

Sue Hunt: Paintings and Silverpoints.

The recent plant form paintings and silverpoints in this exhibition are the most eloquent and lyrical work yet from Sue Hunt. They are consummate in their piquant description and courageous gesture, and she approaches the prospect of this interplay with a great sense of adventure. These paintings and silverpoints of plant subjects – chosen not for their opulence or exoticism, but for their very ordinariness and familiarity – pay homage to their quite extraordinary and unexpected colouring and tracery. The plants are seldom isolated for study in a vase or jug, but taken into full possession to be held whilst being drawn and turned in the light to explore their structures, one hand positioning them in their 3d reality, the other transcribing them into a linear gesture upon a surface. At times their arrangement suggests that after being studied they are then laid down seemingly in arbitrary positions, the vertical plane of conventional observation becoming instead what could sometimes be considered as a 'tabletop' of mobile figures with infinite potential.

To the casual viewer the sinuous tracery may describe a bud or leaf, but here it performs a simultaneous description of both the form of a plant and the void its form delineates. Although there is configuration, these studies are not about 'picturing', and critically in this sense, this is a body of abstract work. As if to charge the surface with energy, perhaps a broad brush of tone or colour is applied, or else some vital sweeps of white, or perhaps again a *melée* of finer, convoluted trails. Sometimes before bringing in brushwork there is an immediate commitment to quietly working with line. What is then added might be an embellishment which describes the materiality of the plant, or yet a brushstroke which contradicts that it has materiality at all, when in one place it is swept across the drawing, only to be drawn upon again in another. Whatever the scenario, it is the dynamic that is set up between brushed areas and the most delicate of tracteries responding to the form of the plant, which speaks of 'presence', vitality, tenderness.

The scale of the paintings invites superb tension between energy and stillness. They are flamboyant, dramatic, with turbulent brushwork against which or within which the insistent particularity of line holds its own. Colour becomes promiscuous, lending itself to luminous planes and plant forms alike (ptg 'Alive to it all'). In some studies the colour seems to seep gently from leaves and petals, maintaining its intensity or separating and vaporising into mists of other hues (ptg *Alstromeria* and blue geranium). (Or is it that these plants absorb the colour-energies around them to hold them to themselves in a momentary saturation before they are swept away? (ptg

Valerian and grey panel)) In yet other studies there is the merest presence of stains, as if the petals themselves have brushed the surface in their world of breeze (ptg Hydrangea, composition divided; slvpt Wallflower in jade, umber and veiled crimson).

In contrast to the shifting spatial continuum of brushstrokes, there might be instances of a 'tablet' of more solid tone or colour over perhaps half of the field. This arena is of a different order which invites other events, like water stains (ptg Black-stemmed hydrangea study in grey and magenta), 'negative' line (ptg Composition with valerian and grey panel), or even a hieroglyph (ptg Black-stemmed Hydrangea with grey, russet and magenta), and it is related to the bold bands and stripes of saturated colour that have appeared in previous work. In the silverpoints these stripes are often revisited, performing precise formal roles, for example guying down a linear form to a plane (slvpt Eucalyptus study on turquoise) or to focus interest on a detail (slvpt Star of Bethlehem in umber and turquoise). Further play with spatial zones happens where colour is solidly rendered precisely up to a linear contour only to dissolve away elsewhere (ptgs Valerian study with blue and yellow light, Iris study in indigo, white on grey; slvpt Star of Bethlehem and Eucalyptus study.).

The silverpoints mark a significant departure. They are manifestly related to the paintings and are personally significant both historically and emotionally. Their intimate scale lends itself to the precision of working the silverpoint tool, and the linear quality it gives to plant forms is markedly more distilled in itself and in its disposition in the overall configuration. What comes across is a palpable studiousness in the contemplation of the subject and the particularity of the line. Indeed these pieces say much about the whole concept of 'study', whether it be close scrutiny of something, or the intimacy of the space in which this happens, and it recalls the historical eras of knowledge-building from the familiarity gained through handling and recording objects. Whereas the line conveys 'information', its crafting furnishes more than simple contours of a plant form, for though 'informative', the humanity it exudes in its dance with brushstrokes shifts it into another world altogether. These silverpoints are the art-cousins of botanical illustration. Their lineage is the descriptive drawings of those earlier artists seeking deeper knowledge of their subjects. A timely impetus, and as if in answer to inclinations in this direction, the British Museum exhibition of Renaissance drawing invigorated the course of exploration already embarked upon, renewing the sense of awe and pathos in the presence of quiet Holbein portraits, and even after a lifelong admiration of Leonardo's studies, still freshly inspiring with their synthesis of economy yet absolute integrity, and the searching nature of the line for a 'truth'. Such values have remained to the fore during the execution of these new studies. Some of them here,

in the precise touches of white on petal or leaf, are strongly resonant of Renaissance drawings, and also of the grisaille paintings of the time (slvpt Star of Bethlehem on ochre ground).

Alongside the richness of its heritage, there is something else about working with silverpoint (as distinct from conté, charcoal, pencil, ink) which has sustained a love of this new medium, and it is the way the tone of the silvered traces gathers warmth over time. Their darkness turns from a near-black to a burnt umber which gives a softness to the form – suggestive that these marks are not a fixed offering but, like the plant itself, have a ‘life’ which ‘warms’ to their modest subject, like the plant’s sensitivity to its environment. There is a humanity in this, a kind of reciprocation in the private act of describing a living thing, because the contemplative nature of this sustained engagement is essentially a private undertaking between beings, the growing of an intimacy borne of reciprocal disclosure.

Overall Sue Hunt’s recent territory provides us with a rare opportunity to savour impressive painterly skill in eloquent concert with sensitively descriptive drawing. This matured direction has exciting potential and there is plenty to evidence it here.

Karin Hiscock

20 October 2011