

***Verbena in the Sky* and *Collector* : two paintings by Marilyn Hallam.**

I have always admired and been fascinated by the intricate, slow way that Marilyn builds her paintings. Looking in on her various studios over the years I have marveled at the layers of drawing, tracing and photocopying, all the collaging and reconstruction that goes on. This exploratory work accumulates and is sifted through, before she even begins to work on a canvas.

The relationship of drawing to painting, and drawing in paint, continues to absorb visual artists, be they figurative, abstract, or indifferent to those categories. In *Verbena in the Sky* Marilyn describes with line and colour the way a delicate tangle of flowers grows high on a balcony, in front of ornate iron railings. A long way below, in the park, dogs and their owners are visible, tiny but identifiable. Flat rectangles of various blues, greens and an intense red were laid down as the first stage of this work, but not before careful preparation. There would have been a study of the complex layers of space, of different kinds of drawing in paint, planning how this could mesh with the patchwork of ground-colour, and become one with it. The three blues are solid planes of sky, without atmospherics, and the details of the violet agapanthus, almost encroaching, are finely rendered in full botanical focus. The middle ground, a leafy overhanging branch, is schematic and brushy. After the first encounter with the glow and filigree of the painting there is an invitation to slow down and take in its richness. Seeing how it all hangs together is completely absorbing, it contains movement in its stillness, holding the attention for as long as one can look into it, as only painting can.

In *Collector* we look down on some decorated ceramics arranged with a pile of plates on a table, and a chair almost as white as the plates. A tall mirror behind the chair gives us the reflection of the space we ourselves are in, but in the painting, at its furthest distance, we see a woman holding up a vase for inspection. She stands against a bright window, behind the table, the chair we know and one we don't, and the plates. Then we are brought back to the frontal plane, which declares the colour-key of this work, a pink box-file with a lime-green gauze ribbon clipped to its top edge. Propped against it is a postcard, a drawing of Ariel the flower fairy, spreading her wings. A skill and talent for depiction can put us inside an illusionistic interior, and move us around in there, our eyes led by the painter. But reading this painting - how it was made, the various greens arrived at through many glazes, the whites stepping steadily backwards through the centre to the final light of the window, which is in the painting but described only as reflection - all these layers move us through time and pictorial space, never-endingly. This takes more than skill and talent.

There is a double intimacy in these paintings that I find strange and distinctive. The domestic interior, with its array of objects loved and used and looked-at, sets a personal, almost autobiographical tone. But what we also have is a construction in paint on a flat surface, which has involved the artist in a process of intense scrutiny and analysis, preoccupied with thoroughness, but intent on keeping the painting fresh, alive and luminous. The activity of looking has been questioned; the process of seeing has been fragmented and painstakingly re-constructed, in order to understand more of what painting tells us about painting, at the same time as it tells of the world. What we are shown is a small part of the world, a table-top, or a balcony, but the painting of it reaches far into thought and experience. The commitment to breaking down pictorial language and putting it back together again is clearly evident, but not fetishized. It is a meticulous exploration, and it has been shared with us. There is detachment in the method, but passion shows in the conclusion.

Each time I see these paintings and rediscover their achievement, I find in them again their intelligence and their beauty, and I feel grateful for what they offer. It's good to think they will be looked at and enjoyed by so many others in the coming year.

Mali Morris RA
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