Neil Anderson "Temple - Template" by Kenneth Baker

We hear it said often that we live in the golden age of biography. Great literary projects by Isaac Deutscher, Leon Edel, Peter Gay, Richard Holmes and others appear to bear it out.

Historians and scholars, and sometimes filmmakers, work at biography. Novelists and poets play at it.

Even gifted instrumentalists can draw biographical shadings from their performance of classics such as the late piano and chamber music of Schumann, Beethoven and Shostakovich.

Countless photographic portraits, of the famous and obscure alike, also appear to bear the stamp - though probably no more than that - of a real individual life.

Now name a great biographical contemporary painting.

None comes to mind because - the special case of confessional self-portraiture aside - modern painting appears incapable of biography, or of supplying what we crave from it.

In an age of time-based media, painting has had the thread of narrative snatched from it, so it cannot entertain, despite museums pretending to their new mass audience that it can.

Its representational powers outgunned by cameras and screens, painting no longer even pretends to trace the outlines of an individual's formative history. The abstract expressionist idea that brushwork inscribes the life-in-time of the striving painter looks like a feckless holding action against this seeming loss of potency.

Meanwhile, we feel incessantly the pressure of our knowledge of living in a world of *x* billion. This knowledge, unfocused and merely statistical though it seems, belittles our individuality and makes us want to defend it.

Whence the craving for biography, which lays out the details of a life more thoroughly and perspicuously than we will ever attempt to do with our own recollections.

Painting cannot do this. But as Neil Anderson's work reminds us, it can do other things.

Painting can bring us back to where we stand, recalling us to the present tense of existence.

Anderson's work studiedly blocks the paths by which we try to escape the duty to see. I call it a duty because every sincere act of observation take us a step outside ourselves, not into

fantasy, but closer to the recognition that the test of something's reality is its independence of our minds, not our ability to submerge it in our mental universe.

Anderson's paintings give a fine grain to this cognizance of the real as the resistant.

Picking bits of natural material literally off the floor of the world, he subjects them to various operations - copying, cropping, projection, reordering and articulation through color, contrast and touch - translating them into the key of reality peculiar to painting.

Eye and mind probe these paintings continually for hidden silhouettes, for symbolism, map profiles, allusions - anything that might abridge the process of seeing. But Anderson deliberately prolongs that process with shifting formal rhythms and the scraped-down, stuttering touches of small brushes in the newsprint-like passages of pictures such as "Palace" (2003) and "Whiteness of the Whale 2" (2002-03).

Above all, Anderson's paintings cannot be read backwards as a coded account of the life or even of the process that produced them. They read only forward from the moment of our encounter with them, toward a clearer view of their material articulation and of their value as sensuous experiences.

Anderson calls his recent series "Temple - Template," with broad reference to his memories of Japanese Buddhist temples. He can point to details in certain paintings that make this connection overt. But the paintings' deepest affinity to this declared source lies in the work's intuitively Zen spirit: its insistence that we lose nothing - indeed, that we gain all there is to gain - by paying exact attention to whatever offers itself for us to see, rather than escaping into narrative, internal or public.

Pre-eminently among contemporary artists, the abstract painter has inherited the techniques and formal language to phrase reality's engulfing offer of itself in terms and doses we can bear and comprehend. From Anderson's painting we can learn to tolerate the particular and so to value our own lived time as our sole, irretrievable access to it.

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