



BESIDE THE RIVER

Essay about the work of Fion Gunn for 'The Painted Thread' exhibition in Beijing Oct 2016

The ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus said, "No man ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and he's not the same man" this notion represents a philosophically complex discourse because it allows us to reflect and to explore the relationship between time and space as well as between human beings. The work of Irish artist Fion Gunn reflects and encompasses this way of thinking and it is evident in the body of work for this exhibition, where the core issue is that of "memory", that it is the perspective of an artist who is also a woman in the "River of Time", who depicts life, her perceptions of the world and of herself in painted shorelines.

I have known Gunn for several years now and have witnessed how she recognises, both in her artistic and her curatorial practice that to focus on humanity itself is the most fundamental and most ambitious theme: to promote justice, equality and not to compromise when confronted with evil.

This series about "memory" shows Gunn as an artist with a specifically feminine perspective which is sensitive and subtle; this is a very special body of work where Gunn demonstrates that she is not only an artist but also a daughter, a mother, a grandmother and a wife. The work describes half a century of her life, it includes all her different perspectives and identities and reveals a complete, comprehensive three-dimensional image of a contemporary woman and a contemporary artist. As a scholar of contemporary art, I think that these works do not only represent the artist's public persona or artistic ambition but, also show her inner self and her vulnerability.

She employs a range of different materials and collage as she explores "memory". The colours are bright and vivid; the aim is not to represent reality, but rather to construct internalised landscapes, where many real, historical events from different places and times, are juxtaposed with the artist's own personal narratives.

In "bridge of memory", composite landscapes from the UK, France, Spain and even China appear on the same canvas, this is not the depiction of a real place, it is a product of the artist's thoughts about the meaning of the word "bridge". Gunn has drawn on her own personal experience as the source for its construction, the landscape does not exist in the material world, it only exists in her own memory. In addition, the use of blue is striking in this work, the description of the sky and the ocean - bright blue on one side to conjure the artist's inner world filled with love and the celebration of life. The colours are beguiling, even when the images are sorrowful or difficult, they still give a vision of hope to the viewer.

I think that Memory Lens, another artwork in this series is very significant for Gunn as an artist. She uses collage and multi media to conjure her own childhood, beside an image of herself as a child she juxtaposes an image of her granddaughter, creating an illusion of parallel space and time. For the viewer this arouses a powerful sense of the passage of time, a sense of humanity's shared experience and common roots. The "journey of life" exposed in these collaged paintings, shows Gunn's concern to include the images of grandmother and other family members as part the creative process itself and it is really worth focussing on this aspect, for we are given full access to the artist's personal perspectives and emotions during the making of her work. The artist uses specific methods of editing her own feelings, perspectives and memories, across the generations and over a long period of time, which enable her work to resonate with people from other cultures and of other ages. Her work also convinces the viewer, even though logically and intellectually we know that time does not flow backwards "*water spilled can never be retrieved*" however, in this particular artist's world anything can happen, for in art like this the viewer can feel unchanging nature of humanity and its timelessness.

As a friend of the artist for a number of years, I've known Gunn both as a fine artist and as a curator and witnessed her adhere to her ideals. Following the death of her mother and with her father suffering from dementia, Gunn has concluded that "memory", which includes the totality of a person's life, the ups and downs and complications, is also one of life's most valuable assets and her current artworks are replete with these treasures. I wish Fion Gunn every success with The Painted Thread exhibition, I hope that many people will have the opportunity to see these paintings, to be inspired by them, to share and value them.

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