

Some thoughts on the paintings of Gareth Lloyd.

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The paintings of Gareth Lloyd make one inescapable demand that the viewer be in their presence. By this I mean that, in an age when mechanical reproduction has given way to the proliferation of digital media, Gareth Lloyd's work needs always to be seen in its original, unmediated state. Catalogue reproductions fail to capture the active tension of the paintings surfaces. It is as much what has been effaced from those meticulously prepared surfaces that counts when it comes to experiencing the paintings. So this is not to make a plea for that unfashionable notion of engagement with the hand of the artist, but to make a more urgent plea for engagement with the eye of the artist. Gareth Lloyd plays with iconography, but the icons at its heart are not those of classical painting, they stem instead from the kind of imagery that has become iconic merely because of the role it has played in all our everyday histories. A fragment of mountain is instantly recognisable as belonging to the logo of Paramount Pictures. We do not need to see the film company's name, nor even to register the band of stars that is sweeping up to take its familiar form of a haloed constellation such as was once found in depictions of the Virgin Mary. Films and film stars of the past are conjured by that simple fragment of mountain; theirs were the faces and figures that peopled our visual landscape in the way that saints and mythological gods once peopled the visual landscapes of earlier generations. The silver screen was the canvas that most enchanted us and on which we gazed for hours at a time. It was our Twentieth Century fix. But Gareth Lloyd does more than tease us with fractured cinematic memories and, as the title of one of his works makes clear, he is very conscious of moving forward, leaving the last century behind. He draws on collective memory to arm us for the future and he adds other references, connects with other art forms, to present us with time as a continuum through which we shift as surely as it does. If images of dead or ageing stars captured in their youth have a vitality that still thrills us it is because they operate outside of, or alongside time itself. They have become enduring symbols of qualities we wish to find within ourselves. Some of the faces and forms lodged in Gareth Lloyd's art will be immediately recognisable, others are not so they are deliberately anonymous but they, too, become symbols with bodily positions or stray gestures that are generically identifiable with coded attitudes. Their alienated positions on Gareth Lloyd's canvases remind us of their strength in combating a hostile world. In the same vein, the other artists that Gareth Lloyd evokes refuse to be confined by time. The poet Mallarmé, for example, produced work which seeps into our own age and challenges it anew. He teaches us that silence is never absolute, that an absence suggests a missing presence his metaphors, which seemed poignant at the time of the First World War, seem even more apposite now, after the Holocaust, the Killing Fields, the Twin Towers; and as we steel ourselves for the next shockwave which will attempt to shatter that notion of human innocence we still cling to so tenuously. All loss, no matter the scale of events in which it occurs, is an intimate affair. So those metaphors are pertinent for those private deaths that do not happen in a public context. Gareth Lloyd's paintings, no matter how closely they connect with public events, are surely private works. The delicacy of their apparently robust surfaces requires close attention. They are sombre in character and yet, paradoxically, they have a brilliance that forces its way through them, passes over each surface like a ray of sunlight and is then submerged again within it. Catching that brilliance is one of the unexpected delights of looking at the work.

Again, it is not a delight that shows itself in reproduction. So we return to the surfaces although not in the fetishistic, Clement Greenberg way for each surface rewards examination. The most obviously accessible of Lloyd's paintings (I speak for myself, as these are, I repeat, private works) is Vanishing Points. Here we see the Paramount summit in full, although the name is still missing and the stars are still in flight. To its left is a sheet of graph paper pencilled with perspective lines and, further left, chalk marks sketch rudimentary perspective on the graphite and masonite ground. One could imagine an early artist attempting to second-guess Giotto with his representation of a neighbouring mountain; or, yet again, a prehistoric architect, aware of nature's grace, seeking to design a towering height of his own with the Paramount image standing for the final refinement of his design, realised several millennia later. But the interplay between the three vertiginous designs is richer than that, and lends itself to deeper contemplation. There is a deliberation in Lloyds placing of an appropriated image, his addition of a careful line or a seemingly negligent run of oil or water. So it is with the images, signs and symbols he creates and then erases perhaps many times over. Every surface has borne so many things that we can no longer see but whose absent presence, or present absence, is contained deep within it. Each painting is a palimpsest bearing testimony to its own history. At times, it may even seem like one of those stone slabs, found in ancient sites, which bear the markings of several civilisations. Through these we can trace our way back through time, then return to trace the development of human language in a manner that leads us back to our origins but also points directly to our living present, our unborn future. Nothing that has lived ever dies, something that is unborn is by no means dead. Gareth Lloyd has an internationalist outlook. The absence of clear, readable images (the presence, instead, a kind of anti-image) is not a denial, it is an embrace. If it connects with the poetry of Beckett and Mallarme, so it connects with those non-European art forms which, in their pure abstraction, replace images with traces of a thousand individual gestures many of them mathematical or calligraphic gestures that measure and describe the world but never seek to reproduce it. Every one of Lloyd's canvases is worked, mined even, as fully as a seam of coal. Each dark, organic mass yields signs of its own, lived existence. Each surface maps an interior landscape and, for this reason, a real engagement with the paintings surfaces is necessary.

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