

DOMOBAAL

Seeing things

They are like pictures of thoughts, some half formed, others on the verge of fullness. Some are hardly there and some nearly remind you of a small part of the world, of a certain type, a kind of feeling, a forgotten taste, a look, though it's nothing you could ever be definite about. Roxy Walsh's work both evokes and resists the familiar, she may play with ideas about abstraction and figuration but it's really far more complex than that. Her paintings have a particularity, a certainty even, each with its own seemingly unrelated character exuding a kind of happy self containment. We aren't told stories or enlightened, instead the artist has assembled a language and used it to articulate a very singular two-dimensional universe. In one piece a veil of pigment emerges as a grossly lolling tongue, in another one might discern the benign face of an elderly white haired gentleman or perceive pie-crust eyes imposed on what could be a yellow rubber glove serve to make it almost flesh. These often quite surreal occurrences have created a place which is as bizarre as it is mundane. It's also a decidedly mute place, dumb and somehow aloof, awkward and elegant and rather beyond description, it stirs up the peculiar admiration one sometimes feels when confronted with the naturally and sometimes unavoidably inscrutable.

Though often small in size some pieces may be the result of weeks of work - paint applied and removed, in part or in full. This evolution is quietly apparent; successive arrangements appear and disappear leaving behind faint traces of themselves and creating a slight patina. The surfaces of Walsh's paintings on gesso have an almost limpid quality, they are curiously tactile. Still, she never overstates the making of her work in such terms, never revealing anything that could be called as grand as history. These paintings are delicate without being in any way precious; they are formed out of a playful ease, difficult to pin down, nearly impossible to explain.

Sometimes there are eyes or what one might take to be eyes. Here and there small circles of colour placed precisely amid a tangle of lines, or an otherwise amorphous shape, conjure up a being; not anything which might have the potential to be real though they are sometimes crudely identifiable, a schematic mouse, a faun in the thralls of a sticky metamorphosis, a frog, or a cloaked eminence. Like bizarre hieroglyphs these figures never become characters in their own right, they don't appear capable of thoughts or a rich internal life but neither do they stand for anything except themselves. Rather this strange cast is grown out of paint and intuition and their semicoincidental under-determination is endlessly satisfying. Painted in translucent, often pastel hues, the works may contain other shapes and forms which could bring to mind something slightly retro - the cartoons of the Eastern Bloc or Bibaesque florescences and maybe the odd baroque curlicue. But any sweet flossiness is held at bay by an intimation of things well used. Here charm is coupled with a slight grubbiness. The beings Walsh populates her paintings with have an often threadbare or washed out quality like toys in charity shops or a pebble from some far distant holiday given life by the addition of now dented boggle eyes. There is a highly developed strain of sentimentality at work in these paintings, it's a kind of mysterious longing born from desire to know about or to create a world for the inanimate, teasing very particular forms of life from paint.

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In a few paintings very identifiable human faces loom out of the canvas. They are vague and definitely other worldly, hinting at the mystical (a somehow uncomfortable word but an apt one nevertheless). In one work two ghostly faces with the pupil-less eyes of classical busts hover amid coloured spheres. Along the lower edge of the painting a miniature motif might evoke the mouth of a cave fringed with greenery - and having gone this far it's easy to start imagining the image having grown out of antique mythology. The faces with their empty eyes and gaping mouths could be masks from a Greek chorus or wan envoys from the underworld and within the tiny cavern more orbs hang silently in the darkness... perhaps. In another painting a luminous head with faded pretty features smiles coyly in the direction of an egg shaped object, it could be a bulging eye or a planet, the marks on its surface suggesting capillaries or the familiar outlines of the continents. The hazy lyricism in such work is old fashioned in a way that is, for a moment, completely contemporary. These spirits are more decorative than they are portentous, evolving from the play on paint on the surface of the canvas. Still there is something in them that alludes to other types of fiction, maybe they did just happen that way, but some form of narrative can float to the surface if you wish it. In this way, it seems, such paintings come closer to some sort of illustration than most of Walsh's recent work. The tales they might accompany have never existed but they can almost be imagined.

The reappearance of certain images in Walsh's work - improbably cute animals, pallid faces, hands and even letters of the alphabet - never really function (except for a few cases) to create much of a link from one to the next. Instead each piece retains its own distinctive and mostly separate personality. The similarities are obvious but it is curious that when seen together they communicate a collective loneliness which is totally captivating. Each work inhabits another plane, coming into being through different sets of circumstances, evolving according to their own discreet criteria. They are like a collection of ghosts haunting the same space, not quite aware of the others' existence, but roused by their presence.

Dale McFarland, June 2006