

REVIEW AMARIE BERGMAN

FORMS OF PRAISE

Gabryel Harrison
3-25 May 2008
Jacana Gallery
2435 Granville Street Vancouver

"Look for the brightest light and the darkest shadow."
Edouard Manet

In 2004 Gabryel Harrison showed a body of work called *The Fifth Element* at Aion Gallery in Vancouver. It was a series of paintings about ether, a mystical substance, anciently believed to fill the upper regions of unknown space, beyond the clouds. The work was cerebral. It was reductive yet richly surfaced, driven by geometry and text – lines of her poems in gold leaf and mysterious braille inscriptions – with extreme light / dark contrasts. In the intervening years, her conceptual art evaporated into the ether, replaced by representational art that appeared to be the direct opposite. At Harrison's latest exhibition at jam-packed Jacana Gallery, the paintings of loosened bouquets of flowers continue to carry that inimitable esoteric bent she's known for, perhaps less magnetically, but the look-at-me down-to-earth style is immediately seductive.

Almost without exception, each painting spins on an axis between light and dark. The whites are creamy; the blacks are nocturnal. These opposite signifiers of metaphysical co-ordinates in any other hand might weigh down the flower petals. But Harrison deftly strokes on inordinate amounts of luscious Vatican and fiery red, tints of coral and, what Mia Johnson calls, 'labia-pink' – all suffused with gold. She adds touches of cerulean / burnt sienna / cadmium yellow and pale aquamarine, all of which act as intermediaries, trading colour-currency into and out of the axis mundi.

Roses and lotuses are suspended, connected by two earthly elements: air and water. Think clouds lit-up in the sky and then morphing into a map of oceanic islands. And so the viewer, bypassing the outer perimeters, visually enters the center of the paintings where the mind can integrate with a voluptuous, yet seemingly sacred, realm.

Using oil paint, tar and beeswax, Harrison instills frequent vertical drips that are becoming her signature style to muss things up. Even so, they are not wildly thrown around: the drips are so controlled they ground the viewer as well as lubricate the flowers, assisting them to slip into our consciousness.

The very physicality of flowers – touch, scent, sight, volume – never minding their limited longevity, affects Harrison very much. This underlies how the work comes into being. In a recent article by Sarah E. Campbell *Tony Scherman: Pensées Impensables* Campbell described Scherman as attempting to “re-code” and recreate the essence of his subjects with intimate proximity. Harrison similarly makes this attempt at re-coding and recreating in her work. Essentially, she’s an intermediary, translating the language of ‘the known’ by leaning over the edge into ‘the unknown,’ where “the brightest light and darkest shadow” reside. I came across a quote by Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Negotiating Rapture*, a book Harrison introduced me to, alluding to this process: “language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. Review the multiplicity (through) ... translating from one language into another – Asking, thanking ... greeting, praying.” It also seems pertinent to the unusually quiet title of this exhibition, *Forms of Praise*.

The lotus paintings especially linger in one’s memory, particularly, the 5 x 7’ *Drinking Darkness Mouth Blooming Light* and *Between Worlds*. The latter with its ascending lotus in resurrection mode is the most spacious work in the gallery, hence becoming either the exception or the forerunner. For the most part, Harrison places detached purity *and* visceral sensuality side by side so the work seesaws between them – something like taking both virginal and magdalenesque sacraments at once. It is further evidence of her continuum in a contrasting duality.

Obviously, the Harrison paintings are aligned to some of Scherman’s (also O’Keefe’s and Manet’s) roses and Monet’s water lilies. But perhaps a closer match might be a singular work of Courbet’s: *The*

Origin of the World in which a quiescent, yet provocative female torso exemplifies the psychic charge of eroticism that subliminally infiltrates every painting in this show. Harrison's flowers elicit the question whether they are resting in a state of anticipating 'pollination,' acting passionately or are they being satiated ... or something else? Wanting to be noticed? (Noticed before they die, decay and disappear?) Wanting to be both loved and immortalized?

"Whatever it is that pulls the pin, that hurls you past the boundaries of your own life into a brief and total beauty, even for a moment, it is enough."

Jeanette Winterson *GUT Symmetries*