. But I am not constantly referring to his work; the effect of his words can last for months on end.

Paintings can take a long time to find their titles and many may remain untitled for a long while (another sign of the way in which they continue to 'breathe' after they have been completed). They wait for their meaning to be fixed.

*Geoff Dyer
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(1) Octavio Paz, Ustica (Salamandra, 1958-61)