

Abandoned on the mountains of the heart

Ausgesetzt auf den Bergen des Herzens - Rilke

Sarah Medway does not shirk from the often painful principle of all or nothing at all. She abandons herself to the actuality of applying oil to canvas, acutely aware of the immediacy of process. However, her absorption in the specific interactions on the canvas is not purely cerebral. It is underpinned by the discipline of black and white drawings which reveal detailed observation of landscape and natural forms, the play of light and shade. Each painting embodies a unique space in and for itself, both actual and virtual. It is constructed, or rather *woven and layered* in a highly complex network of marks. Canvases such as *Sleep* and *Web* have a veiled sense of mystery. Strong earth colours appear and disappear through a white gauze, almost a bandage, a metaphor for the interaction of conscious and unconscious, of moving in and out, different levels of existence. The times of day and the seasons become expressions of psychological as well as physical change.

Each work is a marker for the contradiction of life; the ebb and flow of energy. Medway considers a painting complete when she has succeeded in unifying opposite factors. She seeks to establish an equilibrium of the micro and the macro, the complex and the simple, the maximum expression in the minimum form. She wants to find the middle space, to capture the impossible, such as the negativity of reflection, the moment of transition. The result is an unforced lyricism, a rich tapestry of light, which delights the eye. While each painting is to some extent spontaneous, it is the expression of a protracted journey whose end cannot be predicted. Colour is put on, scraped off, painted over and over. This gives each canvas an intriguing depth, full of unexpected surprises, forms open to a variety of interpretations.

These colour compositions are grounded in the 20th century European abstract tradition. An affinity with earlier artists such as Whistler, Kandinsky, Klimt, Mondrian and Gorky is apparent. As in her predecessors, rigorous technique is informed by powerful emotion. Abstract expressionist painting in Britain during the 1980s moved a long way ahead from the New York school. Now, in the late 1990s, in artists such as Medway, it re-emerges as highly contemporary. It provides an emotional oasis which is stimulating and profoundly satisfying. She, like Rilke, expresses the existential uncertainty of her time.

By Corinna Lotz © October 1996