

Lisa Milroy: Improvisations - Interview with Tim Clark, Japanese Section, British Museum

Tim Clark, Curator of the Japanese Section, British Museum and Lisa Milroy in conversation

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TC: Van Gogh painstakingly copied Japanese prints in oils, maybe to find out how they were constructed. What do you learn when you make your own oil on canvas versions of Japanese prints?

LM: I began to paint Japanese prints in the 1980s. They formed one of the categories of objects for the still life paintings I worked on during that decade. The prints allowed me to depict an ordinary object, a sheet of paper, while portraying scenes of people going about their daily business. The more I grew absorbed by painting these delightful scenes, the more I forgot about the prints as sheets of paper. In my mind, I entered an imaginative space in which I could almost hear the clatter of a crowd, feel the weight of a kimono, smell food cooking, eavesdrop on women chatting. But then this mental connection would slip and I'd grow conscious of simply painting sheets of paper. I'd focus on their flatness and the way the rectangular shapes threw shadows against a ground. I left an imagined peopled world behind for material appreciation of the prints, which re-activated my connection to the real, physical world.

What I learned from the Japanese prints was something about the nature of painting: this shift between the immaterial and material mirrored a fundamental aspect of painting itself. While painting, I constantly handle the stuff of paint - paint as a material is gorgeously bulky, oily, smelly and messy. Yet while working with it, I'm completely involved with images in my head, with my feelings, with concentrating on the canvas and palette. The manual, conceptual and emotional are separate experiences yet become meshed as one. Through the process of making, elements of my inner world, intangible but charged with energy, get transformed into a material form - it's amazing to recognise in paint things of the mind and heart. I'm completely fascinated by this relation between mind, object and transformation.

TC: Why do you abstract some your transcriptions of prints, overlay them with bands of colour and other geometric shapes?

LM: I've always found Japanese prints useful as motifs to explore different aspects of painting and my relation to the world. At the end of the 1990s I used Japanese prints to develop my approach to still life painting in terms of story-telling, and this was linked to my interest in painting people. By the mid-1990s it began to bother me that I only painted things and places. I finally found a way to paint people: by treating a person as an object, a still life. This strategy led me to photograph people at venues like the British Museum where people stood outside waiting for friends. The look of a person waiting is rather masklike, evoking a kind of absence, and this gave me the emotional distance I needed at that time for my paintings. By focusing on this absent expression in my photos, I could paint a face in a similar way to how I painted a building facade or an object. A person's face was simply a surface to depict.

By the end of the decade I was fed up with painting people in such an alienated fashion. I'd hatched an interest in the characters I painted and wanted to portray aspects of their lives, their personalities, thoughts and feelings, their stories. I wanted to look at what lay behind the mask. The Japanese print that helped me make this change showed a group of people on a pleasure boat drifting down a river. I was drawn to this image of people grouped in one place, the boat, but who also moved through a constantly changing landscape - I like the way they were simultaneously fixed and in motion. In painting this print, I wanted to convey something of those particular moments that bind people together and lay the foundation for a future story or memory. I painted the print as if it had been enlarged and cut up into sections. By dissolving the patterns and colour held by the black lines and brushing sweeps of colour up and down the canvas, I hoped to transmit a sense of both the specialness of that present moment in tandem with time unfolding, and of a memory of this pleasant outing in the making.

TC: Japanese colour woodblock prints are an incredibly controlled medium, taking a neat drawing and turning it into a mass-produced, exquisite art-craft product. The line in your paintings is free and spontaneous. Can you talk about the gap between these two and what the reworking means for you?

LM: Whenever I look at an actual woodblock, I'm struck by the twinning of this rather clunky object with the elegant print itself - the hard dark wood is scored by intricate grooves and heavy gouges made with cutting tools that need intense muscular effort. Shadows pool in the grooves and the drawing is difficult to see whereas the printed image is so immediate and fresh with its overall flatness, its seemingly effortlessly rendered black lines and beautiful combinations of colour. One stage of the print involves resistance while at another, there's nothing but ease. Paint also offers a kind of resistance as it sits on the palette with its three-dimensional bulk. It's extremely pleasurable to see and feel this immobile blob give way to fluidity when mixed with turpentine and linseed oil. While I paint a Japanese print, the play between the fixed lines of the actual print and the movement I give them through painting triggers a profound sense of release - I feel like I'm flying!

TC: Your geisha paintings make me think about the construction of femininity - and a construction of Japan, too. Tell me more.

LM: As many children do, I wore a number of uniforms and costumes through my childhood and adolescence - school uniform, Brownie uniform, ballet leotard and slippers, Halloween masquerades, school play costumes. In my teens during the 1970s, I cultivated a flower child look. I donned long skirts imported from India, sandals, patchouli oil and it was important to me that I wore my hair parted in the middle and as straight as possible, like Joni Mitchell - difficult for someone with curls. Then I went through a phase of wearing a lot of make-up, painting my face. Through my choice of clothes and outfits, I felt as though I poured my amorphous self into various moulds and explored the fit. At some playful level, this still continues today. The key is to pick the right outer foil to identify or mirror my inner state. All this engenders a sense of construction in relation to the self, and within this my ideas of femininity are surely involved.

Japanese prints certainly ignited my curiosity about Japan itself. My first trip to Japan was in 1989 for a show of British art that included my work. After that first experience, I was hooked - never had I been to a more visually compelling and engaging place. But however much I was captivated, I felt equally shut out by the sheer sense of otherness, by not understanding the language or social customs. I find this push/pull effect of attraction and alienation very seductive; and in Japan, this dynamic is activated to an

extreme. The subject of connection and disconnection, of the familiar and unfamiliar is one of my grand preoccupations as a painter and so it makes Japan, or my idea of Japan, an important artistic catalyst.

TC: You are very playful in the way you encourage your geisha to misbehave. You've written that they are your alter-ego, so they must allow you do things you couldn't otherwise do. If true, what?

LM: When I was struggling to find a way of painting people in terms of their feelings and stories, the geishas burst out of my Japanese print transcriptions and offered assistance. As my own invented troupe of characters, the geishas quickly let me know it was my own feelings and stories that I wanted to address. But I'm too shy to reveal myself directly so it was great to hide behind them and let them take over - they could emote for me. Through the geishas, I was able to forget my shyness and my sense of duty. This sparked the fun of breaking rules and getting up to no good.

TC: And what about the darker side? What is going on in the black paintings of geisha (after Manet), and when they cut the heads off chickens?

LM: I painted the geishas for a year. I painted them lost, lonely, happy, weary, thoughtful. They were insatiable, always demanding more paintings. But as time went on, I grew afraid I'd have to paint the geishas forever. At last I took a drastic measure and brought a halt to the endless flow by having a geisha die. I felt awful doing it, but quite empowered. To mitigate the realness of her death, I couched my dead geisha in that of Manet's Dead Toreador - she'd live on forever in art. Following the geisha's death, I needed to convey the ceremony and ritual of mourning, and for this I had to find another way of painting - the glossy substance of oil paint; the colour and quick gesture that characterised the geisha paintings were not appropriate. I made my black mourning paintings by rubbing a paste of black powder-pigment and binder onto the canvas. It opened up a world of stillness.

The chicken painting stems from a memory of my grandma who lived in a small farming town in the Canadian prairies and who I would visit most summers during my childhood. To stock her massive freezer for the coming winter, she and her best friend would order a crate of live chickens from a local farmer and spend a morning decapitating the birds. While plucking feathers and chopping bodies for cooking and freezing, they gossiped the entire time. For me, the violence and the blood and gore scattered around the sun-

filled backyard was shocking. Yet there was pragmatic grandma and her friend chatting all the while, oblivious to the horror, enjoying themselves. As a motif for painting, this was a prime example of the familiar colliding with the unfamiliar.

TC: Your exhibition will be the occasion for fund-raising for the victims of the recent earthquake and tsunami in the northeast of Japan. What does an art show offer in times of disaster?

LM: In this instance, I hope it offers solidarity, and opens up an emotional space for viewers to reflect on the value of human connection and empathy.