

Coastal Architecture

In the Orthodox tradition icon painters emphasise light in their compositions, starting every painting with an application of white. The effect is to enhance the colour pigments that follow. Vanessa Gardiner likewise begins her paintings with light; with a pure white ground that lends intensity to the colours that follow.

Again like the icon painters, she works on board – in her case marine ply, which can withstand repeated sessions of scouring, sanding, incising and cutting. Layers of paint are applied and then partially removed. The painting is ‘built’ rather than simply painted. Hers is an architectural way of working, reflecting her subject of ‘coastal architecture’. From raw beginnings, paintings of harmony and balance gradually emerge. Offering open space and light through colour and texture, these are humanist works which intimately link both painter and observer to particular landscapes.

And the landscapes are indeed very particular; places which thrill by their beauty. One such is Cape Sounion, high on a southern promontory of the Attica Peninsula overlooking the Aegean. Gardiner’s paintings here reflect an unflinching light. The landforms appear acute, geometric, sharp, and a hard-edged white line materializes as waves from the dark cobalt sea impact the land. There are areas of transparency and of opacity, but the overall effect is of a clarity which seems almost a crystallization of light itself.

Closer to home is another spectacular coastal landscape at Pentargon, near Boscastle on the north Cornish coast. As at Sounion, headlands reach and stretch into dense cobalt seas, but the geology is markedly different. Here there is the darkness of slate. A curvilinear coastal wall of dark graphite weaves its way through these paintings, mirrored in the white surf lines of the Atlantic and the lines of the plough in the chrome green fields on the flat headlands above.

Gardiner’s practice is to get to know a site intimately through innumerable drawings. Often looking down from a great height, she attempts to capture in drawn lines the dynamic of the landscape before her. She is after its essence, its evolution, its geology, and the abstract shapes it suggests. The shapes and forms of the subsequent paintings come from these drawings, and in turn from the landscape, but once she begins to work on board then the drawings are put aside and the life of the painting truly begins. The aim is not to imitate nature but rather to express something actually experienced in nature, and as Victor Pasmore once put it, to find the necessary processes and conditions which will give it birth.

The way Gardiner treats her surfaces is anything but reverential, and there are risks involved. However, her thirty years experience as a painter have given her the experience, judgment and decisiveness necessary to work her surfaces into paintings of rare beauty. Her palette is of olive green and celadon, Payne’s grey, raw umber, cobalt and cerulean blue – and above all a flat opaque white. Gardiner has achieved in these paintings a unique expression of ‘coastal architecture’. Like much great architecture, Gardiner’s art combines a classic aesthetic with the capacity to thrill.

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