

Gary Goodman: *A Carnival of Sadness* by - Norbert Lynton, July-August 1997

People are disconcerted by the way Gary Goodman paints. They are drawn to the colour and the activity of the brush, in short to his lively painting, and then they are perplexed, just as I was when I first saw his work. Is he being funny? Is he mocking the human beings he is picturing, large and small figures, alone or interacting, in the simplest of settings, accompanied perhaps by some other image like a tree, a bird, the sun, the moon? Is he playing some sort of ironic game, as do many of the fashionable international artists of these decades? Do we lump him in with the clever producers of what has been proudly labelled Bad Painting?

Obviously Goodman's way of painting can be categorized as primitive, and thus has a long history in modern art, going back, for instance, to Paul Klee. Childlike? Graffiti-like?

The great Dubuffet taught us to see gravity as well as humour in the images he developed from the supposedly unsophisticated art of scrawls on walls. Many others have drawn on this resource of instinctive human expression, and this must be where Gary Goodman's scrawls too have their origin. It signals innocence, directness, plain speech unadulterated by artistic self-consciousness. Others have worked to eradicate style from their painting, to develop idioms that once were very shocking in their apparent naivety and brusqueness - think, for example, of Matisse's great *Dance* and *Music* canvases of 1910. Brutal at first sight, we see them now as miracles of energetic painting, unmitigated by a pre-existing visual language.

Goodman has always been a painter, he is passionately attached to the medium (though some of his work is in three dimensions). His work has changed but little over the six or seven years I have been aware of it, in mixed exhibitions (another painter drew my attention to it, making me look harder where puzzlement had tended to turn me away) and, much more recently, visits to his tight, busy little studio and some knowledge of the man and his concerns. I have come to see beyond the initial funny/unfunny issue.

Look with me. This man paints with care as well as impulse, with delicacy as well as his anti-pretty devices. I think that, over the years, his art has become more delicate, more refined, without losing any of its impact. Notice the fluency of his paint, how the movement of the brush can be caring, loving as well as sharp. He tends now to paint in acrylics on paper, which he mounts on boards, building up images that are often quite large. Why Paper? I think because it enables him to use his medium like gouache or even translucent watercolour, benefiting from the smoothness of paper as well as the range of densities, from opaque, even lumpy, to the finest of washes. Far from brutal, Goodman's way of painting is highly poetic.

His images are of figures, sometimes in fairly specific scenes, sometimes in more generalized, atmospheric settings. Single figures, interacting figures, often male and female; no elaborate narratives but simple, not very explicit scenes we can easily connect with once we meet him on the level of idiom, recognizing the refinement. There are encounters, engagements of various sorts, bittersweet often.

What are these paintings about? Gary Goodman is a man and moves through life, in daily reality as well as his imaginings, like we all do but with additional vividness, you could say with an intense need beyond the experience of most of us. That is what makes him the painter/poet he is. He is shy to parade his life-problems. There is a statement he has been writing and revising over the years but still hesitates to make public. The fact is that he and his wife have two daughters, and that one of them, Tilda, suffers from an incurable disease. Bad luck? One knows of such cases, and sympathizes. I have myself carried my youngest son out of the house, convinced he would be dead within the hour. Goodman's portrayal of himself and his family is of course distanced a little by the Goodman idiom - we don't have to identify them, but can read them as more generalized pictures of people and their doings - but the situation is there, in every brushstroke.

We are not very good in this country at accepting pain in art. (It is a fact that he has a wider public for his art in Germany, with its experience of Expressionistic modes in art, music, and literature, than in Britain.) We come round to it when it is dramatized, as in Francis Bacon. Here is a different kind of offering - one well known to us in writing, from Swift to Samuel Beckett: tragic-comedy, that leaves us hesitating between empathy and amusement.

'Can painting laugh or cry?', Goodman asks in his unpublished statement. Yes; his work proves it, both at once. He does not mean to ram his anxiety down our throats. 'I am optimistic about my pessimism'. Tilda is a living precious being, 'an angel with a broken wing ...my inspiration'; her illness is the enemy, 'a devil, a demon, as a monster or shadow'. And yes, of course, there are other things in life too: '... Hares fighting, colours and paints determinedly playing, ... the North, music, nostalgia, Melancholy autumn evenings, Children, Things seen, Things felt.' He is a painter. Everything contributes, but above all he is one who makes images with paint, and that brings its own joys and difficulties, discords and resolutions.

In the middle of his statement comes the line 'Life is a carnival of sadness', and I have borrowed it for the title of this piece. It says much in little, and we know its truth at our various levels of experience and openness. Art is about being open, but of course it is also, never forget, about making art. Goodman's paintings have coherence, beauty, vividness: they are much more than jottings from his personal diary, though that would be a lot: they are intelligently worked art, in which impulse, not to mention the instinctual talent of the true painter, is mitigated by self-awareness, self-criticism. What comes across to us as direct action had been intelligently, painstakingly developed. The freshness of the results is amazing. So is the multilevel way his images address us. Primitive? Crude? I marvel at his lyricism and delicacy.

Norbert Lynton is an art historian and art critic, who after teaching in art schools, writing regularly for Art International and The Guardian and working at the Arts Council, became professor of the history of art at the University of Sussex (1975-89) and served as dean of its School of European Studies (1985-88).

His best known book is *The Story of Modern Art*; among his other books are those on Ben Nicholson and Victor Pasmore; he is now working on William Scott and on the Russian painter-sculptor Tatlin, as well as writing about contemporary art for *Modern Painters* and other journals.