Scenes of a Romantic Nature

Transcription of an 'In Conversation' between Deborah Poynton and Federica Angelucci

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Federica: Ok, when we first started exchanging ideas about what to talk about today, I thought, well what I was intrigued by, was the title of the exhibition, *Scenes of a Romantic Nature*. To me a scene is something that is quite closed off and not for interacting with. I mean, I'm a spectator here actually, and it's something that is set up outside of me. Your paintings evoke this, a scene that is extremely attractive. There is beauty, there is detail, I want to get close to them, but at the same time somehow they leave me out. So would you please, like to talk about this?

Deborah: Ok, I called them scenes very particularly because they are highly constructed; there is nothing real about them. They are like settings, like stage sets, there is no real place like these places that you see. And I suppose I like to do that because I am not interested in what an image says, if I wanted to know what an image says I would read a text. I am interested in what an image is and what it does for me. And what it does for me is that it gives me a place outside myself, a space of the imagination, it gives me a reflection of life, of the experience of actually perceiving and I don't want to say something specific so I've used very used, very used imagery in a way. I have used sunsets and nudes and classical landscapes and classical compositions and things that have been used a lot of times before. And I don't really feel it's possible to do anything new.

Federica: But at the same time you've always been very attentive - and I'm reading what you've said about your work in the past and looking at your past work as well - to what you include and exclude in a painting. Like you once used this expression, 'this very narrow range of elements' that you allow yourself to include to avoid making them symbolic or…

Deborah: Yes, I think, especially with realism, what we are used to looking at in a realist painting and it having to mean something, or being meant to mean something in particular, and I want to avoid that. So I find myself taking things out and putting things in as I go along, as well just to make sure that I don't push it in a particular direction and having it seem to have a particular intention, which I don't want.

Federica: So there is an… am I right in saying there is an equanimity in what you put in the canvas, like each element…?

Deborah: Exactly, like each painting, but I do like to poke and trigger just a little bit so I have little things that I use just to evoke the feeling that something should be evoked, sounds odd but…

Federica: There is that kind of enticing element that could lead you to think that there is something else but actually there's not.

Deborah: Not from me, but I don't mind if other people feel those things, that's fine, that's how it should be, that choice.

Federica: What I can perceive looking at these works is that there is a very deep attention to the beauty, to the sensual and to the figures. And to me, like the two boys that recur in the scenes are a kind of friendly familiar element that helps, that even almost mocks the viewer, the viewer thinks 'ok, then it's something that I can access,' but actually it's not.

Deborah: Yes, I called it *Scenes of a Romantic Nature* because I think that everything we see is a form of romanticism - we perceive in a romantic way. By romantic I mean we filter the world through our own stratas of meaning and importance, and we can't help doing that. It's a human survival need to filter and arrange things in order, and so I'm joking really, but *Scenes of a Romantic Nature* whatever it were of, it would still be of a romantic nature even if it were of a war torn scene or poverty stricken people, or whatever. It would still be romantic and romanticized and accessible, as long as we're able to filter it through who we are already. And so it's about actually what is an image, is it real? No, it's not real, not at all. So…and the beauty is…it's a game I'm playing with you, to pull you in and make you feel that it's real, make you feel this longing, but then there's also this frustration because it is just a picture, it's just a picture.

Federica: Is there any particular composition or kind of character from the traditional romantic paintings that came to you while you were thinking of yours?

Deborah: Well there's the golden age of romantic painting in France which was in the 17th century - people like Poussin - and they painted these beautiful constructed landscapes, with kind of like a golden light, and the figures were very small in the paintings, like I've often done with the small figures. And they basically believed in people in harmony in nature, and the kind triumph of reason over all, and all of that, and so I am kind of echoing all of that without that belief. Let me just think, I suppose, in terms of perspective, of the Japanese woodblock prints, which I absolutely love. I mean perspective is a very rigid thing, but they use it to sort of serve the image rather than the image limiting the perspective. And so as I constructed these I looked at all of those Japanese prints, and how some things look flat and others seem distant, and how they seem somehow unrelated, and yet somehow the thing coheres as one image at the end.

Federica: What about the larger figures? You brought us through the reason, if I can say that, or what inspired you or led you to include the small figures. The large ones, you have a history of painting large scale nudes, and I think I told you in the past: these ones in nature are sort of an evolution of your romantic paintings, like the paintings in the previous show looked to me somehow more free, less engulfed than the figures in domestic spaces that were often quite surreal, surrounded by fabric and objects. These in nature seem somehow more, have a different energy, I don't know if somehow it's something that is there or that I see there. Which is the whole point of this conversation.

Deborah: I don't know, I don't see the ones in interiors as being hemmed in. For example, that one, I would think of a quite heroic pose, it's sort of vaguely Napoleonic, it's very dramatic and absurd. He's sitting on the kitchen stepladder in front of this rather suburban house, and there's a grotto behind, and it might make you think of Renaissance paintings of St Jerome, who was always painted in the wilderness outside a grotto. And yet it's very contemporary as well. And so I think the bigger figures in a way - I mean these two, there are two of these of the man and there's a painting within a painting and he's a giant - there's a giantesque aspect to it, and I think about like *Alice in Wonderland* and the translation into another world basically, and I think they are kind of in between our world and …

Federica: I think to me this resonates specifically with the figures of the young boys, somehow they have this quality of being suspended, of not belonging to any of the realms, and maybe it's a specific age that you're painting - it's not easy even if it's not real.

Deborah: In a way, as well, in very classical poses, and I think it's very compelling to portray children. It can be incredibly kitsch and awful, it often is, I think…

Federica: I don't think so. Maybe we can move into the other room and see… is there anything that you think can be said on this night painting? They are more, somehow more feral because of the palate and animal presence and the animals, and it's somehow not quite the same thing as the young children and the large figures.

Deborah: I don't know, I don't think any of the paintings are different for me because they are all about immersion, the impossibility of immersion. I mean, our curse as humans is to be logical beings, and because we are logical we are cut off, so we are animals and we are not animals, and these are a sort of a dangling kind of beautiful prize, but we cannot have it. We are not able to enter it. We are unable to enter it and be immersed in reality, we cannot do it. And so that is why I paint like this. I do not want to paint things that are didactic, because I am only interested in

looking at a painting, experiencing that feeling of longing - nostalgia almost. I don't know, beauty, I mean I know beauty is a very contentious thing, but I don't know.

Federica: About beauty. We had this conversation about how somehow we don't allow ourselves to dwell into this more central if, I don't know, if it's free, it's probably not, but there was a conversation that Deborah and I had about this letter written by Petrarch when he was climbing *Mount Venture,* and he was writing to his confessor. And in this letter he is writing about how wonderful it is to be lost in nature, even if he's struggling to get to the top, and that's something that these paintings evoke to me, this wondering in a maze, without an end, without knowing where I'm going. When Petrarch gets to the top he reads *Confessions* by St Augustine, and immediately he gets lashed back to the discipline, the Catholic discipline of 'you should be concerned with the questions of the soul and not the questions of the world and not be getting lost in nature', and so it is kind of a refrain. I don't think there is any morality in these works, but they do offer an illusion of beauty and balance and proximity.

Deborah: Yeah, and I think there's a fear now of beauty and of enjoyment in art perhaps, I don't know, of pleasure. And so I kind of really like doing these because it gives me a kind of gleeful evil pleasure to kind of prod the art world and say…and I think generally beauty has been very bastardised, and we're probably quite scared of its being you know, I don't know, what's the difference between this and a Cape Dutch painting done by a Sunday painter? Maybe there is maybe there isn't, who's to say? Maybe it doesn't matter.

Federica: I don't know about that, but I think the intention can make the difference.

Deborah: I like to use beauty, it's very much part of what I enjoy and it's a tool, it's a very powerful tool.

Federica: I think that's where the difference lies, in consciously using it and not as the final aim to something. It's the means, it's not the end - that makes it interesting to my eye. You might have noticed some paintings that are quite radically different from the others. You've probably read in the press release that they are inspired by this Japanese method of block printing, which has a different use of perspective. I would like to ask you how the two styles, or the two processes, are cohesive in your practice?

Deborah: To me there's no difference. It's like when a child is born, that child is there in its entirety, its personality and everything. To me a painting is like that, that painting has it all there, there's no difference between that and that, except for my need for a lot of labour. But really, like that and that to me… I suppose I'm saying that, I'm saying, it's all an illusion. We project and

there's no value scale that says that that's more important or more dense even. And it was very exciting to paint like that, and it was very hard. I wasted a lot of canvas actually. And so I really like them together, because you might make an assumption about me as an artist and maybe those will be questioned, seeing as…

Federica: So how do they come into being, well, in the beginning, is there something that…?

Deborah: Well, I kind of stand in front of a white canvas and just envision a space, and that's what I do with these too, they look so… you just can't see it because the skin is so complete. You know, but it's the same feeling here as here. And actually these are full of contradictions and perspectival anomalies and light. It's not at all real, in any way real that we would understand, it but there's the illusion.

Federica: I read somewhere that with these Japanese prints the word 'Ukiyo-e' means floating world, and I thought it's very appropriate for these that aren't anchored in any tangible reality, to be so, the kind of… it's a, I wouldn't call them abstract, because I can already see what's in them, but it's a difference in language, as if you had moved from classical music to jazz, or to some improvisation.

Deborah: Although to me these are very much the floating world…as much. And there's as much invention, and so actually the word is 'invention' - that's my new favourite word.

Federica: And the drawings?

Deborah: The drawings, I always drew as a child, and so I just decided to just start drawing again and it's been really wonderful. I really enjoy the feeling of being big over this small tiny space.

Federica: And again here the drawings are the same, the drawings are the same, it's just a change of surface and medium

Deborah: Yes, which is so difficult with drawings because it's so easily just, I don't know, it doesn't just quite do it. I don't know -maybe because they are small. Maybe its composition, everything is difficult.

Federica: How do you know that it's done?

Deborah: What?

Federica: With the drawings?

Deborah: Oh, for example with the paintings, I always think about it like when the skin is complete - it's all about colour and light like working together. There's just a moment where nothing else is required really. It's not hard for me to know when it's done. And with these I would sort of come in the next morning and add some kind of blue mark or something, and then just be frightened that if I would do any more something would go. Does anyone want to ask anything?

Audience Member 1: Yes, I would. A very prosaic question. I have seen your work in Cape Town as well, but I can't help it, but does it take very long? I'm sorry, but does it?

Deborah: Yes, it does.

Audience Member 1: Yes, it looks like it does, that's why I am asking. I mean I am not just thinking 'Oh my goodness,' but I imagine that it's labour intensive.

Deborah: Yeah, I think that's been a holding place for me. I've needed that labour, I've enjoy that rigid structure, the structure of working many hours.

Audience Member 1: Everyday?

Deborah: Yeah, but something might be changing now.

Audience Member 2: These works feel a bit like how the universe works, because I can see like every mark being made as I look at it, that it's actually time-based as well. Like every mark is looping, I don't know. Like you were saying that with a child's drawing the only difference if that your hand's more…I think it would be better than a child's drawing. Also like…draws every mind it's very beautiful, the practice, I can see the exact brush and them drying up…

Deborah: Well, it's interesting that you say that because there is something about speed that is important to it. If I sat at it and slowly made a mark it wouldn't work. There's something about an impulse, and doing that is important for those, which is the same in the undercoat of these. I say, I call it I painting myself out. Basically, with these, I obliterate myself.

Audience Member 2: Also moving the brush from the waist, something I imagine very much more… (***loss of sound***)

Deborah: I don't know about that but it sounds great, yeah. Work on the core, yeah.

Audience Member 3: What I want to ask you is pretty radical, probably with abstract works, them being shown in juxtaposition with these works, you're stripping away the illusion you have worked so hard to create.

Deborah: What illusion have I worked to create?

Audience Member 3: You were saying earlier about this kind of…

Deborah: in these paintings, yes.

Audience Member 3: When we see that, it's almost kind of like making your process transparent in a way, and reinforcing the idea of this being an illusion.

Deborah: Yeah, that's right. I mean that's interesting, in what I am doing now is starting with that, but then coming in with a very fine brush and detail, and leaving white coming through. And so you can literally see everything I've done since I started, which is the opposite, which is true. It's been a hell of a process. I was very emotional and I spent two months experimenting and wasted vast amounts of canvas, and I kind of, because I've seen a lot of work, or loose work, I don't know how to put it, that looked a certain way, but I almost assumed that I had to paint that way, and it was so horrible and it was ugly and just awful, just bad, bad painting. And then slowly, I started slowly coming back to myself, and I feel like these are me again. So it's been fantastic - it's been really interesting.

Audience Member 3: What's interesting for us at the gallery is seeing the process going backwards, and perhaps it means more, or is harder. And I don't, when I think of how some young artists start at abstracting before they've ever reached the point of developing the skin, there's a kind of sense of authenticity perhaps, but I don't know. It's not a question I have thought before until now, but then you had a different kind of struggle I suppose.

Deborah: Yeah, I mean there was this 25-year mini retrospective of my work last year and when I walked around it, I just had this vague feeling of horror. Just the sheer amount of work and kind of, it was an amazing, shocking experience to see it all together. I think, I'm turning 45 this year and maybe I may end up next month painting exactly like this again, but I needed to delve into something, find out something for myself, that's what these works are about.

Audience Member 4: I just need to know, like the size of the canvas that you've used, what's the idea behind those?

Deborah: The proportion of these is the same as the proportion of the Japanese woodblock prints, which are actually about this size as well (gestures in the air). But I absolutely love the proportion for the landscape. I just think it's beautiful with figures. So I just took it from the Japanese prints, which I really love. Is that it? Well, I'd like to read a quote from one of my favourite writers, John Banville. I don't know if any of you have read him. And it's from a novel called *Ghosts* and he's describing a painting: 'What happens does not matter, the moment is all. This is the golden world. The painter has gathered his little group and set them down into this wind tossed glade, this delicate artificial light. It is a world where nothing is lost, where all is accounted for, while yet the mystery of things is preserved.' That's a very much loved quote.

Federica: Thank you.