

ARUSHA

GALLERY

A Quickening Spirit - Paige Perkins

Earlier this year Paige Perkins experienced a rite of passage when she injured her hands and arms in a bicycling accident. She feels now that this symbolic breaking of her means of expression (she could not paint until she had recovered) was part of a crucial process of 'going under' in order to come up again and emerge renewed. Lockdown was a period of darkness for many people, when subconsciously at least a part of them dived deep underground in order to mend and revive, perhaps to discover something within themselves previously untapped. So the role of her accident in the development of her recent work is crucial: something literally happened. As PL Travers, wise woman and author of the *Mary Poppins* books, wrote: 'To remember, one must first forget. To be lifted up, one must first have fallen.'

What is art for? To help us arrive at some degree of understanding of ourselves in relation to the environment, but also to make us aware of our hidden selves, our iceberg depths, the other side of the personalities we present to the world in order to survive. Art is there to explore the known as well as the unknown, the familiar and the unsettling, taking account of our weaknesses and failings as well as our virtues and triumphs. The artist's role consists of giving shape to the unexplained, order to the chaotic, and some sort of definition to the enigmatic or barely apprehended. These are large aims, and each artist can only ever be partially successful in realising them.

Paige Perkins paints nature red in tooth and claw, but it is human nature that she principally studies: humanity revealed through different (often animal) guises. There may be something nasty in the woodshed, but there's worse out beyond the fence at the bottom of the garden, where the wild wood fronts up to supposed civilization. She investigates the treacherous edge of things, speculates on the smile that might be a snarl. In her imagery there is often propinquity that isn't sexual; in fact, sexuality in its obvious modern mode has little place here. Passion is evident though, and a fluid sense of identity.

Moments of vision are unpredictable and incalculable. They come unbidden and vanish equally abruptly. All the artist can do is put herself in a state of readiness and receptivity, and look within herself. Why do these figures and animals, the staffage or *dramatis personae* of her tableaux, need to group and re-group in such significant situations? Incongruity and improvisation are key strategies, as is the juxtaposition of supposedly unrelated components. Her paintings may be unstructured and unplanned, but they find their own logic, their own composition, almost in spite of the freedom offered by the artist. As the painter Dan Coombs has observed of her paintings: 'You do these really awkward compositions that shouldn't work, but they do.'

Perkins listens to a certain kind of music when she's working, nothing that will demand too much thought or distract from her concentration on the act of painting, but what she calls 'trance music'. Such will be the systems or ambient music of Steve Reich and Brian Eno, or even the great blues singer, Bessie Smith. She paints fast with concentrated intensity, not to say ferocity. If she works at a picture for too long, it doesn't tend to get better. Sometimes a painting is quite simply the product of a seven hour session, and then a little more time the next day. 'I have no desire to know what it's about,' she says. The painting simply happens on the canvas, as if Perkins were a conduit for another power, another voice, exercising no conscious control herself. Other artists have spoken of opening themselves up to something outside themselves, and allowing the totally unpremeditated or unexpected to come through. But perhaps in this case it is Perkins' inner self seeking expression. She remains resolute: 'I don't know what I'm doing when I paint and I like it that way. It's kind of uncomfortable.'

However much Paige Perkins might consider herself an unwitting conduit for visions, her image-making on the canvas or paper is inevitably conditioned by her knowledge and experience. Her images are informed by what she has seen and remembered, even if never viewed in the real world and only played on the screen of her imagination. But actually, the make-up of her iconography is more diverse than that, combining elements seen in

other works of art with interpreted ideas and wild enactments. The dreaming mind throws up all sorts of strange and beautiful encounters, and these too feed into the rich stew which is this painter's visual image bank.

'I don't like polite art, and I don't like "perfect". I don't like skill. Art for me has to have something more.' Perkins doesn't want to make things easy for herself. Never forget the fascination of the difficult: we value most what we find hard to achieve. Hence the indirect route is often preferred, not the direct path between two points, as the crow flies, but the mazy road that rambles round the shire, the rolling English road, made (we are reliably informed by GK Chesterton) by the rolling English drunkard. And Paige Perkins, although she is American, had adopted England as her country and cares deeply for its land and legends and its merry roads. Also for its folklore. She recognises and salutes the power in the landscape, the genius loci or spirit of place, especially in Warwickshire where she now works. Her paintings are the work of a pilgrim, someone on the path to understanding — not in a portentous religious sense, but simply in terms of addressing important aspects of her life and identity, and trying to get the best out of them for herself and others.

So, in a sense, all her paintings and drawings are works in progress, totally alive in the present, in a process of becoming. *Guardian*, for instance, is presented as a kind of vignette in an ornate frame or cartouche, the recumbent defender figure with her long painted finger nails (or talons) and her long black beard, which looks rather like a false beard from the dressing-up box, stuck to her chin with gum. What is truth, what make-believe? The cartouche is also an enclosure, as if this potentially ferocious beast is actually penned up and harmless. The blossoms decorating both enclosure and surround suggest a more equivocal role for the beast. Only the haunted face in the upper right quadrant suggests something a little more fearsome.

To take a random sample of her imagery: a cave, a magic mushroom, dreaming heads and moon-faces, an angry androgyne up to its chest in water, a wise owl, snakes ('when serpents bargain for the right to squirm...' ee cummings), luxuriously blooming flowers of the forest, a face like a long-nosed Hallowe'en lantern, butterflies and dragonflies, and always some kind of kindred spirits. WH Auden called art 'our chief means of breaking bread with the dead', and clearly Perkins not only wants to connect with us but also with those gone before. One of her titles, *Rattling the Ancestors*, suggests a no-nonsense attitude and that a brisk shake-up would be just the thing, though the ancestors in their richly mellow and superbly painterly setting don't seem to be paying much attention, bless them.

In several paintings are sharp-faced foxes or coyotes. A trickster and symbol of guile, the red fox was a fire demon in ancient Rome, and is usefully fluid and elusive in meaning. The Navaho Indians claim that the coyote accompanied the first man and woman into the world, a resourceful animal who brought with it seeds to supply food. In the assemblies of animals, such as *Creature Comforts* and *Spirit Animals*, the eyes of these snouty enquiring beasts are open, their demeanour questing. Although the animals in *Creature Comforts* are piled together for warmth and reassurance, they are not asleep but alert and aware. By contrast, the eyes of the human figures are often closed or half-closed in reverie, as if preferring to look within rather than contemplate the external world. Whatever symbolic interpretation you care to put upon this distinction, the animals are apparently more in the moment than the humans.

The imagery does not always emerge assertively from the matrix or maelstrom of paint, but is often on the point of definition, fading in and out of focus, returning to the primeval matter (mud, or paint) from which it appeared. This is not to say that Perkins' content is not at times declarative: it certainly can be, but her interests are divided between the seductions of the paint and the lure of the imagery. Although she makes drawings, she is primarily a painter and it is the stuff of paint which fascinates and enthralls her. Her work can be seen as a collaboration with her material, rather than an imposition of her will onto it. She works with the paint, and listens to it, much as she listens to the imagery. Sometimes the paint is more insistent, sometimes an image. Usually Perkins follows her instincts and orchestrates the various impulses that besiege her in the best way she can. The paintings result from this conversation or exchange.

Winged Energy of Delight is one of the most arresting images in this group. Named after a line of Rilke, it is a painting of an ambivalent figure, who could be either girl or boy, with dark eyes and a ram's horn sprouting from the left temple. Perhaps the figure, with such a floating neck scarf and look of rapt attention, is a poet. There are two birds present, one pink one blue (pink for a girl, blue for a boy). The birds are like witnesses or messengers from the gods, perhaps nightingales or Persian bulbuls, and here too are butterflies, the ancient Greek symbol of the soul. This seems to be the most complete statement of Perkins' vision, and yet it remains provocatively ambiguous in meaning. We are not supposed to decipher a narrative in these paintings: hints and suggestions, prompts are all we get. And audacious paint-handling.

Perkins is beguiled by 'Bad Painting', that disrespectful trend that flourished in America in the 1970s, as a kind of precursor of Neo-Expressionism. Figurative but with no respect for traditional representations of the figure, Bad Painting thrived on a lively mix of art historical and non-art sources, and was often fantastical in content. Ironic, irreverent and unconventional, it defied the norms of taste and delved into imagery that was frequently moving as well as funny. Perkins has assumed some of the freedoms of Bad Painting (the employment of archetypes and kitsch, for instance) to buttress her own approach, though it should always be remembered that 'bad' in the title is ironic, not descriptive.

Anima is the most inchoate of all these images, perhaps in its reference to the feminine side of a man's personality, or because it represents the soul, one of the most unquantifiable and elusive of human attributes. The figure only just emerges from its swirling ground, pulled into definition as if through mists by touches of paint, pink as lipstick. (Succulent hot-house colour is one of the principal signatures of Perkins' art, manipulated inventively and with great verve.) The figure's eyes are darkened, not habituated to observation, but to contemplation. The touches of pale blue at top left are like sparks of electricity implying another figure, hanging in the air like a genie. Anima is half-realised, half-expressed, appropriately nebulous.

As the Bible has it, there's nothing new under the sun. So we are not so much the inventors and creators we sometimes like to think; more accurately, we are interpreters of pre-existing material. We assemble our fragments, we sample and compose: something from the tellurian (earthly) realm, something from the chthonic (underworld). Something deliberate combined with something unmediated and hard-wired from the subconscious. On the strength of this new body of work, Paige Perkins would agree with Constable that painting is 'a language of the heart' — not in any sentimental way, but raw and highly charged. As an artist, she exemplifies a kind of radical innocence balanced by a wicked wit. At all times she manages to retain a sense of wonder. For her, art and the other aspects of existence are about becoming more profoundly human.

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Devizes: October 2021