

LIFE IN THIS DARK TIME / Trisha Orr

The two groups of paintings in this show ('Beloveds and Others' and "Charlottesville Burning') could easily be taken for the work of two different artists with completely different aesthetics. It could seem as if there's little connection or bridge between them. They present two different worlds through the lens of two different aesthetics and artistic strategies. The fact that I'm the artist that produced both groups during overlapping time frames seems almost schizoid even to me.

For most of my life as an artist I've chosen to work representationally and to focus on the order and beauty of the world as it strikes my senses. It was a choice I made as early as my teenage years when it felt like a way of dealing with trauma in my background by focusing on what I found to be affirmative and life-enhancing—a way of creating a stable world. Working in this way, among other things, has helped me to center myself as an artist and a person. The philosopher Phillip Wheelwright once spoke about certain situations having more "ontological tenderness" than others. I like to think that this "tenderness of being in the world" is present in some of the scenes I paint and to bring that forward onto the canvas is one of my ambitions.

This mode of art-making was severely challenged by the events of last August in Charlottesville (where I've lived for over forty years). The torch-lit, alt-right march across the UVa campus, the racist violence and rioting downtown the next day disturbed me deeply. I felt as a citizen that I wanted to respond to these horrible events. I felt that as an artist my usual mode of representing wasn't adequate, wasn't sufficient to the situations I'd witnessed. After some hesitation, I took the risk of responding in an expressionist mode—I felt this choice was forced on me by the nature of those events. My sense is that expressionism is a mode that can expose and dramatize the demonic in certain human behaviors—acts of hatred, violence, destruction. To work authentically in an expressionist mode, for me, means that I must let myself be destabilized by the intensity of the chaos and horror. It's painful. To render it with an accurate intensity and dramatic focus I felt I had to open myself to the worst aspects of what it is to be human. I didn't like making these pieces, but I felt compelled to (as citizen and artist) and the experience confirmed what I believe and what I've witnessed in the work of such artists as Goya (his "Disasters of War") and Leon Golub—that visual art can engage this material and make a meaningful and moral statement about it.

My earliest paintings of complicated still-lives represented a kind of meditation on chaos and beauty—how even a chaotic jumble of embroidered cloth, flowers, and transparent or figured vases could become beautiful if it was stopped and held steady in the moment of the painting.

With my beloveds, I feel like I'm picking a moment out of the flow of human intimacy and interaction and distilling it into a stop-time scene that I and the

viewer can contemplate. Lifted up in this way, these ordinary moments become something stable. Thomas Hardy writes in a poem of his old age about an ordinary, remembered childhood moment when his family gathered by the living room fireplace: “blessings emblazoned that day. Everything glowed with a gleam/ But we were looking away.” In these paintings I try to look toward not “away”—and lift them up to be explored as the ordinary blessings and dramas I feel that they are.

I’m drawn to situations of interiority or reverie—moments when people turn inward even when they are engaged in social settings. I work from drawings and notes made from cell phone photos, and make new drawings and additional notes before each painting session.

The earliest of these paintings are about my dog, Georgie Girl. Later, I moved on to paintings of family members and friends. Most recently, I’ve been interested in painting people that work at my local supermarket.

With the family groups, it’s a matter of painting the faces I love and their gazes—either looking at each other or looking inside themselves, or both at the same time. I find these compositions often present a “safe circle.”

In the supermarket paintings, I start with the simple fact that I think supermarkets are amazing spaces visually—their aisles and checkout counters stacked with products and all the shoppers moving through either purposefully or in a state of mild distraction, and the personnel (who become familiar faces and personalities if you shop in the same supermarket for decades, as I have) presiding with agile detachment over the whole drama.

I’m fascinated by the strange cornucopia of nourishment that is part of the American story for many people and for the middle class in developed countries. Supermarkets, when you shift away from the people inhabiting the scene, represent a chaos of abundance that is both exhilarating and disturbing. In contrast, the scenes of my family and friends gathered around dinner tables or in kitchens bring the story of how we live into a quieter, more intimate focus.

I think of the family and friend paintings and the supermarket paintings as complementary— an intention highlighted by the fact that frequently my family members (husband, daughter) put in an appearance in the supermarket paintings.

I wish I could bridge these modes—the beloveds and the Charlottesville burning. Instead, I’ve decided that to represent their lack of connection and lack of shared artistic vocabulary is itself a symbol of a strange political and cultural situation we experience now in America. Two different visions discordantly juxtaposed. At this point I can’t reconcile these visions, either in my life or in my art. All I can do

is to dramatize each vision to the best of my ability in the mode that seems most adequate and appropriate to its nature.

The truth of this moment in our society seems to me a nightmare eruption in the midst of a dream of tranquility.

Maybe neither nightmare or dream is true, but both are real.