

## HUGO GUINNESS: NEW WORK by Deborah Needleman

Hugo Guinness's paintings retrieve, as if from a collective memory, moments that would otherwise be lost, remaining unnoticed, and unheralded. These forgotten moments were destined to pass without notice, mostly because they are minor and domestic—a woman sitting alone in a chair, two women having a cup of tea across a table at a restaurant, a man watching the telly in a room with good art. And yet they resonate with meaning that is closely held—in gestures, placement, in the empty space between two people, in repose, in silence, in boredom even.

These are personal paintings that draw on images, scenes and memories of the artist's own childhood. Many cull from a fairly rarefied realm, depicting an upper class English world laden with manners, mores and privilege. In one painting, a woman in an evening gown fondles a diamond necklace, in another, a woman is seated on her bed where a housekeeper has just entered, and in another with her back to us, a woman sits before her dressing table either preparing for an evening out or undressing after it. It is also a world where much remains unspoken, where loneliness or thwarted desires are often masked by rectitude, wit, snobbery or drink. The emotion in these works are incisively drawn out by Guinness in the physicality which contains them. It is for this that his memories tug at us in a familiar way, it is as if we too hold these feelings inside us too, because we do.

Guinness paints without aggression. His style is expressive not of some effort to take his brush stroke out into the world, in the manner of the great man artist, but rather to bring the world to us with it. The paintings are also small in scale, making them intimate objects in themselves—we must go to them; they do not shout at us from across the room. While he paints a world that formed him, it is also one that he left when he decided to make his home in New York some twenty years ago. Yet, there is great tenderness in the way he renders his subjects, a tenderness that he bestows upon them.

There are essentially two groups of paintings here—interior scenes, full of abutting color and pattern in the manner of Vuillard or Matisse, and exterior scenes with nudes, set in a natural world untouched by man, that owe more to the Romantics or Transcendentalists. The interior paintings regard surfaces, settings, fabrics. Society and culture are the unseen guests in these paintings, offered in the form of the beauties and lovelinesses that they can confer, but also in the way they can isolate us from ourselves and one another. The only sentient being in this group of paintings that seems truly at peace is a dog. Serenely perched in a Matisse-like setting of dynamic, adjacent patterns, he is the most psychologically resolved of Guinness' subjects—at one in himself and in his surroundings—blissfully free from civilization, and its wretched, glorious, life-affirming discontents.

If the interiors are psychological portraits, the exterior paintings are portraits of the soul. These are mostly nudes in a landscape free from human intervention, and so removed from the civilizing norms of the worlds we create. These paintings are dreamlike and mythic in subject matter. The colors are delicate, set down with brushstrokes so loose that the figures often seem to be fusing into the landscape around them. These mine the essential emotions of the human condition—longing, desire, love—passions as familiar to the Greek gods as to the lowliest among us. A naked woman reaches for a man not equally naked, and in that fact, you know her desire will never be satisfied. The paintings of single nudes exude the most calm of this group, surrounded only by nature, that neither loves us nor mocks us.

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Guinness only took up oil painting 2 years ago. In the watercolors and linoleum block prints that he has been exhibiting at John Derian's shop in the East Village for the last 18 years, his subject matter also dealt with surface details that might otherwise go unexamined. But the imagery was simpler—toy soldiers, underpants, a Corbusier chair, a record album or a geranium stem. The emphasis was often on the capabilities of line, rather than color. He is best known for his depictions of flowers, their silhouettes, patterns and movement—the slightly wobbly lines that form them are as much the result of the artist's own hand as of his close observation of the subject itself. And indeed in these earlier pictures, Guinness always worked from life—from objects set on his desk or clipped from the garden and stuck in a glass. He could see the end result before him, and knew just what he needed to do to get there.

With this current work in oil paint, there is no such clarity of intention or assurance in the outcome. To begin, late in his 50's, in a new and unfamiliar medium, in which he is no longer painting from life, but from within himself, is a brave and risky proposition. Sometimes Guinness starts with an image he has seen or a recollection, but he has no idea where it will go, how it will resolve itself into a painting. Or if it will resolve itself. "It's like fishing," he says, "sometimes you catch something, but often you don't." What that 'something' he might catch is an emotion that resonates in a hidden truth. Unlike with his lino prints, this truth is no longer just the surface reality of the way, say, a rabbit settles on its wide haunches or a fleshy hyacinth stem gives out and falls over, but something deeper. That two ladies taking tea across a table at a restaurant or a woman alone at a bar with her legs just a little too far apart should take hold inside of us and speak to us in the places we don't often share with others, is the surprise gift of these works. "These are intimate moments we all know: brief encounters, ennui, lovers," he says. "Life is full of poetic moments, but not always the ones we think of."