

Luminous Transcendence in the Art of Saugy

On first encountering the innovative paintings employing mixed techniques on Plexiglas of the Swiss-French artist Catherine de Saugy, who prefers to be known simply as Saugy, their intriguing combination of fluid organic shapes afloat amid more rectangular forms suggesting portals, evoked memories of Aldous Huxley's "Doors of Perception," its



L'envol

title lifted from a line in the great British visionary William Blake's poem "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell."

Huxley's book was inspired by an experimental mescaline trip undertaken over the course of a single afternoon as part of a much broader program of consciousness expansion. And although Huxley eventually decided that psychoactive (later to be referred to as "psychedelic") drugs were merely "toxic shortcuts" to a "self-transcendence" which could be more lastingly achieved through meditation, autohypnosis, and The Alexander Technique, and other more holistic methods, the experience yielded "purely aesthetic" benefits that led to insights suggesting that, along with Vermeer, Chinese painting, and other examples cited in the text, the author might have had a keen appreciation for the metaphysical aspects of Saugy's art. For her works create a visual language for how the mind expands and experiences a timeless dimension wherein the physical world disperses and becomes pure energy.

One especially apt example can be seen in "L'envol," in which sinuous graceful shapes float like wisps of smoke or translucent rose-colored clouds over superimposed window-like rectangles. As in ancient Chinese scroll painting, these ethereal elements seem like envoys from infinity, an effect enhanced by the perfectly square shape of the Plexiglas panel which, like that of a circle, signifies a limitless eternal expanse (as do, in fact,

the symmetrical formats the artist favors in other works in the series as well). Indeed, for all its visual attributes of purity and balance achieved with a pristine and refined technique characterized by subtle shadings and tonal felicities calculated to please even an aesthete whose primary concern is with formal relationships, "L'envol" transcends its purely aesthetic virtues — as well as the drama of otherworldly incongruities that are normally classified as "surreal" — to achieve a sense of what Huxley, viewing a van Gogh under the influence of mescaline, referred to as "a sacramental vision of reality, where everything shone with an Inner Light and was infinite in its significance."

Here, as in all of Saugy's works on Plexiglas, which she substituted for canvas in 2005, twelve years into her artistic career, the sense of ethereality is enhanced by the translucence of the material itself, which is auspiciously suited to her exquisitely delicate delineation of her forms, as seen in another work on a Plexiglas panel entitled "Le Bouquet de Dulcinee," where the romantic notion of presenting of bouquet to one's sweetheart, inherent in the title, is somewhat ironically dampened by an image that, while essentially abstract, nonetheless suggests the melancholy lyricism of scattered windblown petals of an autumnal burnished orange hue in flight past the unforgiving geometry of a stony gray facade.

Interpreted in such a manner, this composition has the poignant beauty of an Edith Piaf song. Yet one must be cautioned about reading too-specific meanings into any work by an artist as innovated, adventurous and multilayered as Saugy, and in whose richly varied oeuvre such symbols invariably take on a broader, more metaphysical, abstract suggestiveness — here possibly having more to do with the transience of time itself, rather than with the dissolution of a romantic liaison. After all, of her initial decision to move beyond the canvas to Plexiglas, Saugy herself, a musician trained at the Geneva Conservatoire de Musique before turning to painting, has stated, "I had a desire to experiment with painting by introducing another dimension to it; to expand 'finite time,' to drive emotion to express itself by using materials that are supposedly cold and techniques that appear to be complex and inaccessible; to mingle inner vision and outer vision, both of which are captured by our eye, over and beyond logic, analysis and observation."

Obviously, the decision was not determined by considerations of mere

novelty, since Saugy's works on paper are entirely consistent with those on Plexiglas and impressive in their own right, particularly the composition called "Don Quixote," with its complex overlappings of rectangular and circular forms engaging in a geometric dance through which more fluid forms and sinuous linear configurations thread like strains of an elusive melody. She perceived correctly, however, that she could imbue the particular forms in her visual vocabulary with further depth and mystery in the newer medium, the unique qualities of which become immediately apparent in a work called "Winter I."

For here is all the beauty and mystery of the season encompassed, as in a snow globe, in a sublime minimalist composition comprised of a single white-on-white orb contained within the rectangle of the Plexiglas panel. Its perfect symmetry plays off against the subtly irregular configurations of white strokes within its circumference, which could almost appear akin to those in Robert Ryman's white-on-white works, except that in Saugy's painting, rather than merely exploiting the materiality of pigment, they are insulated beneath the surface of the transparent support rather than upon the surface of a canvas and thereby transcend the palpable to suggest more complexly variegated qualities and contrasts between the matte whiteness of powdery virgin snow, the sheen of slippery ice, and even the cirrocumulus clouds that our warm, vital human breath issues out into the frigid



Illusion

winter air.

Indeed, it is Saugy's ability to juggle so many diverse allusions within a single composition and make them speak to us on several levels simultaneously that makes her works on Plexiglas infinitely compelling, amounting to a veritable visual manifestation of the ever shifting kaleidoscope of memory fragments and sense perceptions about which Huxley wrote so eloquently. —Peter Wiley