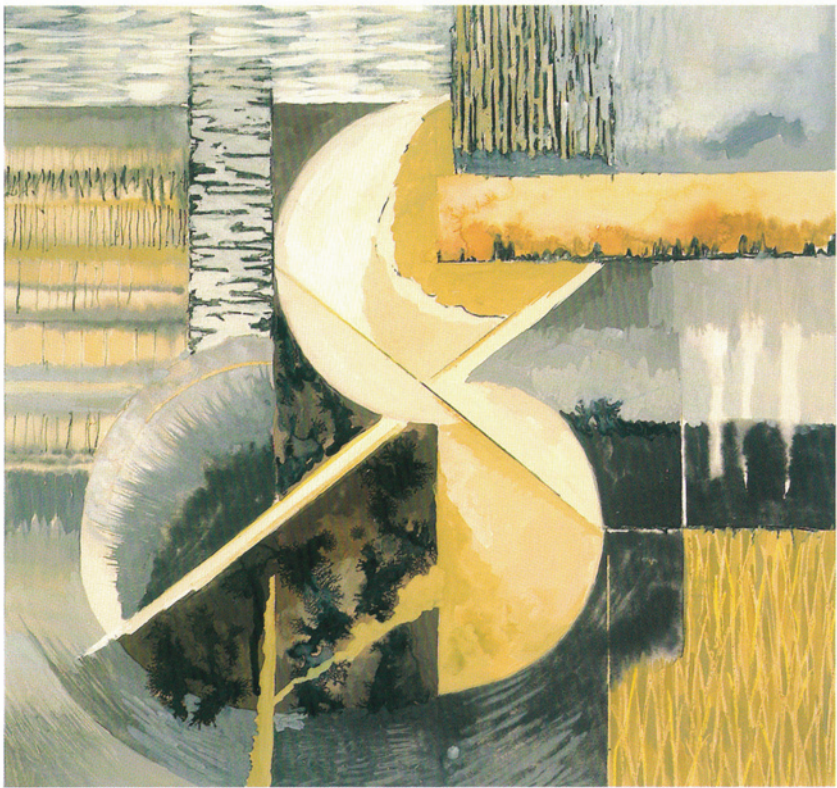




RACHEL FENNER



Through dark furrows 2001

Gouache 42 x 44cm

Rachel Fenner's work has always been characterised by her sense of the way in which a tiny detail can stand for the whole. As far back as the late 1970's when she was making intricate and large-scale sculptural installations, a single element would often display not only the wide range of cultural reference but also that quality of wayward and yet still essentially rational structure which characterised the whole. Twenty five years later nobody could ever argue that she has not made the most of her exceptional energies: she has accomplished a truly impressive range of public work, often occupying very large spaces and invariably with the bulk of the work carried out entirely by herself. It is easy to see why for the last ten years or so she has turned to painting as a counterpoint to, or possibly relief from, the long hours of physical labour on site. But it would be a mistake to think of her paintings as any kind of soft option. The briefest glance confirms that they are as marked by that fierce sense of struggle as any of her sculptures or environmental designs. In fact in some ways the process of making the paintings probably represents not only a more intimate but also in a sense a more testing challenge, as the only person she has to satisfy is herself.

Unlike her sculpture however, in which a variety of influences including Baroque, Japanese and even Celtic may commingle, her paintings are rooted very firmly in the tradition of twentieth century British Romantic landscape painting. The most important predecessor is Paul Nash. What she shares with this artist is a highly developed sense of *genus loci*, which of course brings with it a strong awareness of the cycles of the seasons. The result is that although the language of the paintings is unmistakably twentieth century, the atmosphere generated by them belongs to no particular epoch but seems to allude both to the past and possibly to the future. These paintings are about places she has known all her life, in particular Dorset and



Breaking through 2000

Gouache 29.5 x 30.5cm



Flight to mountain 2001

Gouache 29.5 x 30.5cm

west Wales. Interestingly, although she is drawn to the landscape of south-east Spain and Andalucia, where she has been going in the summer for some fifteen years or so, it is only recently that she has been able to make paintings from the experience.

Her paintings make patterns, which we will sense immediately are related to the appearance of the natural world. The shape of all of them is square, which means that the vertical is as prominent as the horizontal, so that our inclination to see a landscape within a rectangular format is thwarted. In fact quite soon we see beyond this quasi-abstract collection of shapes and start to perceive the parts as pictures of things that we know. In other words they begin to function as images - although they may relate as much to sensations as things - and these are images which are linked not only to the experience of the painter but to anyone who has walked through the wilder parts of Britain.

What we have is not the romantic excess of the sublime but the experience of a landscape of sun and showers, where the reflection in a puddle is as telling as a range of mountain peaks. Each painting is like a small kaleidoscope of images dealing with shifting lighting effects. We are made to feel as if we are in a landscape where the weather changes from minute to minute, mountain to valley, hilltop to hilltop. At the same time the particular effect might originally have been seen as the reflection in a pane of frosted glass or possibly a car mirror filmed with ice on a bitter winter morning. Often the representation is fleeting and ambiguous. It could be a row of trees on a dark skyline or perhaps a line of shadowy water plants waving in the depths of a mountain stream. In the same way a tracery of grey-blue lines could equally be the pattern of the cracking on a sheet of brackish ice or the leafless boughs of a silver birch against the sky. It is clear that the paintings do fall broadly into two groups, according to whether the colour is hot or cold and that this corresponds pretty much



Ice Tracks 2000

Gouache 42 x 43.5cm

to the seasons evoked. For example in *Scorched Fields*, the scratched area of pale yellow shades though to deepest ochre, in a way which seems to allude to the dry stalks and cracked earth left behind after harvest. Whereas the title *Breaking Through* may refer to the rays of the sun but the overall atmosphere seems to me to be generated by the icy blue of frozen ponds and wintry skies. Paul Nash talks about 'using colour as a kind of chromatic percussion' and the phrase seems appropriate here.

The square format and underlying grid gives the paintings a cohesion, which allows individual forms to emerge, sometimes with dramatic results. Peering into the surface we may imagine not only that we see vapour rising or water trickling but also other more acrobatic events taking place. On occasion the imagery is violent, even shocking, as in the red gash that seeps like a wound in *Transfigured Fields*. Here the land seems very strongly to act as metaphor for suffering. In others the repetition of elements within the grid creates a feeling of slower movement, akin to the remorseless change of natural weathering and erosion. And increasingly we become aware of the way in which the forms have also been drawn out of the behaviour of the paint, so that an organic process has been set up within the space of the painting, almost as a kind of microcosm of the world outside.

The aim of the artist in her own words is that 'the emotion evoked by the landscape is released and freed from the expectations of imagery'. I think she achieves this but what I find remarkable about this work is the way in which it conveys the wildness of the natural world whilst retaining a relatively tight structure. These paintings are so fresh that they seem almost alive.

RACHEL FENNER
New Paintings
5th - 22nd December 2001



Snake Dance I 2000

Gouache 29.5 x 30.5cm

PRIVATE VIEW
Tuesday 4th December 2001, 5.30-8.30pm

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