Ruminations: Exhibition Reviews

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PERDITA SINCLAIR: Small Towns

Window Gallery, Phoenix Art Space

15 January – 20 February 2022

Visitors will surely be intrigued by the spectacle of the colourful, carefully and skilfully painted oil paintings that join together under the title of Small Towns, an exhibition from Phoenix Art Space member, Perdita Sinclair. Usefully there are chairs spaced along the broad corridor that encourage people to sit and take stock too. Paintings (especially good ones) deserve prolonged attention rather than the perfunctory or passing glance.

A sequence of eight canvases begins with ‘Pineapple’, which at 165x125cm is the largest work on display. The title is suggestive rather than descriptive as it could just as well allude to a portrait as much as an exotic fruit. But more about titles and interpretations later, for what we do see before us is a figurative painting of a mound of litmus-test-type strips of variously coloured papers. Or are these tickertape off-cuts from the studio floor? They look like discarded fragments purposely gathered together and fashioned into something specific but just out of reach of a clear identity. Also, it’s an inventory of sorts, as if a student painting class has completed a day of mixing colours and these are the results, a fairly comprehensive range of all six primary and secondary colours plus black and white. As an extension to the task of mixing the paints perhaps a still-life has been produced wherein the painted shadows form greys and other tonal varieties of the colours. There are some striped pieces too, including red and white that might be paper bags from a sweet shop. As interpretation creeps into observation of the image one might sense that the coloured papers are hiding something. It might be a pineapple, as the title implies, or a vertically held up thumb or even a portrait of sorts. Is the title a trick? Is our humour being tested? Has the artist literally set something up for the viewer to interpret as they wish?

Perdita Sinclair – ‘Pineapple’ (165x125cm) oil on canvas

Seven more paintings are to follow and questions persist. Each is clearly an original statement but all link somehow. Colour pervades, as does clarity of form and skilful rendering. Are these portraits or still-lifes? Do the generally blue/grey backgrounds suggest skies, distances, neutral space? Are these singular forms still or floating in space? There is no clear external context in the paintings; all content is essentially contained within the implied forms. But let’s not forget the artist and/or the viewer. Could these be self-portraits or mirrors – or both?

Perdita Sinclair – ‘One In Hundreds and Thousands’ (80x60cm) oil on canvas

If the viewer takes in the whole sequence from left to right there is some suggestion of a progression, or morphing, from a still-life type configuration to a portrait of sorts. After ‘Pineapple’, ‘One in a Hundreds and Thousands‘ appears to be a form floating in a sky-coloured atmospheric space. Within and around what might be locks of long flowing hair there are triangles of painted papers or thin card. Some of these fragments are painterly wet into wet renderings that could reference landscape based fragments or abstract compositions. The striped papers are here too. There is a sense of the organic and the geometric making some kind of union. Next, in ‘Along the Coast from Yarmouth’ a similar sort of composite form has come back to earth, or rather an ethereal sea with reflections or submerged forms.

Perdita Sinclair – ‘Along The Coast from Yarmouth’ (80x60cm) oil on canvas

A mixture of flat triangular forms, mostly airborne, and flat on the picture plane slightly undermines a traditional perspectival reading. Predominantly there is a shallow or tightly enclosed space created from the spatial arrangement of the entangled forms in the foreground. A snaking red, blue, yellow and white candy stick at the apex of the arrangement meanders down to, or up from, the base. It is also partly submerged. Likewise, the tricolour ribbon also winds its way from the bottom of the composition to the apex. An echo or reflexion of the red, white and blue form is placed behind this mysterious configuration to suggest some depth and a flattening simultaneously. Solidly rendered, yet flat triangles (X7 white, X5 red, X2 blue and X1 black – for it seems pertinent to count them) float around or penetrate the central mass/form. Unexpectedly, centre-left, a curvaceous form that might be fish or snake skin, or possibly a hand-dyed scarf on a slender shoulder, links top to bottom or head to torso.

‘Inbetween Castles’ is more grounded, and candy-type tubes employing the colours from the paper stripes from ‘Pineapple’ replace the vertical, elongated form of the hair. A flat triangle of colour at the apex of the form is possibly turning into a set-square. Read this more organically and the soft sticks of seaside rock might otherwise suggest intestines. It’s uncanny – by which I mean weird. But not grotesque or creepy weird; more like playful everyday, ordinary, artefacts being open to interpretation and association in the eye of the beholder.

Perdita Sinclair – ‘Inbetween Castles’ (80x60cm) oil on canvas

‘Lickerty Split’, the penultimate image in the sequence certainly does look like a glorious head of long hair. The title suggests doing something quickly, though clearly not the making of the painting. Take a look at Sinclair’s website and you will see that this painting, along with ‘Baskin in Obliquity’ displayed next to it, belongs to her Wave Theory series. Sinclair’s painting titles are fascinating. There is a mixture of deadpan humour and scientific awareness – as provided by this pairing. Natural forces are at work. The small town reference starts to make some kind of sense. Whether we live in a village, town or city we belong to relatively small communities after all.

Perdita Sinclair – ‘Lickerty Split’ (80x60cm) oil on canvas

This selection from Sinclair’s various series of painting themes and projects (she has also produced sculpture and installation events) not only provides evidence of her undoubted commitment to painting but also prompts an intriguing meditation and reflection on what we think and feel about ourselves and our immediate familial situations and the world around us. A brief explanatory wall mounted statement adjacent to ‘Pineapple’, primes and sets up an opportunity for the viewer to see where the imagery might take their expanded thoughts:

My work reflects what I perceive as the dichotomy between the way the human mind confronts complex and serious issues and, at the same time, deals with the trivial ephemera of our everyday lives. I am interested in contradictions and tensions in human nature, which often express themselves through our interaction with the natural world.

Small Towns is an exploration of life cycles within confined spaces. The work is inspired by the geographical restraints that we have lived with which paradoxically turbo charge the mind into thinking about distance, difference and alternate realities. (Perdita Sinclair)

Thereafter the viewer is surely connected with each work beyond the immediate visual impact of the intriguingly titled pictures. As much as we might long for the day that we can forget about the ongoing pandemic that has restricted us physically and geographically, an unexpected benefit might be that we start to appreciate and more fully understand our truly global ecosystem that relies on cooperation rather than unabated competition and nationalistic introspection. Or at the very least, we might take what is near as a fascinating take off point for the imagination. For Sinclair it might be the trivial bits and pieces that one’s children might play with vis-à-vis the bigger issues that concern us.. This is an interpretation of superposition (another of her series of paintings) in which something (or a system) can be in multiple states at the same time until it is measured. It’s certainly the case that if we take the suggestion of the portrait from these paintings we must ultimately place the notion of self or identity within an environment, which can be either physical or metaphysical… but perhaps this is a step too far.

Perdita Sinclair – ‘The Infinite Gobstopper’ (80x60cm) (Photo: Bernard G Mills)

Returning to Sinclair’s work, she does not break with tradition to assert contemporary relevance and context. Despite alternative practices and technologies, painting has much more to say or remind the audience of. At a simple level, subject matter generally splits into and expands the categories of the portrait, still-life or landscape – with, arguably, the addition of abstract art. At a more nuanced and deeper level paintings perform (even when undermining or questioning) within conventions of visual culture, including iconography, aesthetics and culturally shared systems of visual language. Of course, within and beyond the visual arts painting also has to contend with ever developing technologies, particularly since the invention of photography and, far more recently, digital systems and the financially speculative advent of the NFT. But painting persists and potentially slows us down, in a useful self-reflective way.

Walking home from the exhibition, in my own small town, I unexpectedly thought of the work of the 16th century Milanese painter Giuseppe Arcimboldo, a Mannerist artist, who created portraits from a piling up of natural forms, especially flora, vegetables and fruits. The ‘Arcimboldo palindrome’ may also be suggested, whereby the apparent reading of a work is changed, not by turning the canvas through 90 or 180 degrees as the artist ingeniously invented, but by alternative conceptual readings and understandings of an imaginative invention, or inventory, as presented by Sinclair’s work. Intriguing, indeed.

Perdita Sinclair – ‘Baskin in Obliquity’ and ‘Lickerty Split’ (Photo: Bernard G Mills)

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Links:

Perdita Sinclair – https://www.perditasinclair.com

Phoenix Art Space – https://www.phoenixbrighton.org/Events/perdita-sinclair-small-towns/

Giuseppe Arcimboldo – https://www.theartstory.org/artist/arcimboldo-giuseppe/

Also see –

Perdita Sinclair interview in The Organ – https://organthing.com/2022/01/17/13-questions-from-organ-perdita-sinclairs-paintings-are-alive-with-appeal-with-deceptively-soft-ice-creamy-colour-theres-an-undertone-though/

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