



RACHEL FENNER



Dinas Fach, 1998

Gouache 41.5 x 59 cm

Rachel Fenner is a sculptor who also makes paintings. This simple fact may however seem surprising to those who walk into this exhibition with no prior knowledge of her work. Her command of the medium is assured and it is only on close examination that one becomes aware of the strong sculptural sense that underpins the construction, even of what seems to be a swirling fantasy. Throughout there is an awareness of the great mass of an ancient landscape, even as the slabs of colour are pieced together to conjure up a surface which is always subject to the changes wrought by the seasons and the light.

Although none of the paintings are actual 'views', they are very much the result of an intimate and long standing involvement with specific parts of Britain, namely Pembrokeshire and Dorset. It is from Wales that the rock forms derive, with the very particular geology of its coastline, manifested in intricate layers of stratification and strange folded rocks. Despite the harshness of the forces which have brought about the erosions and the landfalls, which at times have meant that parts of the cliff have simply slid off sideways, the shapes of the massive boulders in these paintings are noticeably sensuous – the edges are softened, at times almost blurred. In a couple of the paintings the paths and the vegetation seem to have fused, giving rise to ribbons of white which cluster like capillaries running across flesh. Some passages evoke the sodden marshiness of long periods of heavy rain, while in others we catch the brittleness of the dry scrub of a good summer.

This textural variety of course depends on the handling of the medium. Gouache is a liquid that dries fast. Too much fiddling and the picture goes dead and these pictures convey a sense of the exhilaration of the process. But the artist has devised her own way of dealing with the bits that do go wrong and to my mind some of the most interesting are the collages, in which the best parts from different works have been cut up and pasted together in new ways. In *Framed Landscape* a crimson right angle is an abstract sign in itself but is made to function both as the



Framed Landscape, 1998

Gouache 15 x 22 cm

link between two disparate parts and as the central axis of the composition; while on the left the white flurry of a torn edge seems almost to be letting in the air. Equally experimental in a different way is *Yellow Waterfall*, Centred in which a kind of refractive circular structure has been imposed on the centre, giving a sense that the artist has used a lens to focus on her point of interest. This is perhaps the flattest of the pictures.

Although the language of the paintings has its roots in cubism, and it is clear that the tension has to be held right across the picture plane, there is almost always a sense of natural and logical recession, reminding us again of the fact that the artist is also a maker of objects, both small and very large. The colours are beautiful: salmon with lemon and lavender and flesh, sage green set beside celadon and palest grey. But again it seems to me that they are never purely decorative but instead are used also to inform us about space and distance and the light.

What is most impressive though about these small paintings is the way they make one increasingly aware of the depths of her passion for the landscape. Her responsiveness to the force of the elements seems to shimmer through the little patches and dabs of colour. Her pictures have a gutsiness which is often absent from larger and more elaborate works. One can imagine that she is a person who could stand for hours in freezing water and who would thoroughly enjoy a storm. But the moods of these paintings, which almost seem to be pushed towards us, are essentially not so much human as to do with nature. For most of us today our relationship with nature is to do with the scenic effects we experience on a day trip. These paintings remind us of a time when the effects of the weather and the passage of the seasons really mattered.

There is a quality of foreboding in some of the images, which is perhaps most evident in the pictures of the sea. There seems always to be an awareness of the potential brutality of a storm which could become a gale. Even in an outwardly peaceful scene, the dark patches of shadow



Yellow Waterfall, Centred, 1998

Gouache 29.5 x 41.5 cm

communicate a rhythm which is tugging forcefully at the rocks. One group were provoked by a strange incident when she and some friends thought they saw a mirage of an island with spouts of water erupting from an otherwise calm sea. There is apparently a meteorological explanation for the phenomena but what matters in this context is the magical quality of the works she produced as a result. A tiny whirlpool whips across the surface, evoking a sense of prescience which evokes the mythological.

Looking back over the photographs of her last exhibition, it seems that her images have become less fanciful and possibly more firmly rooted in the spirit of the place. At the same time however it is obvious that the paintings are not just to do with observation, however empathetic. Indeed the imaginative component is *the* most important. And is the way in which nature has acted as the catalyst which links the work most securely to the work of other British artists, in particular Paul Nash and Graham Sutherland. To my mind she has more in common with Nash in terms of the feeling of the work, even though the language of her forms is more wholly modernist. William Blake is another British artist who comes to mind; this may seem a rather odd comparison but there is something of the same emotional intensity, manifested most obviously in the strangeness of the light.

Fenner's sculpture, both public and private, draws on a wide reference to other cultures. In contrast her paintings are unmistakably British, lodged with in the Romantic tradition of jubilation and damnation which is such a strong part of our own culture. What both her paintings and her sculpture have in common is an obduracy and a toughness which informs even the most lyrical. These little pictures betray a passion and an involvement with forces which most of us choose to ignore. The experience they offer should prove exhilarating.

Fenella Crichton

RACHEL FENNER

Recent Paintings

29th July – 21st August 1998



Rock Landscape and Winter Light, 1998

Gouache 29.5 x 41.5 cm

PRIVATE VIEW

Tuesday 28th July 1998, 5.30-8.30 pm

Gallery Opening hours: Monday-Friday 11-6 Saturday 10-5

DUNCAN CAMPBELL

FINE ART

15 Thackeray Street, Kensington Square, London W8 5ET Tel: 0171-937 8665