

Cicely Cottingham: Recent Paintings

I first encountered Cicely Cottingham's paintings in the late 1980s when I was assistant curator at The Montclair Art Museum. It was at another agonizing statewide Arts Annual, where many of the submissions tended to be second-rate. In the midst of mediocre paintings, sculptures, photographs and graphics, a set of oils on wood panels stood out. They were neither figurative nor abstract, their titles inspired by the poetry of Rilke; and although they were physically small pictures, they possessed a monumental presence. Above all they were paintings in the truest sense of the word.

For over 30 years Cottingham has been producing a consistent corpus committed to the tradition of painting and drawing that belongs within the family of artists like Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot and Edouard Vuillard, Giorgio Morandi and Alberto Giacometti, Georges Braque and Agnes Martin. This is the family of contemplatives in painting, for whom the medium is an occasion for pause and meditation. In the 1990s I had the opportunity to exhibit Cottingham's work while I was curator at the Jersey City Museum. That work had grown to a boldness of expression where the forms, textures and subdued colors were breathing in and out of each other.

Since then color, at times riotous and liberating, has exploded within her work. This does not mean that the meditative essence of her vision has simply given way to light. No: light as expressed through pinks and blues or pale yellow IS the meditative vehicle. What is powerful in this recent body of work is that the colors, bold or subtle, enhance her contemplative vision. The drawing maintains its nervous energy, while being purified of an earlier anxiety; Henri Matisse's profound elegance would have been at home here.

These works consist of the *Flag*, *Kitchen Table Drawings* and *Marjorie Paintings series*. The first features three panel compositions painted in acrylic on tracing vellum. These flags are not signs, but rather symbols; their meaning cannot be made clear or precise. I perceive them as open-ended banners of hope; in Cottingham's own words "blowing in the wind like Tibetan prayer flags." *Kitchen Table Drawings* are small watercolors painted at the kitchen

table when the artist could not get to the studio. Light and delightful at first sight, closer observation reveals a depth of feeling reminiscent of the early pictures of Arthur Dove, where matter and spirit are integrated into a whole vision. An elegiac and celebratory tone charges the 16 *Marjorie Paintings*. These works, painted in panels of four (a longtime strategy of this artist), evoke Cottingham's shift from country to urban dweller, as well as the presence of her late mother. Poetically they communicate a life lived and the creativity that Marjorie fostered in Cicely. At times, through a certain texture or color, these compositions border on sadness, and yet the sheer painterly force ends up being life-affirming.

There is no doubt in my mind that these new works by Cottingham are evidence that she is at the height of her creative powers. There is not a single unnecessary element in any of the pieces. Everything simply IS, just as it should be.

Cottingham is a painter's painter. But then, we have known this all along. These marvelous pictures place her permanently in the company of masters such as Braque and Martin. Like them she says NO to the hollow noise and clownish performances of the art world. Quietly and severely (perhaps with the intensity of a mystic) she says YES to painting being alive and thriving. This happens every time she picks up a brush.

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And

Cicely Cottingham's Flags
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