

## Sarah Gillespie – a loving gaze

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A dark tangle of alder branches; a scattering of light reflected on water; a solitary coot swimming amongst a forest of gently swaying reeds, its legs leaving a pattern of concentric ripples that play a game of cause and effect on the water surface; these are the simple, unassuming moments experienced by Sarah Gillespie on her regular walks at Slapton Ley, a nature reserve close to her South Devon home. Their familiar presence has woven itself into the fabric of her life becoming as natural a part of her existence as breathing, a rhythm as regular as the beating of her heart. But they are more than a familiar backdrop to her existence; they have provided an incursion of 'otherness', and offered those moments of Sublime encounter that have become the subject of her work.

Most of us ignore such incidents of the everyday Sublime. We are seduced by the dramatic vistas that are its more usual territory. We crave the involuntary spine-tingling shiver, the mix of awe, wonder, and terror that such scenes evoke; the sense of transcendence that comes from something that defies the limitations of our controlling gaze and reason.

To discern the presence of the Sublime in the ordinary and everyday, however, cannot be achieved through the quick win of the picture postcard glance. It demands time and attentiveness, a sense of humility before the object. It requires a process of slow contemplation, an unhurried reaching out of our gaze to caress every detail of what lies before us. As we do so we are drawn into its orbit, we become absorbed and we begin to look with all of our senses, to see with our tongues, our skin, our nostrils, and our ears. Time seems to slow down, and then, just occasionally, it seems to stop and what has until now been ordinary and overlooked becomes a universe in a grain of sand. We come to realise our insignificance in the vastness of creation. What we have been looking at from a distance seems to reach out and envelop us so that we become inseparable from it, an interconnected part of the whole. But then, in that same instant, the sensation is gone, leaving only a faint, but Sublime memory.

Gillespie's work is an evocation and recreation of this loving gaze and the timeless, sublime moments that arise from it. On her walks at Slapton Ley she makes quick sketches that transfer the memory of her eyes' caresses onto paper. Then back in the studio the slow, concentrated process of looking becomes the slow process of painting and drawing that she learnt in a traditional Parisian atelier where her text books were Cennini and Theophilus.

As a result of her training her work has a technical facility, an almost photographic quality that seems to breathe life into these images of coots, reeds, branches, light, waves, and concentric ripples. But photographs are frozen moments in time whereas Gillespie's works are the laborious recreation of those moments of concentrated looking that result in an impression that time itself has

stood still. The viewer who chooses to look beyond the apparently photographic surface of these works, allowing their gaze to linger on each colour and mark with the same generous concentration they use to gaze upon the world, may find that the intensity of their looking causes the mimetic quality of the works to dissolve.

Most of Gillespie's works are characterised by the strong contrast between light and dark that Edmund Burke saw as one of the true spaces of the Sublime. For her, light is not a means of illumination but a force of transformation, flattening the solidity of three dimensions, and allowing the edges of her forms to melt into an insubstantial haze that reaches out and merges with what is around; leaving no beginning or end, but a seamless whole. As our eyes become lost in their intricate surfaces the dark pattern of lines that once evoked so perfectly the solid form of alder branches transforms themselves into a series of tears and rips in the fabric of space that hint at infinite uncharted depths. Once relieved of their mimetic duties these lines also become a place of silence in which the eye can rest in a moment outside of time.

In contrast, the whites and yellows that are used so effectively to imitate the elusive play of light on water become more substantial, creating craters of colour that record the impact on the canvas of invisible rays of light. These dancing sparks of light caught in the ripples of breeze ruffled water become a messenger from an unseen realm; a moment of Annunciation that bridges the gap between reality and transcendence; an angel tangled in the world whose ethereal form promises otherness, an everyday moment of the Sublime.

As our eyes become disentangled from the seductive surfaces of these works, we see the world anew. Each dark branch becomes a passage through to the immaterial, each reflected spark of light an angel briefly resting in the world's embrace.

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