
DIANA COPPERWHITE – *Choice as Chance*

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The studio is a cluttered room in Temple Bar Studios; the noise and chatter from the square and the street below seem oddly part of the small universe which Diana Copperwhite has created in this space. She allows the world into her paintings in ways which are at times muffled and subtle and covered over, subsumed into the image, made part of a surface which is capable of immense expression. There are times, however, when she needs to concentrate hard on the work she is making and she uses soundproof headphones through which she can hear the sound of water. The work in front of her, rather than the world around, has to become the focus on all her attention.

She has placed large unfinished paintings around the walls. In each one of them there is her own signature set of colours and motifs; in each of them there is a sense of risk, pure risk, in the structure. Sometimes, she says, she allows an image from a newspaper or a television programme or from a photograph or even an object to come into her imagination as a sort of suggestion; later, she may paint over it, or blur it, or leave it there.

Sometimes, if she adds such an image, it will provide a solution to the problem she has set for herself. There is, for example, a book open with photographs of Bauhaus architecture, including an image of a skyscraper that was never built, and that she has incorporated into one of the paintings. It provides something, and that something is always hard to define; it is not exactly a centre, or a focus, but it will simply seem right in a way which she cannot explain, or become a way of holding the eye for a moment, arresting it, preparing the eye for what the overall impact of the painting will be. Some of the images she works from are stray, non-essential, but other images have an emotional resonance for her which she seeks to capture not by merely placing them in the picture, but by painting them into the picture, giving them the same degree of importance as a gesture, a swirl, a line, a pool of colour.

But in working with such references, she also has an urge to defamiliarise them, take them away from any precise meaning or context. Her work is about painting first and foremost; these references merely serve a purpose. Thus digital images which freeze and fragment an original image fascinate her, but such images in themselves are not enough, they provide a way into the painting. It is their visuality which inspires rather than any precise sense of a

blurred or fragmented reality. Because she physically likes making paintings, everything is subservient to what the paint will achieve. The work is not - in the way structure is broken or made, in the way images are added or blurred or broken up - a metaphor for anything.

Colour is personality. Her colours, especially her pinks and greens and oranges, may seem bright but they are, in fact, muted slightly, they have a slightly greyed tonality. If there is blue, she says, look carefully, it is a grey-blue, everything is greyed down. Nothing is full-toned.

In the first painting we look at, the aim has been to make it spatial or flat, just itself, but in the others she is working with great ambition and care to create dense and ambiguous and shadowed dimensions which pull the eye right in, right past the paint, towards something complex or simple further back in the painting which might or might not be there. There is never nothing there, but what is present in these depths of the surface she has created can be mysterious, full of nervous excitement, sharply emotional in its effect, requiring a great deal of work on the part of the viewer and requiring from the painter an almost infinite amount of tact and visual intelligence and care.

In one of the paintings there is a sense of a group of spectators watching something going up into space. It is easy to see that it began with such a precise image, an image of looking, of gazing, of eyes and binoculars; and then fascinating to watch what Copperwhite began to do to make a painting which is full of risky energy and a structure dictated by concerns that emerge in the painting process. For example, there are two circles in the painting which come not from the original reference but from instinct, which were added late in the composition not only as a way of removing the direct reference to a photograph, but to play with the tension between the traditional dynamic of the reference and a much more abstract dynamic. It makes the image less safe, and puts a logic of its own into the picture.

It is interesting that Copperwhite constantly mentions a musical logic and a sense of musical notation and tonality as she describes the act of painting. But, on the other hand, she insists that she does not pre-structure, that she allows one colour to suggest another, that the element of gesture and chance is essential as is the flash of insight and the swift ability then to structure it, to carry it out.

Although she talks fluently about making these pictures, she has constantly to qualify what she says, because it is clear that she works in two very different ways. One demands logic; the other demands that logic be broken. She is completely aware of every decision she makes, and why certain solutions are chosen. She is always working strategically. Even when

she seems really to let go as a gestural painter, on some deep level she is in fact controlling and fully alert. She stands in front of the canvas for ages deciding where to put the mark. The result of this decision, if she gets it right, can include the illusion of randomness.

But this dichotomy between the flick of the wrist and the purposeful decision, with all the coiled energy it lets loose, is not enough to make paintings as large and ambitious and various in the uses of pure painting and imagery as she is making now. She works not only with ideas of decision versus immediacy but with a fusion of layers, a sense in each part of the painting there was once something else there, that something has been left or covered or erased. She loves the volatile excitement of paint, the amount of expression you can get from tonality in colour; and then she loves channeling this excitement and that expression, covering it over, doing more work to it, adding, subtracting, layering.

Thus the work is not in the planning; the work is not merely in the executing either. She does a great deal of looking, of standing back and watching and then trying to decide, of remaining utterly conscious, self-conscious, self-critical, and then fluid enough to make choices that have the full excitement of chance. It is clear that her method of painting takes a great deal of emotional and intellectual commitment, and unrelenting integrity. Just being there, having all the paintings facing outwards in this confined space, makes the sense of energy in the studio almost overwhelming.