

Vanessa Gardiner

Vanessa Gardiner's work stands out in the breadth of contemporary British painting as a lone block of masonry would, set among courses of brick. You can build walls with baked moulded clay or with chiselled stone, but choose the latter and you handle a mass with a grain and a resistance that were not manufactured. Gardiner's paintings have such a happened-upon hardness: they seem as much found as made. Both emotionally and physically, they distinguish themselves from the expanses of wilfully moulded pictorial product.

They are indeed carved - if not with chisels, with sanders and scourers borne down against the resistance of ply- or hard-board. Sometimes it feels as if more paint had been subtracted from the picture than had ever been added. (A minute's brushing in, then hours spent paring back.) Yet as all paintings must, they begin as wilful additions to the world. To see Gardiner's current work en masse, in stacks looming against the windowlight in her small studio, is to register what a determined and productive creator she is. In her Dorset workspace she is summoning into being the elsewhere that possess her imagination - in the present context County Mayo, where she took on a residency in 2007; Argolis in Greece, visited last year; and, as throughout her twenty-year exhibiting career, certain stretches of Cornwall. Her attachment to these exemplary locations - sealed with the souvenir fragments of quartz, karst and granite that lie on her windowledge - is quite specific: with each new board she starts work on, she is pronouncing again a certain loved name. The topology and colour timbre of one or another terrain reliably unfold in her studio from the compression of a pencil sketch done directly before the motif - sketches which, strangely, are often chunkier and more sensuous than the paintings they eventually generate.

At the same time there is obviously a general interest that these bare unpeopled landscapes share. A coast is the limit to a solid mass. It is where indefinite liquid acts as a blade, slicing away at the stuff we stand on. It is where, then, that substance stands most clearly revealed and distinct. The vectors Gardiner employs, her scumbles and her scourings are all ways to close in on such a quiddity of the land. (And by extension, of what is not the land: the contrasted seas and skies.) The interest for her lies not so much in the geological history of the cliffs she paints as in their quasi-architectural aspect: the way that like monuments, rockfaces can offer a companionable and sustaining presence.

Gardiner is a highly consistent artist, but the comparative weighting of her methods has shifted. The analytic slicing up of the rectangular board - which insists that it is just that, a rectangular board - comes from a British modernist tradition, headed by Ben Nicholson, that she happily keeps faith with. In former work, however, I feel, she has been less ready to concede that a landscape is just that, a landscape. Sometimes the original motif got caught up in a dialectical fight between so many trapezoids and triangles as to how to coexist within four corners: at other times, in a lunging perspective that brushed you up against the artist's own presence as spectator. The recent work not only sees a refinement of means (I marvel at how the paintings breathe sea air without ever descending to particulars of the weather); it seems more at peace with its content. It lets the land's own rhythms dictate the board's. In other words, I suspect that with this exhibition we may be seeing some of Gardiner's most beautiful and distinguished paintings to date.

Julian Bell

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