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ART: Making History Stand Still In the studio with Sabrina Rowan Hamilton

One must always maintain one's connection to the past and yet ceaselessly pull away from it.

— Gaston Bachelard

Spending time with an artist rarely a sensible or pleasant thing to do — particularly if one has come to like one of his or her paintings. It's a bit like hanging a sign around your neck saying 'disillusion me now, please'. Studio visits are all too often wrestling-matches between good manners and human sympathy on the one side, ganging up again basic aesthetic judgement. Because it's not a good feeling, really, to discover that a recent brilliant 'find' is just a freakish one-off success into which some plodder accidentally stumbled — worse, really, to see that what looked like a charming if naïve little panel has been generated by a self-important bore who insists on overloading it with naïve but entirely un-charming glosses of 'theory'. After this vernissage of annoyance has taken place, the work can never be cleansed of it, and another little source of pleasure or engagement is banished from the world. So I don't always like visiting studios, or hearing artists make the case for their own work, and I like it least of all when that work has already started to occupy an increasingly important place in my own field of visual reference.

So when I was finally due to turn up at Sabrina Rowan Hamilton's Chelsea studio and look at some of her more recent paintings, my feet dragged a bit. I had first encountered Rowan Hamilton's work on the basis of a couple of paintings included in a mixed group exhibition for for which I was writing the catalogue essay. Both the works were, unlike most of the works in the show, highly gestural abstracts. At the same time, they were full of passages anyone could read, albeit in a dozen different, self-contradictory way: ladders, tower-blocks, tall upward-reaching structures set against a ground that pushed them forward but also shimmered and smouldered in its own somewhat hermetic right.

Before the show I had spoken briefly to Rowan Hamilton on the 'phone, ringing from a friend's kitchen, to get some ideas for the catalogue. Rowan Hamilton quoted Gaston Bachelard (a French writer on the epistemology of science, poetics and dreams) on the nature of space, referred in passing to a bad divorce, and talked me through some technical points. But at that point, what I saw mattered much more than what I heard. Rowan Hamilton's palette, at that point, was still chthonic and forbidding. These were dark paintings, and not just in the tonal sense, either — tall rectangular panels that radiated fury and despair — postcards from a journey into a particularly bleak, unwelcoming, reparative place. The limpid blue-grey fields recalled the less saccharine products of St Ives, but leavened with a pervasive urge to mess things up, to jar as much as to balance, that is firmly rooted in our own times. Here and there, the pigment had

been roughed up with marble dust and sand, creating ashen or tarry surfaces that recalled Kiefer, but without that very male grandiloquence verging on bombast, or perhaps the early Tapiés — expressionism pronounced in accents that invoked older shores than those on which de Kooning had pitched up, anyway. And then there was the moment where a crystalline structure, drawn on in pigment, seemed to make reference to late 1940s Bacon — as did the take-it-or-leave-it nonchalance, the opalescent colour and the indescribable uncalculated glamour of that brushwork.

These were, in short, paintings that not only stood out in a group show, but frankly would have stood out amid far more serious collections. At the exhibition itself, they were the ones that caught the attention of several of the other artists — which was no surprise, as they looked like unruly, aggressive cygnets compared with what were, in the main, the fluffy ducklings around them. I am not sure whether anyone bought them, but they stuck in my mind, an irritant as much as a stimulus.

But Rowan Hamilton's work didn't stand still. Before long I heard that she was using a lot more colour — that her paintings were becoming lighter, warmer, 'happier'. For her actual real-life friends, people who cared about her on a personal level, this was obviously a source of delight, so intensely did they read these works in terms of Rowan Hamilton's own emotional state. But as someone who didn't know the artist, and hence was under no obligation to take an interest in her well-being, I worried more than a little about what this increased colour — always mentioned as if 'more colour' and 'more light' were inevitably Good Things — would mean for the work. Had those grim, fierce, furious near-monochromes been nothing but a brief aberration within a long happy life of holiday-coloured Sunday paintings? Was Rowan Hamilton's art actually, basically, ultimately quite *nice*?

It remains a source of joy to me that the answer, once I had made my way to Rowan Hamilton's house — a place that reminds one why Chelsea in the 1960s seemed sexy and fun rather than full of investment bankers — and seen the new work, turned out to be 'no'. Art rarely silences me — the reverse, generally — but those first ten minutes in Rowan Hamilton's beautifully-illuminated studio virtually deprived me of the power of speech. It was as if my language had somehow buckled under the profundity of their impact. The date was late April 2003. Rowan Hamilton shifted large panels and talked me through what she had been doing. Her mood? Self-confident, electric — she seemed to have crossed some sort of barrier, to have suddenly become secure in a sense of her own competence, her own ability to solve the sort of problems she set herself. Dark-haired and slim, late-30-something (I guess) but broadly ageless, wearing jeans, a scoop-necked top and a necklace that might have been either a family heirloom or a good buy from Topshop, casually funny and extremely passionate all at the same time, her talk flitted across a recent visit from a much-respected teacher — a wild party away from London — the impetuous swipe with a loaded brush that had resolved the apparent ineffable irresolution inherent in the elegantly anarchic work she had just placed on the wall in front of the two of us.

What was there to say? Reproduction does not do justice to the shimmer or grit of these surfaces, the knife-edge tonal contrasts or agreements, their scale and authority. They need light — lots of natural light — and possibly a richer, more unpredictably human context than the starkness of a gallery wall in order to do all that they can do. All of which goes a long way towards explaining why the reaction generated by those two smaller works, all those months before, hung in company that could hardly keep pace with them, was nothing like the effect of being surrounded by dozens and dozens of these paintings and drawings — works where a richly sensuous delight in the sheer force of applied pigment somehow bonded with raw emotion in a way that ripped every single word out of my head.

It was true, of course, that there was more colour in her work — very sweet colours, too — a palette of chalky pinks, lime greens and iridescent violets, occasionally electrified by an infusion of brilliant orange or even yellow. In lesser hands, indeed, it might have looked a little too sweet — pretty, eager-to-please colour, invoked to drive away the menace of those greys, blacks and white. Here, though, it did no such thing. If anything, the sweeter colours gave the darker shades a more distinctive voice — pried into the ambiguity of their shadows and unleashed another sort of depth. Or to steal a phrase from T. J. Clark, their sudden appearance unlocked the ‘coldness, brightness, lordliness and nonchalance’ inherent (to me at least) in the work.

Readers will, of course, remember that T. J. Clark, in the essay about Pollock from which these words are taken, sees all these qualities as hallmarks of a specific sort of modernist achievement — one very much rooted, it must be said, in the 1940s and 50s. So was my reaction to the nature of Rowan Hamilton’s highly expressive abstracts — sited, it should probably be said again, very much in the context of European rather than American gestural abstraction — distinguishable from nostalgia for an earlier age — more innocent, less ironic — when painting occupied a different role in the world than it does today? I wondered this at the time, and wonder it still. And then there was something about Rowan Hamilton’s house — ‘love, love, love’ chalked onto the risers of the stairs, the battered grandeur of the furniture juxtaposed with these breathtaking paintings, the infinite self-confidence and casual glamour of the whole set-up — that seemed to look backward as well as forward, too, or rather to be comfortable in both these places. Art-historical time and autobiographical time both seemed to operate strangely here. Things I thought had gone forever felt newer than ever before. What was going on?

Rowan Hamilton, though, is a magnificent exponent of her own work. She certainly does not need anyone else writing about her, and if anyone does, it is simply to fulfil some need of the writer’s own, rather as Rowan Hamilton feels compelled to paint for her own reasons. She was, for instance, highly persuasive on the subject of abstraction (a semi-meaningless term, we both agreed), painting (a basic human impulse), and the ongoing validity of art as means of individual expression.

I visited Rowan Hamilton again in November 2003, when the leaves had been stripped by the wind from the trees in her garden and a cold, unsparring winter light flooded her still-marvellous studio. The months since May had, it turned out, been astoundingly

productive — throwing up half a dozen very major works, as well as others that have, whatever their flaws, a faint dusting of proximate greatness scattered across their surfaces. The previous visit had, to some extent, prepared me for what I was going to see, and given me reliable terra firma from which to gain some leverage on Rowan Hamilton's style.

Had there been changes? Inevitably, there had, almost from work to work. On one side of the studio was a magnificently simple, 'open' painting in which the horizontal bands, rather than being painted over to become the 'towers' as many of her other recent works, had instead been allowed to describe a rather calming series of horizon-lines across the picture. Amongst them Rowan Hamilton had scrawled 'where did the love go', while a purple rectangle floated like some becalmed vessel awaiting rescue. The result reminded me a little of Twombly's maritime scenes, but with a meaning both less fixed and less finite. Meanwhile on the opposite wall there hung a painting crammed with so much incident, so many improvised solutions to so many pressing problems, that one could have untangled the whole self-evident yet evanescent story of its facture over a period of hours or perhaps years. Rowan Hamilton herself was expansive on the subject of the 'stillness' for the former work, the finely-balanced complexity of the latter one. And indeed, there is a sort of maturity in knowing when to leave well enough alone, followed closely by a mercurial refusal to allow 'maturity' to become mannered. No, this visit wasn't destined to become a disillusionment, either. The work still hit as hard as ever. I didn't know where the journey was leading, but there was no place where I'd have rather been.

Rowan Hamilton scratches words across her work for all sorts of reasons — because she has studied Japanese calligraphy, because she loves Hockney's earlier work, because the words mean something to her — but also, one suspects, in order to disrupt the surfaces, the easy ways of seeing, and to avoid becoming bored by it. Engagingly, 'boring' is written on one of the panels, alongside 'bling'. There is clearly a strong intuitive force informing her best work, leading it out from anecdote to something both more general and less confined. This comes out not only in the emotional sunshine and shade, but even in the development of individual works, which sometimes bear all the marks of having lived alongside a real, contingent, emotionally-functioning person for months or more. Drips that run 'up' from the bottom of the painting, passages painted over and impastos built up — no, these are not paintings that have been flung together in a day or two, or paintings that can be created on demand. She can't, she insists, paint to order. And indeed, as far as that goes, Rowan Hamilton's life and art could not, one imagines, easily be separated one from the other. Her darker works came out of a time when she was facing divorce, the loss of a beloved home, and perhaps even a sort of crisis about what her art could achieve. Her happier works are, by the same token, full of hints, hopes, loves and near-misses, fragments of sensation gradually ossifying into memory. Time operates oddly, here, too. It becomes caught in the paint, embedded in pigment, ready to be painted over or across.

Yet despite the intuitive, even visceral nature of some of the work, Rowan Hamilton is by no stretch of the imagination a naive or unselfconscious artist. She knows her

contemporaries, goes to their private views and reads her art magazines. On an obvious level, her conversation is dotted with shrewd, sometimes arresting insights into the art world, past and present. Our most recent conversation skimmed over the regrettable neglect of Roger Hilton, the reasons why Howard Hodgkin's paintings do so well on television, a perhaps unexpected interest in the work of Sarah Lucas and that fellow employer of succinct phrases (although used to very different effect), Tracey Emin. It's all fresh, independent-minded stuff, delivered with confidence, irony and an admirable admixture of sympathy — and a notable willingness to pick an argument. But there is also a critical, scrutinising eye at work. Hughie O'Donoghue's recent show at the Imperial War Museum draws generous praise, but also some sustained technical observations about his ability to create space, while another painter in oils is brightly condemned as someone who does one thing only, but does it very well. And indeed, someone could, I suspect, create a perfectly good profile of Rowan Hamilton simply by logging the perceptive comments she makes about her peers and then treating them as tokens of a particularly cold and unsparing self-awareness. For Rowan Hamilton certainly can create space, even in abstract paintings where this always seems, somehow, a harder struggle, while her worst enemy could not accuse her of repeating herself. This is no accident. She knows what she is doing. The impulse that drives her to cite a philosopher of science, to seek perfect formal solutions even when these are carried out in what look like the effusions of her own soul, is rigorous as well as passionate. It is, obviously, no accident that one of the most aesthetically satisfying if tragic mathematicians of the past few centuries, Sir William Rowan Hamilton, shares the artist's surname. There are different ways in which to solve the problems with which the world presents us.

All of which is a long way of saying that Rowan Hamilton is not only an intuitive artist, but an intelligent one, too. Her series of City & Guilds art degrees culminated in an MA, in the course of which she completed a dissertation titled 'The Power of Art to Transform Lives', looking in depth at the work of Kiefer, Scully and Beuys, among others. Modestly, she now claims that she never really answered the question set up by her title. Yet when we met in November we ended up spending quite a long time talking about whether art changes anything — whether Barbara Hepworth, for instance, busily designing work for the United Nations' central plaza, was simply wasting her time — about whether those post-war aspirations for art's transformative force have any continuing validity, or merely period charm. Rowan Hamilton, for better or worse, is certain that they do — that art really can make the world a better place, albeit at the level of individual lives, and perhaps the communication of real emotions and experiences, rather than at the level of cheap political gestures or pretences of universal applicability.

And indeed, in conversation, Rowan Hamilton is quite clear that ultimately she paints for no one but herself — not to illustrate a general point, but to express and transcend some personal compulsion. This is, of course, a richly political and ideological stance. Rowan Hamilton is indeed, fortunate that she has never been forced into a position of having to produce signed Rowan Hamiltons on demand for every Kensington-domiciled investment banker who wants something that will harmonise with his sofa and his curtains. This practical fact has probably helped to keep something raw and personal alive in her art long after it has faded out of the work of some of her peers. But all the same, this

emphasis on the transformative, positive power of art is important in understanding the work that is emerging from Rowan Hamilton's studio. The unrepentantly personal is, in Rowan Hamilton's art, always destined to become at least the potentially universal, while the purpose is not fame or fortune, but rather an aspiration to alter the world for the better. For ultimately, Rowan Hamilton sees the personal as the political. She's impressively well-informed on the minutiae of hands-on Westminster politics and the dangers of an Atlanticist foreign policy, and indeed, keen to discuss these apparently unappealing topics. She is a great supporter of peace. Or to put it another way, she is highly political, but in an individual, slightly quirky way that is at once admirable and hard to pigeon-hole. Certainly, she seems far more interested in integrity than in party labels. Whatever is going on here, it looks a bit like dogma portrayed in a highly personal rendition of quicksilver.

But then Rowan Hamilton thinks more about history than many artists do. At Exeter, she completed a history BA with a strong emphasis on the sad recent century of German history. So she's seen Beuys and Kiefer from both sides, as it were — their critical take on history, as well as their art. And indeed, as far as that goes, it would not be hard to argue that, instead of being about pure aesthetic pleasure, ultimately Rowan Hamilton's work is about history. There it is, our past — a past of poisoned relationships, dreams that go wrong, innocence and perfection both enriched and ruined — on the canvas before us. Rowan Hamilton, who lives with her canvases for months at a time, probably embeds more in them in this sense than many artists do.

So these paintings, for all their superficial, evident glamour, are at the same time records, x-rays, artefacts articulate about the facts of their making. But at the same time, her work is also about that very human, rarely successful attempt to bring history to a momentary standstill. Speaking to Rowan Hamilton, narratives about paintings so often revolve around finding endings. They are so often about the final flourish that finishes off a work, the stroke of a brush or calligraphic line that seals off the movement and drama beneath it. A green cross, a solution to the problem of some blue in the upper left-hand corner is the penny in the mouth of the incident, the action, the unpredictability of everything beneath. Time stops, history stands still, the past becomes soluble, intelligible and perhaps redeemable. Long before 11 September 2001, Rowan Hamilton was painting twin towers in burnt-out, disaster-stricken pigments. There's a sorrow in these paintings that can, alas, expand to meet the world around it, but also a sense of order that argues, persuasively, for the human impulse to make sense of anything, no matter how horrific.

As for what the works are 'about' — well, whatever her feelings about painting and its ability to change the world, Rowan Hamilton has probably resigned herself by now, as that 9/11 example suggests, to the labile quality of 'meaning' when it comes to visual art. Metaphors can be anyone's plaything. Once she has gained the audience she deserves, nothing will be about her own life any more. The lost Moroccan home can, as we have seen, become the wounded tower-block in the course of a London morning. Other scraps of meaning are equally, teasingly flexible: the scribbled cube-like forms, the recurrent crosses, the suggestive titles of some of the works.

But even this turns out, really, to be a meditation on time and its effects. Rowan Hamilton has said herself that ‘like an old photograph or the pages of a diary I started painting black and white, the history of the painting clearly visible ... stripes, stacks, blocks of flats — the passing of time captured in a vertical structure — past, present and future caught in a single moment.’ So wherever those towers or pages are seen to come from or wherever they seem to direct the imagination, in some sense it hardly matters, any more than the exact chronology of those infinitely rich, complicated, time-scarred surfaces. Rowan Hamilton claims that she is glad to get rid of finished works, feeling that they might as well get out in the world and start making lives for themselves. Nor is this simply bravado. Not all works could do such a thing, but Rowan Hamilton’s, in fact, almost certainly can, without the need for any explanation or exegesis, either from painter or critic.

All of which may seem to set up some spurious opposition between intense, almost lavish formal beauty — there’s no weaker word for what is going on here — and the burden of content it is being asked to bear. Of course not all the works bear this load with equal effectiveness. How could they? But then the occasional failure of a work to resolve itself properly, of all the elements to stand in the right relation one to the other, is perhaps the price one pays for the intensely attractive sense of casualness that pervades Rowan Hamilton’s work — a casualness that would seem almost dandyish, so extravagant does it look in practice, were there not such an obvious weight of conviction underpinning it. A surface here, a slash of paint there, a word or phrase roughly scribbled in chalk to puncture any hint of complacency — these are paintings that celebrate contingency while at the same time saluting the human need to do something about contingency.

Such art requires self-confidence verging on arrogance — strong nerves, strong beliefs and a formidable sense of perspective. But few other works have the weight with which to make sense of the times in which we live. So I am glad to have met Sabrina Rowan-Hamilton, glad to have spent time in her studio, glad to have heard her comments about what she is painting. She is, beyond doubt, a major artist, whether or not her aspirations to change the world deliver all she hopes for them.

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