

A Light Rain Falling - Notes on the work of Sharon Poliakine.

Cyclamens are plentiful in Sharon Poliakine's work, they appear across her drawings, painting and prints. They hang in arches, gather in abundant clusters, and appear as fields and curtains of flowers. There are drawings and paintings where the intertwining flowers, stalks and leaves combine with other objects and loop into fragile and beautiful wreaths - mournful laments for the dead. Compared to Ellsworth Kelly's lithographs of cyclamens, which convey the soft voluptuous forms of the flowers through a smooth and continuous line. The briar like line of Poliakine's tangled necklaces carries an altogether different charge, sensitive and agitated, the broken line snags the eye. Her flowers seem wilder more disarrayed, their fragile blooms withered and fallen.

Do these breaks in the edgy line of her drawings correspond to the intervals between looking and drawing, marking the artist's glance, revealing the connection between her eye and hand. Poliakine's practice is rooted in the lived and perceived world and she makes drawings from life. She drew cyclamens through several seasons and like Moshe Gershuni before her, and to whom, in some sense, she is paying homage, these flowers are images for the fallen. In Chaim Guri's poem *Bab al-Wad* cyclamens grow on the spot where soldiers have fallen in battle; the soldiers transformed into flowers. In several of the paintings the artist inverts and resurrects the cyclamens so they stand erect and triumphant - like 'soldiers with swords'. The cyclamen then, is both a symbol of transience and regeneration.

Poliakine's first love was printmaking and in particular etching and this practice is rooted in her very being. Its central importance is made clear in her large oil paintings *Rain and Wind*, (2008) and *An Image I Have Gained Honestly* (2008), both of which rework a 16th C engraving of a printmaker at work in the workshop. The printmaker whose long hair and haloed head is just one of the artist alter egos, or disguised self portraits. The expressive possibilities of printmaking informs the artist's approach to painting. She has said 'I think my first painting was an attempt to imitate covering a metal plate with an oily liquid that drips down, like in the process of printmaking.' The artist is interested in the quality of a line, which in etching is open to chance and surprise, dependent as it is on so many variables; on the pressure of the hand, the depth of the groove in the plate, the room temperature, the strength of the acid, and on the type of paper employed. And the line itself has a physicality, scratched in metal and filled with ink. In order to achieve equally physical lines in her paintings, which carry no trace of the brush, Poliakine uses 'nicols' plastic sandwich bags' which she fills with paint and squirts through a hole in the corner, icing the surfaces of her paintings in thick bodily lines.

The artist has an intensely physical relationship with her paintings, she begins a new painting by enacting a kind of trauma on its surface, she almost attacks it smearing its entire surface with paint. She says the most important thing is 'that there is no part of the painting I haven't touched.' This sensitized wounded surface becomes the ground on which the painting is built; sometimes the surface of a painting appears like a raw exposed skin which is then tattooed with a delicate line drawing, in others the painting surface is built up in layers, which are then carved and tunnelled into. Poliakine's paintings register a physical and psychical process, they are a result of a labour, one might say she farms her paintings in the way that Auden spoke of the poet WB Yeats farming his verse.

At the time of the second Intifada Poliakine painted an expressively turbulent and stormy seascape in muted mixtures of black, white, green and red, entitled October (2000). In the same year she made Field III, (2000) a dark painting whose brown undulating terrain seem to swells, fall, stretch and roll as if subject to some seismic turmoil, discharging a feeling of growing pressure and volatility, a kind of emotional barometer of an unstable time. It recalls both the expressive tumult of Van Gogh's fields as well as the hot claustrophobic internal space that is Matisse's Red Studio. In other more tightly controlled abstract paintings the artist has employed one of her home made tools consisting of seventy paintbrushes fixed in a row by being attached to two strips of wood. With this tool she has ploughed the painting into regular furrows or stripes of black, yellow, green, as well as fleshy pinks and reds - a wounded field where body and earth seem to merge. A rich comparison might be made with Anselm Kiefer's war ravaged landscapes.

The artist is intimately involved with her materials and subjects, she could never simply appropriate images or ideas in any direct way, instead she needs to make things her own, and earn the right to use them. It seems that whatever enters her paintings has to pass through the eye of the needle, which is her studio and become part of its evolving landscape. Whether it be a battle painting by Uccello, known through its reproduction in a book that makes up part of the physical landscape, or the broken and discarded things that have fallen out of use -the detritus that belongs to the practice of painting, tubes of paint, bits of a tin, broken ceramic plates, pencils, squeegees, paintbrushes, as well as other things, sticks of cinnamon, bits of wood, dried twigs, and string. She gathers together these bits and pieces and out of them constructs her highly evocative and fragile painting/objects.

When these poetic humble bundles of odds and ends are translated into drawings and paintings they seem through some visual alchemy to produce a resonance with other images, so that the curve of a piece of fern, a squeezed out tube of paint, a rectangular wooden block, twigs and pencils, all tightly bound together with string, might echo the tortured, hanging and fallen figures of Goya's The Disasters of War series. Poliakine has the knack for making things speak and for producing a visual reverberation; she like to make links; visual, verbal, and across time.

There are paintings in which luminous vaporous fields of colour are stamped with a delicate line drawing, or articulated by a fence of straight lines, or whose soft muted veils seem to exhale ghostly figures. There are paintings in which the fragments of figurative drawings seemed to emerge out of and then become subsumed in a sea of soft muted colour, as if they had been washed away, dissolved, their fragments dispersing, like a dream that slips away on waking. The bold black line drawings of lights, electric wires and sockets in Nocturnal Portrait (2004) are obscured by a veil of liberally applied yellow paint, colour and line are unshackled and the freed colour brings a bright luminosity to the painting but in a way that adds to the uncanny feeling of looking at something dangerous, secret and covered up. Poliakine explores the relations between line and colour, figuration and abstraction, and her paintings reveal painting and drawing as different kinds of action, which entail shifting speed's, intensities and levels of engagement.

Around the time of the second Lebanon War Poliakine began a remarkable series of war

paintings drawing on the battle paintings of old masters such as Paolo Uccello and Piero Della Francesca. The Missing Person (2007) is a reworking of a battle scene where the artist has distilled the original image into a highly complex black line drawing rendered in exquisite detail whose emotional tone is given by the all-over red colour that unifies the image as both body and ground. It is a variation on an original, so when looking at the image there is the simultaneous experience of recognition and misregistration, of seeing something already known yet somehow new. Her images often feel made and unmade their resolution provisional. The title of the painting Rain and Wind, (2008) refers to the irregular almost wind-blown fine slanting black lines that cross the image of the master printmaker at work. These lines both activate the image and slice it apart, there's a sense of distance of not being able to get close enough, of not knowing how far you are in front of the it, and the eye cannot rest on the image but skids nervously across it. Poliakine deftly uses all kinds of distancing devices to keep the image beyond reach and beyond stasis.

In more recent works Poliakine seems to be recasting her vocabulary of images so that cyclamens, the print-maker recast as an ascendant angel, pumpkins, birds, may combine within a single work. These paintings are sometimes so densely layered as to appear almost abstract. In other works where the images appear more emphatic less veiled they often seem to hover in the picture plane, floating before the eye retaining their uncanny mystery.

Looking at Poliakine's paintings engenders the palpable and physical experience of recognising but not precisely remembering something, like having a word on the tip of your tongue, a liminal experience of something on the edge of memory. And they stimulate the active desire to bring it to mind, to pull it into focus, to restore and reinscribe it, to make a link, to remember. And then, as if, by some act of grace or a trick of the light an image momentarily aligns and the bits of wood, fragments of plate and the row of squeezed out tubes of paint, tightly bound together, speak of slaves shackled together on a ship, of the vanquished, the injured, and the lined up body bags after the count.

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(all Sharon Poliakine quotes from conversation with the artist 2010)