

Essential Spirit

William Packer

Jennifer Durrant is now in her early 60s, with a long and distinguished career to her credit and is one of the significant non-figurative painters of her generation. Her work has not been seen in London, at least in any substantial measure, for some considerable time. Even at the Royal Academy, to which she was elected in 1994, the presence in the annual summer show of her habitually large canvases, with their expansive sweep and rich colour, their imagery redolent of organic energy and growth, has been marked by its absence. It was not until 2004 that she returned to show again on those walls, only to surprise us somewhat with a group of six tiny paintings from a recent and still continuing series, *Last Conversations*: an unheralded forerunner and taster, as it turns out, of this present show. We all of us have some catching up to do.

As the experience of so many artists bears out, even a lengthy period of apparent inactivity, whether entered upon by personal choice, creative uncertainty and frustration, or forced by external circumstance, may be no bad thing. In Jenny Durrant's case, this useful interval would seem to have been brought on by a touch of all three.

In 1999 she bought a plot of land in Umbria on which to build a studio, got married the following January, sold up her house and studio in London, and went to live in Italy with her husband. But such things do not always run quite as hoped. The immediate and unexpected illness of her husband, now happily recovered, the death of both her parents within the next year or so, and the inevitable, year-upon-year Italian delays to the completion of the studio, all seemed to conspire against her. Was it the ghost of Hannibal that she had disturbed, or those of the Romans he had defeated in the very field where she meant to build? One way or another, it was only towards the end of 2001 that she began to set herself properly to work again. Even so, with the new studio barely begun, she had to make the best of it, crammed into a small and narrow former pigsty in the garden that was to be her temporary studio for the next three years, and forced to work on an unaccustomed scale. Not just in a new place, but in a new country, things could hardly have seemed more different to how they were. Where would it all lead? The only thing was to trust the work to see her through. It is from this inauspicious beginning that this present exhibition substantially derives.

It would be wrong to take so fresh a start as marking any actual and fundamental break with the past, and a change in direction of the work, whatever the superficial appearance might be. For despite the inevitable shifts and changes to be seen in any artist's work over a long career, whether of interest, practice or circumstance, it will always come together in the end, all of a piece. And though Jenny Durrant herself speaks of her nervousness at not having painted for so long a while, she also recalls a statement she had made at the time of her Barbican show fully ten years before. 'Although my initial thoughts and imaginings,' she wrote, 'are prompted by those particular and quite distinct things that I observe in the outside world, and my identification with them and my feelings for what I see, my paintings are not the conscious re-creation of an exterior space... I would wish that my paintings may reflect a reflective/contemplative experience, engaging the senses and, through the senses, the intellect.'

Here she was in her little Italian pigsty, previously her husband's workshop, improvising variously with paint and collage, on cardboard panels primed with gesso, many of them no

more than postcard size, and yet responding as intuitively as ever to just such external stimuli as she had spoken of at the Barbican in 1991, and still working unselfconsciously to just such an end. The rich, eternal Umbrian landscape was all about her, to pluck constantly, as it were, at the strings of her visual imagination. There were the lake and the hills in front of the house, and the fields and orchards behind, full of flowers, and indeed she speaks of the colour in her work of this time in terms of being a direct if insensible response to the colours of the land and the ever-changing seasons. She remembers too being surrounded always by the song of the birds, and listening incessantly to music as she worked, to Bach most of all. And in these *Last Conversations* paintings, with their layered strips of colour, purple, black, green and red overlaid and activated by tiny contrasting dots of paint, the sense of some private notation of an unheard, unknown music, or perhaps of some lost or silent speech, is inescapable. While intending that generic title to be in no way directly illustrative or descriptive, she readily acknowledges looser associations, suggestive as it seemed to her of ‘the stops and starts and phrases and pitches that occur in telephone conversations’.

That *Last Conversations* series emerged directly from the working method she was constrained to adopt. Using gouache and acrylic paint, she first laid simple grounds of colour upon sheets of paper, which she cut into narrow, rather wonky strips of more-or-less brush-size width. Onto these she then painted the animating dots, accepting any chance drip or splatter in the doing, before laying them out in various arrangements and pasting them onto the small gesso-primed and canvas-covered cards. As part of her resource material she also used the myriad incidental notes and jottings she made day by day: observations of nature and the landscape, and records of her visits to frescoes, churches and museums, that served as both diary and visual memoranda. Directly from these came many of the actual colour combinations she used. As the work went on, so the cutting and sticking of these coloured strips and blocks came to include canvas elements too, for she still had with her several rolls of painted canvas scraps that she had kept after the disposal of her London studio. These supplied in particular the basic working material for the *Uccelli* series, which was developing alongside the *Last Conversations*.

Indeed, along with those abstracted connotations of speech or music, the *Last Conversations* series also clearly carries with it associative suggestion of other and more physical kinds, geological strata, perhaps, or crop marks and cultivation patterns, slices through fruit or roots, or of seeds and microbes beneath the microscope. Of the two, however, it is very much the *Uccelli* group that is the more obviously suggestive of landscape as such, in both a particular and a general way. The format is more various, less schematic, less insistent. The constituent blocks of colour, though conforming to roughly rectangular a model, are wilfully inexact. The thought of a geometry is there, but the hand has moved. Edges are ragged and far from straight. Threads peep out. Cut from the old canvas, these elements remain as they were, with no further painted inflection, modification or addition. The colours are the colours of the earth, and of nature: green and blue, yellow ochre, terracotta, purple, black. And the thought is rather of the organic, practical chequerboard of ancient fields or strip systems, laid out before us as on the hillside across the valley or on an old map, or as may be in the background of a Uccello or Piero, deceptively higgledy-piggledy as though worked for generation upon generation, time out of mind. These are paintings gently but richly seductive, as much of the imagination as of the senses, and they are beautiful things.

It is, nevertheless, the thought that comes out of this work, and not description. In New York in 1978, Jenny Durrant came upon the work of the American painter of the earlier 20th century Arthur Dove, and felt an immediate affinity for what he had to say of the nature and importance of the painting of ‘ideas’. He spoke in particular of the ‘essential spirit’ of an object

or situation. He wished his abstractions be concrete and independent experiences and not refer back to any other object for their meaning. Dove spoke too of 'extraction', in resisting 'abstraction' in its conventional art-critical usage. Perhaps we should all come back simply to using 'abstraction' in its truer and literal sense, of a 'drawing from', a taking of what we know or need.

As long ago as 1980, in relation to a show she then had at the Museum of Modern Art at Oxford, she was citing Max Beckmann too:

In Art, everything is a matter of discrimination, address and sensibility, regardless of whether it is modern or not... If you really have something to say, it will always be evident, therefore do not shy away from tears, from despair, and the torment of hard work... it is worth your while to sweat a bit... If you love Nature with all your heart, new and unimaginable things in Art will occur to you; because Art is nothing but the transfiguration of Nature.

Such precepts are, as they have always been, instinct in every painting that Jenny Durrant ever makes.

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