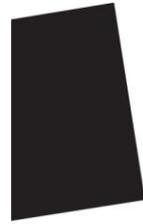


Chantal Joffe

Interview

22 May- 10 July 2004



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Sacha Craddock: You have always been a figurative painter, but the result here seems to be totally about the play between physical reality and imagery.

Chantal Joffe: It was brilliant to have nine paintings to do. I could explore, one could be rough, one could be muddy, no single painting had to carry everything. I had a fixed length of time to make them, although in a way they made themselves. I worked completely on my own. No one has visited the studio. You get involved in them and they evolve, so there is no connection to any preconceived idea.

It was not all as I had imagined. I had thought maybe billboard scale. with ideas of the American artist James Rosenquist, or big like an Alex Katz painting. I looked at Gustav Klimt and had imagined that they would be thinly painted in the way that everything falls away at the bottom in some of his works. But in the end it all lies in the heaviness of the paint not in the lightness. I don't like the lack of commitment to a mark. I was looking at Philip Guston, often visiting his exhibition at the Royal Academy, and realised that that was the way to paint.

It is everything you have ever dreamt of, the black of the swimming costume, the big planks of paint. The big dark or light areas become almost more important than the figure. The colour ground I had originally planned soon got destroyed. I would mix up a bucket of yellow, and start by laboriously filling in. I had forgotten the physicality; I hadn't made a big painting, with a large figure, in 6-7 years.

SC: You are used to making much smaller paintings which at some level allow a controlling overview of what you make and do. It has to be admitted that at a basic level size does matter; here it affects a different process for you and a different experience for us.

CJ: Painting the heads up on the scaffolding meant that I was incredibly close to them. Everything becomes cubist, abstract, distorted. It was like painting in the dark, almost Zen. They work in different ways. The woman on the beach, for instance, is so wrong. Her sausagey legs are wrong but somehow the paintings reach a moment where they have to be that, where they have their own life.

You have to be quite fast up the scaffold and speed becomes a big part of the making, there is a real momentum. The fastest you go the more you loose yourself. They have to have that flow to



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them or they die. Like the paper cut outs I worked from initially as a way of deciding the imagery, they could become static. The physicality of working on a scaffold, day by day, was fantastic. I felt free and they do seem really natural. It can only happen through scale, on BA I painted with a lot of paint, on large canvases and that desire for sheer lushness never goes away. I know so much more through painting at this scale.

When I finally get down and pull the scaffolding and stand back and see what I have done, only then do I see it may be wrong. Then I have to go back and scrape it off. They don't become precious objects; there is nothing frilly about them. I am always thinking in my mind I will get back to this or that but then another thing interesting happens. A line may be right but it does not meet with its fellow on the other side, the paintings have their own internal logic- otherwise they can look coy.

SC: What would you say is actually happening in these paintings? Are they portraits?

CJ: I don't want to tell a story; the paintings I like best become abstract at some level. These are much more factual, much less illusory. No narrative creeps in.

SC: How involved do you get with the characters? I like to think of your paintings as invented portraits where the slightest scrap of photographic information evolves into a tangible but plausible person.

CJ: That ebbs and flows. Sometimes it is all about a colour – a black or brown-black, then shadow. One can look a bit sly, but that eye is wrong. Perhaps one looks “quite John Updike”, and I think; she is the bitter woman in *Marry Me*, perhaps later there is a sense of slyness, a sexual olderness, whatever that is.

There were days when I thought they are going to fall on me, crush me. The physicality is a huge part of the excitement. I can't judge them in any way. I can only judge them by how exciting they were to make.