

placing. The lens compresses the distance. The mind races. John will never know this (unless he similarly reflects on it). Once seen—even though it is not a mere symbol, and the meaning of the photograph does not reside in it—the cross insists on its place in our understanding, as the white dog watches transfixed, as the long, dark vertical retinal windows of the barn stare back when John moves toward its interior.

Here we have the world without irony. Irony always gets to trump vulnerability. It's always cooler, less discomfiting. It's also overused, contrived. Here, with irony banished, the humor and the strangeness remain, and awkwardness takes on a kind of loveliness. That's one of the things Georgia is doing here: using the known world as a point of departure to ask questions by seeming to accept what is. She's the clever girl detective, on the case—a constant observer in sensible shoes, carrying a camera almost as heavy as one of Uncle John's logs—who believes the past speaks to our future as inevitably as a shooting star speaks to the sky.

Questioning the Quotidian: Trisha Orr's Paintings

TRISHA AND I met in 1975, in Charlottesville, Virginia. Neither of us had focused very clearly on careers; barely at the far side of hippiedom, we didn't even think in such restrictive terms. An interesting experience, to know an artist well and then to see her way of seeing the world.

Through the years, Orr (formerly a photographer) has painted many subjects, from achingly beautiful portraits of individual seashells to flower arrangements that would have intrigued de Heem (updated, with Matisse lurking in the background). Fascinated by easily identifiable, seemingly simple forms, she painted their inner complexity for years, then—like the shell collector she has always been—came to create what is perhaps her most recognizable work: precisely detailed still lifes of antique pitchers and jars spilling forth intricate flowers spun together as if contained within a painterly spiderweb used both to de-

lineate and to further complicate the shapes, colors, and forms, along with bits of branch or leaf, arranged in compositions sometimes so radical, the perspective so deliberately skewed, that you know she has an eye not only for beauty, but for juxtapositions and contradictions. *Would I display flowers arranged that way?* you wonder. Yes, but only if you looked intensely enough and long enough at fanciful disorder to see it expressing something in its own right—stalks bent, petals falling, flower heads almost colliding, the figuration on the vessel commenting with a partial face's ironic eyeroll—rather than presenting us with a bouquet assembled because it represents reassuring aesthetic perfection.

This painter doesn't waste her time reassuring us.

Barry Lopez, in an essay in *Granta*, points out a fault in his way of thinking about describing the natural world. He noticed that his traveling companions sometimes made an "insightful remark" that he would never have thought of, for which he envied them. He pinpoints that envy as "a feeling related not so much to a desire to possess that same depth of knowledge but a desire to so obviously belong to a particular place. To so clearly be an integral part of the place one is standing in." It is a human impulse, which explains everything from selfies to the drowning flood of memoirs published each year. Trisha Orr has attitudes in common with Mr. Lopez, not only in being an adventurer and observer, but in wanting to *belong* to what she sees. The wrinkle? That she sees things as being in flux: the bud bursting into flower, the drowsing flower's head; no reductive, tidy prettiness attracts her eye.

Many of Orr's compositions contain riddles and enigmas, some inherent in what they are (illustrated pages from books, for example), others intuited (from her titles, you'll realize she's a reader as well as a painter). Orr assembles shapes and colors as unexpectedly as Mother Nature—and sometimes they're just as disorderly. That world is visited and revisited, the same objects (containers, vases, fabrics) transformed when seen from a different angle or in different light. There is a startling quality to the paintings, which I think of as both a display and a warning. Orr has a way of suggesting that the inanimate objects she paints are *themselves* startled. They drop a petal or bend under the weight of too-heavy heads in a way that seems analogous to our own fatigue, aging, inability to always stand upright, metaphorically. Time changes these sometimes personified compositions, too (of course). When revisited, or varied slightly, the paintings are recontextualized by how the same props vary when used differently. Cumulatively, you get the message that the vase is only technically inanimate—what it contains are not generic flowers; they are anthropomorphized improvisations of human qualities and tendencies, portrayed as they exist in time.

This painter has a fascination with order and disorder.

There's a constant vibration between what's living and what's artificial, giving us a glimpse of possibly happy or unhappy unifications between similar but ultimately disparate friends (such as elegant flower and weed)—Orr incorporates both emotional possibilities, and is entirely at peace with the literary concept of the pathetic fallacy.

She looks the flower paintings in the eye, even if she places the assemblages here or there, higher or lower. In other words, she's trusting her perception of what is inherent in the objects of her compositions without editorializing or projecting onto them; it's more a matter of being able to be comfortable with discomfort. It would be easier to paint, as she can, straightforwardly, omitting life's contradictions and complexities. It seems to me that she's meeting her match with these still lifes, finding (then taking) her distance only after knowing them, whether choosing a confrontational close-up or backing away (perhaps slowly) to give the impression that she is not there to impose herself on her subject's privacy. The *subject* retains its essence, and also, ultimately, pride of place; the artist's sensibility doesn't predominate. It's an even—and glorious, sometimes funny, clashing, colorful, even pitiful—playing field.

At first, I didn't see where Trisha Orr's "Beloveds and Others" series—paintings of her family, relatives, and friends—could be placed in her painterly trajectory, though I recognized them as uniquely hers. I was drawn to them because I have my own emotions about many of the people she depicts. As we all know, babies, cats, and dogs always steal the show, so it's better to keep them out of the picture/novel/wedding reception. But how could she do that with her muse, Georgie the dog? To say nothing of her husband, Greg Orr, her daughters, Eliza and Sophie, and their mates?

Eventually, I realized she was working to keep the instantly recognizable quality of a grabbed moment by not orchestrating her compositions, in the same way she'd

organized her still life compositions. In both cases, the painter does not exclude anything for being singular or an anomaly. Ever the photographer she started out to be, Orr is making painterly records of ordinary moments that would have been missed if she hadn't immediately taken a picture. People's expressions flicker more quickly than the way light changes a shadow cast on a wall, or the late-afternoon sun irradiates an unseen color in the upholstery for only a second before passing by, leaving the object as we've usually seen it. With a quick iPhone snapshot, she has at least the chance of returning to these moments, eventually, with the painter's eye.

Yet it wouldn't be accurate to suggest that this painter is distant or absent; these aren't models—this is her life.

For someone who can paint with photorealistic precision, these new paintings are brushy, scabby, and seem to rely on unexpected glimpses of routine moments. One way of thinking about them might be that Orr is determined to keep out an awareness of mortality. If you were lucky enough to have her show you her paintings before they were hung on a gallery wall, you'd see her carrying them the way a mother cat carries her kitten, by the neck, then plopping it on the floor. Seeing them this way, you'd see the hurried, unorchestrated initial composition before you gradually registered the alternation between specificity and detail and noticed the gestural paint strokes, the tension or cohesion (not mutually exclusive) in the dynamic between the subject's depiction and the means the painter has used to suggest *her* vision. I love Orr's painterly scribbles, her shorthand for conveying that certain things

belong to the language of painting, brushstrokes that can be quite funny in their irreverence, like mini-tantrums.

The paintings appear to be seen-on-the-run, or (at least in pretense; an artist can't alter her eye, whether actively composing or not) too casual to be mistaken for definitive. Might that stance, too, be a way of distancing thoughts of mortality? Throughout her work, Orr's been moving toward a complex vision with the pretense of not judging the moment. In *Poet in the Afternoon*, we feel we're looking at an incidental composition, which just happens to be of her husband of forty years, with his neck and head rising out of a green mountain of sweater, his amazing eyebrows echoing the peaks of nature we don't see inside the room (at least, they're enigmatically raised because of *something*). They're not easy paintings. In theory, there's no resistance to taking them in ("Oh, there's Greg!"); it's just that you can't get out of those paintings as easily as you got in.

They may seem photographically straightforward, offering us a moment in which someone's pose is "natural"; that's part of the painter's trickery. The more you look, the more you sense the artist's personality in her way of recording with her medium, paint. Orr occludes, scribbles, obscures. Far from this being dismissive, though, I see it as a willingness to show us both the underpinnings of her art and its surface. And it's on the surface—where painting, as opposed to literature, so obviously *does exist*—that slowly we realize we're looking at fondness and fancy, a sure vision of a tenuous thing. What a great paradox. She pretends to be giving us a view into someone's life, just us-

ing what happened to be handy, like grabbing a big spoon rather than a spatula. You might be a little clumsier using the spoon, and it might scratch the pot . . . I won't continue with this implied metaphor. Trisha Orr is painting domestic life in our time.

In literature, it's advantageous to consider subtext: surface and depth, what's happening where. If it's off-the-page, how can it be substantiated? (Answer: Because we're human beings, and we intuit meaning, whether something can be pointed to on the page or in so-called real life, or not. Go ahead: point to love.) The difference between quickly seeing a painting and quickly seeing a text is enormous: a painting registers viscerally all at once: *Ah, a painting of a person*. With a text, time must pass before you know, in the most general terms, what "it" is. (Apologies to Bill Clinton.) But Trisha Orr is a tricky painter. Tricky without being devious. Skilled, because she puts enough into her paintings to seem to be definitive though what it is—besides something that attracted her attention—resists paraphrase.

Looking at *Thanksgiving at Rima's*, you may feel for a moment that yes, there it is, you're taking it all in. Further inspection, though, will reveal more, but basically: it's night in somebody's kitchen, somewhere, there's a lot of food, and it's dark outside. I doubt you get more instant reassurance and orientation than that. The common practice of hanging pots overhead (so sensible! frees up space!) here in Orr's hands makes me think of a storm cloud gathering in the distance. The pans don't just hang; they *hover*. They encroach. The kitchen's glaring lights are their

counterpart; I'm not sure if one of the bits of brightness is a ceiling fan or a second lightbulb, but in any case . . . they're peculiarly painted, again *overhead*. No view out the window because it's night. Your eye cannot escape. This is it, viewer: This is where you're caught, in this kitchen, with these people, all occupying their own space, all with their own stories, recognizable (the embrace) or enigmatic (the figure to the right). We're made voyeurs in this uncomfortable moment, outsiders who've happened into the kitchen during someone else's romantic embrace observing a person who's at the stove, still working diligently on this meal; she has no time to see the embrace, herself (the brushstrokes suggest this; the arms are a blur of motion).

Then there's the figure on the right, clutching his beer bottle. This figure eventually rivets our attention. He's obviously out of tempo, his back turned on young love, drink in hand (with more to be had elsewhere, as the entire painting is about the near insanity of bountifulness). If we look away from the stove, it's with relief that we, personally, aren't at this moment enveloped in steam and expectations. Averting our eyes because we're not supposed to gawk at people expressing affection, we're left with the differently painted, solitary male figure whose eyes are the only ones depicted. His glance is also the only one that looks out. (We look in; he looks out.) However, we can't know what he sees. Our eyes return to what we *can* observe, and it becomes—as our own kitchens become—chaos. There's ridiculously plentiful food (this is America), bowls and serving implements ready to go. The Thanksgiving feast has not yet begun, though all this is

what's required to make it happen, in another room, at another time. This is the moment before 'The Moment, and this painter knows it's much more interesting than seeing people seated at the table.

There are too many ways to interpret *Thanksgiving at Rima's* to enumerate. But by considering the placement of the figures and the eerie quality of the pans-as-storm clouds, as well as the dauntingly bright, overhead lights that seem to glow as bright as the sun, we get a sense of people who exist below, at eye level, who have not created a world in which they're comfortable. The disorder keeps them from relating to one another. They might find themselves having a convivial, even fond moment in another painting, but not in Trisha Orr's.

All along, our jumpy eye movements have been echoed or substantiated by the editorialized, spotlight, painterly hazes (as opposed to the obliterating darkness, which is simply a fact—a very useful fact). It's not a static painting because the woman at the stove is in frenetic motion, but with the other figures, we might be peeking through a keyhole. Theirs are private moments. Enigmatic, unknowable moments. If music played inside these figures' heads, all of them would hear different sounds. Paradoxically, the painter has opened up the room in order to make it claustrophobic. She registers her subjects' lack of relation to one another, rather than inventing cohesion. Ah, the family. The cozy kitchen. Those enormous, too-filling celebratory dinners. It's dark outside, which inherently helps this painting convey meaning. And where do we think the painter is standing? And for how long? Only for a very

brief time: kisses end, the cooking will be done, the male figure on the right will have to spring into action, animated or sedated by his bottle of beer. Better that we stay in this moment, I'd say, peering only into the anteroom of chaos.

In *This Above All*, Orr's point of departure is *Hamlet*, specifically Polonius's last talk with Laertes, which has been somewhat misconstrued because of the current context that says one should be faithful to oneself—"to thine own self be true"—whereas Polonius was actually advising his son, more precisely, about guarding himself. The painter's husband is the fatherly Polonius; their elder daughter, amusingly, a very feminine Laertes. The meal is finished (cutlery on the plates, napkins discarded) and this is when people really talk—not so much during the meal itself. Greg Orr's hand is raised; his daughter Eliza's is relaxed, curled. He gestures, expansively; she receives, slightly closed off. She seems to be a figure from another painting; she seems to exist in another time. Her figure has been addressed differently from her father's. She looks French. Her pink shirt is so feminine; Vuillard with a different palette? Seen in profile, Greg's features are not revealed, whereas Eliza's eyebrows arch quizzically. In the manner of Alex Katz, father and daughter face in each other's direction, though their looks don't connect.

Consider the background (the only other place we can look, after considering the figures): quite brushy, sketchy, yet the walls unify with the tablecloth, as if the walls blend with the set table to make the interior one contiguous entity, energetically depicted, as if in motion. Against this backdrop we notice the hazy strokes atop Greg's head

(thoughts streaking past?) and the more defined, horizontal L shape boxing in the top of Eliza's head (I can't help but notice: she's called Liza). The L shape functions almost as a headpiece, adding to her elegance, while further defining and framing; when that happens, we are in stopped time.

Orr is very good at suggesting haste, haziness, unpredictable unities constructed by similar techniques. She's also very good at directing the viewer's eye, so that on first glance the painting seems to depict very little. That pose (or pretense) is characteristic of her way of looking at things, but just because she's a painter doesn't mean she has no preconceived notions. Often she gives us something predictable: backstage in the kitchen on the night of an annual celebration; two people at meal's end. The paintings might seem to have tossed-off titles, but they're not randomly named. Throughout her "Beloveds and Others" series, she's made telling choices in selecting the dominant figure, painting one figure realistically, and the other nearly caricatured. Knowing our proclivity to want quick decoding of situations and quick answers (the numbing "Have a nice day!"), you must linger with these paintings to see how much selection has gone into their composition.

IN RECENT YEARS, there have been quite a few successful museum shows of "vernacular photography," which is to say, snapshots. Things we look at and think, nostalgically, *Remember when!* This includes not only the shoes we'd once thought fashionable, but also the tree in the front

lawn before it grew. We also look at photographic prints and remember that pictures taken with a Kodak were once that size, black and white, deckle-edged. Back then, photographs were very different. Later, to prove that their composition wasn't the result of recomposing by cropping, photographers used a chiseled negative holder that would leave a black border around the image (See! I got it right! No cheating!) Trisha Orr seems not to be cheating, either, though that might be a fiction. The painting we view or the book we hold always is fiction, because in the second when what is recorded exists, all other possibilities disappear. Or seem to. Sometimes a ghostly presence finds its way in and becomes part of the visual record.

Because she's a serious reader as well as a visual artist, certain stories—whether from myth or from Shakespeare, or from places not nearly so lofty—partially define Trisha Orr's paintings, where her insights are revealed in the choice of imagery, in the composition, and in the distance between the painter and the painting. Protective coloration isn't the same thing as disappearing. I sense her there in the discordant details, in the animated brushstrokes, in the ostensibly casual way she re-creates fleeting moments in time, relying on the viewer to feel the love implied.

The Sirens' Call: Joel Meyerowitz's Photographs

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JOEL MEYEROWITZ IS good at keeping the world at bay. When he's at his studio in Chelsea, the messenger is dealt with instantly, the phone conversation is brief, and when he sits on the quilt-covered sofa to converse, his eyes don't stray to the tall windows that overlook downtown New York. The message machine is turned on. The photographic equipment is nowhere in sight. Anywhere in New York such placidity would be unusual, but here it's entirely genuine.

This is Joel Meyerowitz in the city, knowing the same thing he knows on the Cape. In answer to a question about whether he isn't sometimes annoyed to look through the camera lens and see that something he doesn't want to be part of the picture is present, he says, "Something may be in the way, or you may wish for something, but then you're ruined. If you don't wish,