

Rachel Berman Recent Work

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Requiem for Harlem East 108th St
Photographer Kelvin LLOYD

RACHEL BERMAN *RECENT WORK*

By Brian Grison

RACHEL BERMAN HAPPENED TO BE IN NEW ORLEANS WHEN SHE WAS BORN, BUT WITHIN WEEKS SHE MOVED ON TO NEW YORK. SINCE THEN SHE HAS LIVED IN MANY PLACES, GEOGRAPHIC, PSYCHIC AND OTHERWISE. SHE NOW LIVES WITH A FRIENDLY BLACK AND WHITE CAT, TAXICAB, IN A STUDIO OVERLOOKING A BUSY STREET IN DOWNTOWN VICTORIA, BRITISH COLUMBIA. TAXICAB OCCASIONALLY WALKS ACROSS UNFINISHED AND EVEN STILL WET PAINTINGS, CONTRIBUTING TO THE PHYSICAL AND EMOTIONAL GRITTIENESS OF BERMAN'S ART.

Until recently, Rachel Berman's life has been so complex, so dubiously colourful and so precarious, that her reluctant recent telling of it to me became a blur of North American cities, European countries, artists, demeaning day jobs, tragic family circumstances, foster parents like The Munsters, years of hard drug and booze addiction, life on the street, dangerous illness, severe medical interventions and chronic poverty. For example, Berman discovered her original first name and birthday, her real family name and her biological parent's first names only about ten years ago, when she was already fifty-two years old. Years ago I knew of her with a completely different name.

All these grim circumstances can be read in her drawings and paintings, if the viewer isn't too complacent, or proud. Though her work does not focus on her own story, there is plenty

of evidence of her jaundiced but surprisingly tolerant view of humankind's frailty.

Berman's subject is the aloneness, the alienation and the anxiety of contemporary urban life. However, her skeptical gaze is balanced by the beautiful sensuality of her careful drawing, graffiti-like pencil marks, pen scratches, erasures, paint smears, smudges and her pallet of blacks, browns, grays and white tones. But despite this material sensuality, Berman's art does not offer escape from the dilemma of modernity.

Her drawings and paintings are breathtaking visceral, physically, emotionally and intellectually, like the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti, or the paintings of Francis Bacon, but with a touch of the austerity of an Edward Hopper or Lucien Freud. This is not an educational pedigree to be ashamed of for a self-taught artist.

Berman's characterization of her practice, presented as a question or challenge to the observer, has a touch of sad humour:

I wonder if people realize the process a painter involves himself in - to paint, not the thing, but the effect it produces: reflection, redrafting, botched attempts, more reflection,

trying things from different angles. I doubt most observers could appreciate the struggle, the tedium, and the exhilaration that comes through the effort - the despair, the relief...

Berman easily acknowledges the idea of life's natural sadness, as if, like the other scars we accumulate as we age and grow wise, melancholy is only a reminder of mortality. She claims that her "happiness wears a sad face," suggesting that her creativity resides in the struggle to maintain this precarious balance.

Rachel Berman's art reminds us that we live in a time of personal, community and institutional suspicion and paranoia. She confronts this contemporary social ill in the subtle narratives of her work, in the composition, titles, technique, colour tones and texture. This too, she characterizes with ironic humor and a subtle gallows sense of exile.

Victoria is certainly the place for me, like none other could have been, to surrender to the miseries of my mind, retrieve the innocence of my heart, relish the amazements of a solitude empty of any loneliness, and revel in my dishevelment.

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EXHIBITION

Winchester Galleries
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However, though it is a charming city, Victoria does not resonate with the wisdom that we respect and even fear in the face of a wise elder or the face of an old city. For this reason, Berman regularly escapes to New York. The drawing, *Requiem for Harlem*, is an example of the hard inner life of that urban world. The drawing is a view of old and near-derelict residential and commercial buildings along 108th Street. Berman unveils the city as a soiled skin across the face of the paper. The drawing, on ordinary craft paper, is graphite stick, oil paint and beeswax, materials that suggest metaphors of ancient grime, grease, staining, and the unexpected preservation of abandoned memory. The composition is panoramic, just high enough on the building facades to eliminate street life and the possibility of nature, such as a tree. On the other hand, the view is low enough to block out the sky; its glaring presence is evident in the sharp shadows across the buildings to the left like an intrusion on the private sadness of old urban misery.

There are no people in this drawing, an odd act of deliberate exclusion for an essentially figurative artist. However, in *Requiem for Harlem*, the city itself becomes the private body of its citizenry, and the face it reluctantly displays in the inquiring harsh light is proud, old, wise and gritty with memory. □

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The themes of the exhibition follow Van Dongen's rich and varied career from Rotterdam to Paris, where he remained a central figure of the modern era.

From North to South, from Symbolism to Neo-impressionism (1885-1904) presents early works executed in Holland, which reflect the art that inspired Van Dongen, from Rembrandt to the Neo-Impressionists; *Van Dongen Illustrator* (1895-1904) focuses on the important role graphic work played in his art; *Van Dongen Fauve* (1904-1912) shows how his style evolved under the influence of avant-garde artists of his day, and circle, like Matisse and Picasso, as well as how he became notorious after his participation in the Salon d'Automne in 1905, and his growing interest in portraiture. This section

also shows his fascination with the worlds of the cabaret and the circus and his obsession with women. *Exoticism and Orientalism* (1910-1917) looks at how his trips to Spain, Morocco and Egypt inspired van Dongen to create a new palette of colours and to explore a different purity of line. *The Artist's Studio: A Social Venue* (1914-1930) focuses on the period when the now famous, or perhaps infamous, Van Dongen frequented Paris high society and painted a gallery of portraits that represent a chronicle of the Roaring Twenties. The final section, *Landscapes* (the 1950s), is a collection of works as well as archival documents and photographs that reach for themes and styles that characterized the artist's early years.

Van Dongen was a fascinating personality, a great individualist and an unabashed explorer of art and life. Fauvism itself was shocking at the time, challenging as it did the convention within established genres, parodying the academic style, and what followed, its social function. Van Dongen took it further, both artistically and morally, subverting the Fauve style in the process.

His works are as shocking as they are titillating, and the *frisson* they evoke will stay with the viewer for a long time, and delightful it is... □

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Judy Chicago is an energetic force, disciplined and concentrated on a larger vision. *When Women Rule the World* is a title as prescient as the advancement of women's rights for the verbal obeisance paid is well deserved – the evidence is in the artwork.

Chicago in Glass is scheduled at the Musée des Maîtres et Artisans du Québec from September 15, 2010 to January 9, 2011. Virginia Eichhorn is curating *Judy Chicago: Dauntless – Fifty Years of Art Making and Other Acts of Courage*. It will be travelling to Europe, the US and Canada beginning in 2011 and is the first major travelling survey exhibition of Chicago's work. The tour is being coordinated by Exhibits Development Group (Washington, DC) in partnership with ACA Galleries (NYC). □

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