

Paula Modersohn-Becker at Galerie St. Etienne

Viewing this large exhibition of paintings, drawings and prints, it is natural to speculate about what Paula Modersohn-Becker might have accomplished had she lived longer. Despite the brevity of her career as an artist (the show ranges from early drawings of 1896 to paintings completed during the last year of her life, in 1907), Modersohn-Becker's work is considered to be an important (missing?) link between French modernism and German Expressionism. Beyond any historical significance, however, is the undeniable strength and maturity of her figurative work, most often depicting women, children or herself. When portraying people, Modersohn-Becker overcame her self-conscious timidity and a debt to the founding fathers of modern art (all too apparent at times), to give these works a timeless, mysterious presence.

Although much of the production of her formative years can be considered studies or student exercises, there are several pieces that convincingly display Modersohn-Becker's uncommon gift for portraiture and the figure. *Peasant Woman in Profile, Facing Right*, 1898, is a carefully constructed tonal study of sculptural, almost geometric forms. But in this drawing there is also a harsh and uncompromising honesty, putting Modersohn-Becker in line with the German realist tradition. Modersohn-Becker did not possess the graphic power or social conscience of her fellow countrywoman, Käthe Kollwitz, but she did evince a far greater empathy

for the individual.

With the exception of her portraits, one could suppose that Modersohn-Becker just did not have the time to achieve a mature style. Her landscapes, though appealingly straightforward, are beholden to the painters of Worpswede, an artist's colony which she attended, devoted to the esthetics of peasant life in northern Germany; and there is influence, too, from the work of her future husband, Otto Modersohn, whose sentimental and anecdotal paintings Modersohn-Becker later found pompous and conventional. As for the still lifes, Modersohn-Becker pays homage to the Post-Impressionist paintings in that genre that she had seen during her frequent visits to Paris. *Still Life with Pitcher, Peonies and Orange* and *Still Life with Yellow Bowl*, both 1906, are attempts to reconcile van Gogh's color and texture and Gauguin's pattern with her own almost primitive treatment of objects. These paintings are awkward, stiff and heavy-handed, as though the artist wanted to prove herself capable of dealing with the rigors of composition and color harmony.

On the other hand, the portrait and figure paintings are outstanding for their insight and veracity. *Bathing Boys by Canal*, 1901 which depicts three sallow, skinny youths with sway-backs, distended stomachs and spindly legs, is well observed and full of good-natured amusement. *Girl in Landscape*, also 1901, shows a girl with straw-colored hair staring straight ahead, dark eyes somewhat unfocused, lips slightly parted in a childish manner and two large front teeth barely visible, a detail that lends character to the whole face. Her expression seems to hover between curiosity and fear; she belongs in the gray, rural setting, but also appears isolated from it. The painting is executed with confidence and vitality, yet it is as unpretentious and inno-



Paula Modersohn-Becker: *Girl in Landscape*, 1901, oil tempera on cardboard, 12 3/4 by 14 inches; at Galerie St. Etienne.

cent of guile as the girl.

The three self-portraits in the exhibition serve as the best gauge of Modersohn-Becker's progress as a painter over a six-year period. *Self-Portrait in Front of Paris Buildings*, 1900, shows a young woman with pronounced cheekbones, wide-set eyes and a slender neck. She stands in shadow, surrounded by the sun-filled streets of Paris, her collar and tie neatly arranged—the dutiful student. The portrait is reserved and unobtrusive, but also exposes the artist with brutal—because unflattering—truthfulness.

In *Self-Portrait with Necklace*, 1903, the artist gazes directly at the viewer. The previously angular head has been reduced to an oval shape, the features are no longer severe and there is a serenity in the eyes. The softening French influence is immediately apparent, but the artist uses the brush han-

dle to agitate the surface of the painting, an experimental technique perhaps intended to counteract the passivity of the image.

Finally, there is the late (1906) *Self-Portrait with Lemon*. The woman is far more sophisticated and worldly than before. Modersohn-Becker had now come to terms with her German heritage and the influence of (in Otto's words) "modern notions." The color is fresh and bold, the composition well organized, the image provocative. There is a confidence in the way she holds a lemon in a gesture that is like an offering. A slight smile seems to signal a new independence.

When are we likely to see a comprehensive exhibition of Modersohn-Becker's work? It is difficult to assess her contribution to 20th-century art without her late, Symbolist compositions, or the other major self-portraits. Hopeful-

ly, this exhibition will generate enough interest to give Modersohn-Becker's work the wider audience and recognition it deserves outside her native country. —Robert G. Edelman

Ross Bleckner at Mary Boone/ Michael Werner

Light, scintillating over surfaces, is the subject matter, such as it is, of these abstract paintings. Their non-colors, a faded maquillage Bleckner smears into reflected water effects, range from grisaille to blue-green and yellow-brown glazes. The most recent work, *Untitled*, has the most color.

Light glances off the oil slicks of these works, making them sleek and sleazy. Light also sticks in the mountains and crevices of their paint texture, making them feel a little tacky. A network of small brush-pauses slows down the canvases, giving them an allover texture of time and hesitation. Some seem positively dotted.

Bleckner's is a brooding, leftover light. We never see its sources, only its auras and eclipses. Laboriously built up with brushwork and modeling paste, his allusions to water trees and mountains are embodied yet disembodied, devoid of figures, situations, revelations. Where the six large paintings at their best are all shimmer as in *Weather*, which suggests three trees reflected in water the three small paintings lack illusionistic dazzle and are more like impacted punctuation points. One small canvas, *The Sense of Ending*, shows a mysterious, blinding orb—sun, moon, atomic bomb, E.T. Another small one, *The Hand Before the Face*, shows the three trees in question vignettied within an oval as if it were an older painting-within-the-painting or a Victorian mirror effect. Like Edgar Allan Poe without plots, these pockets of light do not open up or out so much as shimmeringly hold their