

By the Sea

From *Graham Nickson: Dual Natures*, Frye Art Museum, Seattle, 2000.

Andrew Forge, 2000

You can think of all Graham Nickson's paintings as representing a stage. Our position as viewers is in the seventh row center of the orchestra. The central axis of our viewing dominates every aspect of the picture. It is reinforced by a ruler-straight horizon (*Georgica Bathers*, 1984-96), or by a spread towel that defines the plane of the foreground (*Nexus*, 1984-94) or by the perspectives of tire tracks or boardwalks that lock our viewing into position.

The frontier between the ground plane and what rises up behind it – typically the sky, but sometimes the wall of a building – will be clear-cut, stated with schematic clarity. Usually this hinge between “stage” and “backdrop” makes a key division of the picture, sometimes bisecting the short side of the canvas, sometimes making what looks like a golden section. These ratios will be developed elsewhere, in the placement of figures and in the division of the various fields of color.

What happens on the “stage” itself is marked by extreme formality. Although we tell ourselves that the figures are “bathers,” the word feels a bit too fun-loving for these disciplined, self-absorbed athletes who do impeccable headstands, raising their limbs with such perfect control. These are not scenes of casual frolic: a woman stands rigid, her arms upraised, pulling into a sweater that makes a heavy red triangle over her head. Her knees and the muscles of her shoulders are tense. She occupies a position at the dead center of a double square canvas, 8' x 16'. Her chin, all we can see of her face, rests in line with the waterline, which itself cuts the painting in two horizontally. The rigid formality of her pose is equaled by the formality of her placement in the picture and the formality of its divisions.

The figures are naked or nearly so. But there are props that they work with, clothes that they pull on or step out of, towels, the A-frame stands that lifeguards perch

upon. In a number of pictures, a wooden footbridge features as a kind of framing architecture, offering different levels for the figures, rough-hewn echoes of the marble balustrades and staircases that divide and complicate the spaces in Veronese's grand compositions.

This geometric world is presented to us without distortion, without a sense of geometry being imposed as a stylistic manipulation. That is the point. That is why the metaphor of the stage comes back again and again in our viewing. It feels as if the figures are superbly, meticulously controlled actors, finding their places to a hair's breadth so that the geometry of their placement and action is revealed to us only from our place in front of the stage.

At first sight these paintings are declamatory. Their aggressive, emphatic color, their muscular structure seems to promise vivid expression. But they are deadpan. This is their oddest feature. As depictions they withhold. For all the warmth of the sand, the bathers stand in frozen silence. On the other hand, something is going on round about these pictures. They are asserting an allegiance to a pictorial tradition and without irony or reservation, claiming a place in a line that would include Puvis, Degas, Seurat, Gauguin, Cézanne, Matisse – all of whom saw themselves as belated tyros of the Great Tradition and all of whom recruited bathers as neutral, secular stand-ins for goddesses and heroes. This is the measure of Nickson's ambition.

Born in 1946 in Lancashire, Nickson comes to London and is trained in a particular discipline of drawing from observation. It is a discipline devoted to unprejudiced looking, suspicious of expressive subjectivity, averse to anything arty. His training takes. Much is determined by it. In London he learns the great collections like the back of his hand. A brilliant student, he goes to Italy in 1972 with a Prix de Rome. He is in the footsteps of generations of northern artists going south. Now the wonders of Italian painting come back to him in the context of southern light. As if searching for an antidote to the austerities of his northern background, he paints scores of studies of

sunsets and sunrises, exploring areas of his palette that he hardly ever dreamed of and, at the same time, breaching interesting taboos. Sunsets?!

It is possible that, pondering the course that his own development might take, he found himself paraphrasing the slogan said to have been written on the wall of Tintoretto's studio, "The drawing of Michealangelo, the color of Titian." How would such a paraphrase have gone? The drawing of the Peckham Road and the color of a sunset over the Bay of Naples? That, at any rate, would be one way of putting the program of these vast compositions, which he began to show after his move to America and which he is developing still.

Perhaps something like that is still running in his mind. He has always shown his drawings on equal footing with his paintings, as if offering them for side-by-side comparison. Many of the drawings are extremely large and worked so heavily that they read at the same distance as the paintings. There is nothing tentative about them. They could be said to function like the paintings. The chiaroscuro of charcoal and paper allows or more abrupt modeling, more rugged geometries of form and, in some cases, for more unified light. So setting the two side by side, drawing and painting, is not, as it might be for many painters, to say something about the formation and process of the painting so much as to rehearse before us one of the oldest and densest of studio arguments: black and white or colored? Florence or Venice? – the very argument that Tintoretto had challenged with an impossible synthesis.

His color is extreme. Even in the watercolors that he has been making in the last few years, when he has again been working directly from dawns and sunsets. Here he has had to come to terms with the disobediences of both the motif and of the medium. Perhaps for this reason the watercolors have a warmth and an unpredictable sensuality that the acrylics seem to exclude in the interest of a timeless order. The rising sun won't keep still for him nor will the watercolor submit meekly to his intentions. Even so, he drives it to the limit, forcing it to exchange its transparency for dense saturation and its watery flow for strong contrasts and chunky, incisive drawing.

Indeed, in all his work there is a sense of something being pushed to a limit – a limit of saturation, of tonal contrast, of dissonance. What establishes the limit is a certain conception of light. This is where the line is drawn beyond which color would run berserk. The light is always violent, whether the blazing dangerous noon light of *Atlantic Bathers* (1976-82) or the troubled sunset light that turns skin to the color of flame and shadows on the sand to an electric purple. And he will set off these flaring discords against pitch-black clouds or ponds of indigo that stretch the length of the picture.

The metaphor of the theater comes back. This is light as spectacle, a moment of transformation when for a few minutes the setting sun works alchemy on our surroundings and familiar things are transfigured by light colored to breaking pitch. It is when I recognize this moment of theater in this color that the altogether contemporary dialectic of his pictures comes clear to me and I am able to read in their tight geometries something fragile, as finely balanced as the bather's perfect handstand – and, so the light tells me, as transient.

Andrew Forge
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