

JULIE LANGSAM'S ARCHITECTURAL SURREALISM

IF THERE IS A CRISIS IN THE VISUAL ARTS TODAY . . . THIS COMES FROM THE PECULIAR DIFFICULTIES THAT CONFRONT THE CONTEMPORARY PAINTER IN THE FORMATION OF A STYLE. RICHARD WOLLHEIM

To understand any highly original painter's body of works of art, you need to look at her history. You need to consider her entry point into the art world, know about her education, and learn how from that starting point she developed her style of art making. Galleries usually display just the artist's most recent paintings. That is understandable, for the art market is concerned with a painter's newest productions, but it would be a mistake to look at this show of Julie Langsam's art without grasping something about her personal history. Her paintings sum up and extend, magnificently, ways of visual thinking which she has been developing for more than two decades. And so you miss something if you don't know this history.

To understand a visual artist, we need to look beyond mere appearances, to understand her stylistic development, the way that she handles her subject matter. Langsam's first paintings look very different from her current architectural scenes, but there is an essential continuity in this development. I have known her for some years as a much-valued colleague, and so have seen her recent art, and even shown images of it in my lectures in Cleveland. But not until we sat down and looked at her earlier paintings did I really understand what she is doing right now. When, for example, she speaks of her concern with the failure of modernism, you need to understand how this view of the inevitable failure of desire is grounded, not in some recently fashionable idea about postmodernism, but in her long-standing interest in Surrealism. And you cannot grasp the logic of her very recent insertions of Ad Reinhardt's abstractions into her pictures without knowing something about the art she made in the 1990s.

Langsam has developed in a marvelously confident, admirably self-sufficient way. What unifies her *oeuvre* is a highly original conception of how painting can continue after the end of modernism. Everyone, almost, agrees now that modernism is over, but the recipes for dealing with this situation are quite varied. Some artists appropriate earlier art, while many others abandon painting entirely. One reason Langsam's recent art deserves your careful attention is that it offers a singularly suggestive view of this situation. Another, I hasten to add, is that the paintings themselves are a serious source of aesthetic pleasure. Hers is art any aesthete would love to live with.

Langsam has been painting seriously for twenty-two years. Despite a youthful fling with photography, she has always been faithful to painting. (Her mother was an abstract painter.) Langsam's pictures always have illusionistic depth, but she has never been interested in making sculpture nor, still less, in working in other media such as video or installation. "I don't have a good idea of three-dimensional

space," she has said, "I think illusionistically, in terms of the two-dimensional picture space." That she came of age as an artist in the mid-1980s is very important. "Had I been born ten years later", she once told me, "I would have gone to film school". When she was a student in the 1980s, painting often was beleaguered. There were endless discussions about its death, and, then, about its hoped-for revival. But those prophetic accounts never had any influence on her development. Like every seriously original artist, she learned early on the importance of being self-sufficient.

We Live So Fast (1986), a small abstraction, is the first painting that Langsam identifies as belonging to her *oeuvre*. If you merely treat it as an abstract picture, then it looks very unlike her recent paintings. But when you note how she floats the biomorphic forms against an atmospheric background, then you see how her current pictures derive from this starting point. Langsam did not continue to work abstractly. In *Snake Charmer* (1993), decorative forms constitute a kind of Surrealist collage, containing eyes. As we shall see, Surrealism has remained important for her, though in the recent paintings it is employed in a less explicit way. In the mixed media collage painting *Dreamgirl* (1996), shown in her first New York exhibition, she deals with the idealization of romance and beauty, again with a Surrealist technique.

Then in the *Men & Women Series* monotypes from 1997 and the *Hunks* of the same year, Langsam did a sequence of figurative images about the seduction of romantically charged images of desire. Knowing that these images are false, still we find them desirable. Giving up the romantic couples and hunks turned out to be the magical moment in Langsam's development. Before about 1998, she was a talented artist working in borrowed styles. Once she did the first of her architectural landscapes, she found the highly original visual conception that she has relentlessly pursued for a decade. The person Langsam credits with the greatest influence on her development, from the 1980s even up to the present, is not an artist but the art historian and critic, Robert Pincus-Witten. He was famous both for his catholic enthusiasm for a wide variety of contemporary art, and his influential label, post-minimalism, identifying art coming after 1960s minimalism. He was, Langsam recalls, a charismatic teacher. His support for two of his contemporaries, Richard Serra and Sol LeWitt, and his concern with Surrealism, played a significant role in her development. Of course, other critics were interested in these sculptors, and other art historians were discussing Surrealism. But the particular way Pincus-Witten conjoined these interests had a decisive influence on Langsam. "As a young Jewish woman," she has remarked, "old master Catholic painting felt like a closed book. I didn't know the stories these pictures illustrated." For her, at least early on, the Surrealists were the old masters, the starting point of what in art's history was usable for her.

One more part of the pre-history to Langsam's present art remains to be told. When in 1996 she started teaching at the Cleveland Institute of Art, she was fascinated by Fredrick Church's *Twilight in the Wilderness* (1860), a magnificent vista with a sunset behind an unspoiled landscape. It is surprising that this Hudson River School artist, and not one of the modernists or contemporary artists collected by the Cleveland Museum of Art, was a decisive influence. This near contemporary of Édouard Manet has not had as much influence upon recent art. But he fascinates Langsam. Since 1998 the backgrounds

of her pictures are set against skies in high-pitched color, like Church's. For her, *Twilight in the Wilderness*, like Surrealism, is about the inevitable failure of desire. However eccentric this reading of the picture may seem to orthodox art historians, it has an obvious historical logic. Church's idealized landscape shows what America did not become. In that way, he now has become a proto-Surrealist.

Church gave Langsam the background for her pictures of architecture. In the foreground she shows modernist buildings by Marcel Breuer, Richard Neutra, Gerrit Rietveld, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and also more recent architecture by Peter Eisenman, Richard Meier and Frank Gehry. The house then became a replacement for the biomorphic forms in the earlier abstract works and the sexually charged couples in the figurative paintings. Sometimes her houses are shown close-up, but more typically they are set far in the background. And she depicts Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater and Guggenheim Museum along with such other museums as Gordon Bunshaft's Hirshhorn (1974), Breuer's Whitney (1966), Meier's High Museum (1983), and Louis Kahn's Kimbell (1972). She also depicts sculpture: Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column* (1937), Richard Serra's *One Ton Prop* (1969), and Sol LeWitt's *Incomplete Open Cube* (1974).

At first blush, Langsam's paintings look like faux-naturalistic scenes, late modernist versions of Nineteenth-century landscape painter John Constable's *Wivenhoe Park* (1816). Like Constable, she shows grand houses isolated in natural settings. But actually they are something quite different, and altogether more interesting. The Surrealists were obsessed with the *rendez-vous*, the conjunction, under the spell of desire, of two things, which ordinarily we do not find juxtaposed. Think of how much visual energy René Magritte gets from juxtaposing two absolutely banal objects. In its use of surprising juxtapositions, *Snake Charmer* is akin to many Magrittes, but it reveals a far different view of the *rendez-vous*. The Surrealists generally had a very male sensibility. André Breton's *Nadja* (1928) was about the poet pursuing a girl. Langsam's very different take on unexpected conjunctions, though perhaps not explicitly feminist, certainly brings a different way of thinking to bear. No bodies appear in her recent pictures, which, like the upscale houses you find illustrated in architectural magazines, have no human inhabitants. None of the Surrealist painters used architecture in Langsam's fashion. Salvador Dalí presents unexpected juxtapositions of objects, not buildings; Giorgio de Chirico shows uncanny piazzas. Langsam, by contrast, is concerned with architecture and desire. The subject of her *Fuller Landscape (Dymaxion House)* (2007) is most revealing in this way, for designer and engineer Buckminster Fuller was closely associated with the now failed utopian dreams of the 1960s.

Coming some generations after the Surrealists, Langsam inevitably has different concerns. She is interested in the failure of modernism, and in how the painter can keep going after the end of that history. No wonder she loves Frank Gehry's project for Peter B. Lewis, the house that after ten years of planning was never built. But there is no despair in her art. Pincus-Witten's concept of postminimalism, which continues to influence her, has implications different from postmodernism, the label that became more fashionable in the 1980s. That desire always falls short is for her visually stimulating. Failure has been a recurrent theme of art shows recently, like the 2008 Whitney Biennial and the 2008 Carnegie International. But Langsam understands it very differently. She shows seemingly timeless

sublime backgrounds behind modernist architecture. The buildings she shows, all well known, are isolated, as if on stage, with the sense of scale lost. She turns these buildings into images, as if they were objects, not three-dimensional constructions. Set *We Live So Fast* next to any of these recent pictures, and see the essential stylistic continuity of her art. Like that early abstraction, these pictures foreground flattened forms against an illusionistic background.

Finally, we are ready to consider her most recent paintings, which are on display in this exhibition. Langsam has complexified her basic working plan. Beneath her modernist architecture she adds long horizontal color grids derived from Ad Reinhardt's paintings. She shows not the art in his final signature style, the black-on-black pictures, but his earlier pictures, which employ a range of colors. Reinhardt, like many of Langsam's architects, is involved with grids. But that is not the aspect of his art that concerns her. For her, Reinhardt too is about failure, about the failure of modernism to realize her ends. With the bottom of Langsam's pictures flattened out, you view three elements: the Romantic sunset sky; the architecture; and the ground from Reinhardt. These pictures make more explicit than the earlier architectural scenes the way that she plays with scale. What is the relationship between the sublime sky, the building (which in reality is large), and the physically smaller Reinhardt stretching across the bottom? No definite answer to this question is possible, for Langsam is not concerned with showing objects in a real space, but with the play of desire. Here then, again, beneath the surface appearance of change in her art we find essential continuity. She always has been concerned with spatial illusionism, and never interested in naturalism. Purity of heart, it has been said, is to will one thing.

The significance of my epigraph deserves an explanation, for it identifies a way of thinking crucial, I believe, to Langsam's art. This statement comes from my teacher. Richard Wollheim, who in 1986 gave the Mellon lectures on art history at the National Gallery of Art, which was a great honor for a philosopher. Wollheim's claim, at that time highly controversial, was that we can only properly understand an artist's development by reconstructing what he calls their style, by which he means their distinctive way of handling the visual content of their pictures. In the 1980s when painting was beleaguered, this way of thinking seemed positively antediluvian. Langsam's development shows how shortsighted this claim, which Wollheim critiqued, was. I hope that viewers coming to this magnificent exhibition of her new paintings will take time to learn how she arrived at this destination in her journey. That journey, is it not dramatically daring?

DAVID CARRIER

Champney Family Professor,

Case Western Reserve University/The Cleveland Institute of Art

This essay is dedicated to Robert Pincus-Witten, in thanks for his generous and essential contribution to Langsam's graduate education.