

# NEO-NARRATIVE PAINTING AND THE WORK OF ROSA LOY

EMMA TALBOT UNPICKS  
NARRATIVE AND THE  
PERSONAL VOICE IN HER  
PURSUIT OF A NEW KIND  
OF PICTURE-MAKING.

**N**arrative painting is enjoying a revival, thanks to the resurgence of invention in painting (as opposed to a reiteration of pre-existing imagery through appropriation). Leading painters in this new wave include the Leipzig Schule painters Tilo Baumgartel, Neo Rauch and Rosa Loy. Their use of tertiary colours, reminiscent of Eastern block interiors and design, and period, utility-wear, dress, suggests nostalgia for communist era Germany. But although they look to these lost historical and painterly eras, by retelling histories they pull outmoded languages into a contemporary description of personal freedoms and idealism. With this communist background, the hard won voice of the individual and the exploration of personal thought and desire provides for these painters and others from the Leipzig Schule a liberating opportunity for self-identification. However, regardless of background, narrative invention provides a space for the complete rejection of the mainstream mass image or at least a lack of need to correspond to it.

We are bombarded with imagery on TV, on the street, in magazines, on the net and our use of digital

cameras and camera phones, coupled with domestic use of computers, involves almost everyone with image making and exchange of images as part of daily life. These images are settled within a descriptive society, where bureaucracy breaks everyday processes into manual-like steps, where common sense is spelt out and ingredients are listed. We are socially 'incorporated' into this pedantic way of thinking, with a political emphasis on methods of inclusion and acceptance of difference, which seem to dissipate alternative culture. Narrative painting represents the individual voice, not simply the impromptu idea or action (which might be shared on YouTube), but an individual means of delineating personal meaning, value and importance through inventive picture making. This revealing of the inner workings of the subconscious, taking the individual away from its relationship with the mass, produces an individual way of describing.

Rosa Loy's paintings are populated by women that look like her. They are engaged in unknown rituals and transformations pictorially reminiscent of 1930s and 40s female surrealist painters, such as Leonora

Carrington and Dorothea Tanning. A pictorial device common to Loy's paintings is the use of twins or the doppelganger, emphasising the act of self-reflection, being absorbed in the parts of the self.

In 'Mitgefühl' ('Sympathy') (2006), a tree breaks into the city apartment and grows out through the skylight. The frail figure in the foreground is covered with an animal skin, while a benevolent sister holds a crystal over her head. Another figure looms above, entangled with the tree. An owl takes flight, almost straight out of the 1932 Valentine Hugo painting 'Le Harfang Des Nieges' that Ernst kept above his bed. Into this dream-narrative, where the whole composition borders on sleeping and waking, life and death, the glowing portal seen through the doorway suggests the presence of another realm, beyond the structures of this world, which are already in flux.

The story-telling is as ambiguous as a remembered dream, but suggests themes about natural order breaking apart the concrete man-made structure, alternative therapies vs the drug-heavy workings of modern medicine, what was dismissed (like narrative figurative painting) resurging as the utopian ideals of modernism are recognised as a superficial sticking plaster.

There is in Rosa Loy's work, an awkwardness in the drawing and execution of the figuration, a 'badness', which operates as an antidote to the idealised imagery in mass media, and mirrors the female surrealist painter's need for 'internalizing the muse'<sup>1</sup>. This is quite unlike the figuration of Picabia, who deliberately set up a dilettante, hobbyist position to create knowingly bad paintings, placing himself right in between the traditions of painting and the language of popular culture. It's not bad like John Currin's paintings, which reference kitsch and traditional language, and by extending characterisation within both, draw out the grotesque. By standing to one side of the genres chosen and by commenting, artists like Picabia and Currin are involved in impersonation or imitation: providing a critique by exaggerating the characterisation of existing genres while asserting their own allegiance to the knowing 'normative' position. Picabia and Currin deal with unfaithfulness, while Rosa Loy and Leonora Carrington's paintings are faithful to their subject. It's not about separating artist from imagery and objectifying it, it's about a complete belief in the language

employed to describe the idea. (And yet, because she isn't pretending, in Leonora Carrington's case, I find it makes the painting utterly uncomfortable. 'The Inn of the Dawn Horse' (1936/7) for example, makes me squirm with its faithful badness.)

The self-absorbed nature of narrative seemed to do painting a disservice by the late 1980s. The issue of narrative's ambiguous meaning, the use of personal symbolism which could not be universally read, the arrogant assumption of the artist as the great visionary, without demonstration of mastery of effect or skill, led to a general tiredness with picture-making. It seemed so easy and so meaningless. The proposal that, as a viewer, you could read into an image what you brought to it was irresponsible, and painting's relation to its own history meant that any personal mythologies would be utterly unimportant in relation to the grand themes and propagandas of historical narrative paintings. Any use of the guise of tradition, as in neo-classicism, just looked like a poncy way of saying what TV and media images were saying more directly about dynamics and relationships. The focus on the subjective equalled a lack of criticality and a lack of position.

Contemporary narrative painting doesn't make grand claims any more (except that one). It is deliberately low-key. It doesn't aim to contend with its histories in a bombastic way, but focuses on lower art forms, such as folk-art and outsider art to provide the roots of individual identity played out through small projections. There is a playfulness at heart in this unassuming position for many neo-narrative painters. Despite this I am drawn to Rosa Loy's painting expressly because she does not assume a coy position. Loy's work is often large and ambitious and it tackles personal themes whilst allowing enormous psychological and philosophical territories to be opened out. The workings of the subconscious, individual memory (as opposed to collective memory) and existentialism are all played out in her paintings whilst retaining an openness and directness that avoids pretension.

[1] 'The idealized vision of woman as muse was no help to the young women who came to surrealism during the 1930s seeking an artistic identity in the movement. Rejecting the idea of the Muse as Other, they turned instead to their own images and their own realities as sources for their art' Chadwick, Whitney 'Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement' Thames and Hudson, 1991.