

The Priseman Seabrook Collection

In the works of the Priseman Seabrook Collection, there is a sense of time being slowed down. Whether in the geometric, deliberate abstract constructions of Charley Peters, Ben Cove or Mary Webb, or the closely observed detail of Linda Ingham's self portrait, the paintings feel considered, slowly built up, and realized over a period of concentration, focus, and solitude.

Perhaps this solitude is most apparent in Nick Middleton's painting *Projection*, which is painted in intense photographic detail. The subject is a solitary painter working in the light of a projection – she is entirely focused on the flat surface of her canvas, slowly creating an illusion of verisimilitude, from tiny strokes of a thin brush. When painting, the painter is almost invariably alone: whether the subject is abstract or figurative, the painter builds a relationship with their subject, which is then put out in the world for the viewer to relate to.

The paintings in the Priseman Seabrook Collection speak to me of intimacy. The subjects are usually pared down: a person, a face, a grid of squares, two triangles. They are not showy, ostentatious paintings that labour for meaning, but ones that tend towards a simple idea, articulated in paint as clearly (and generously) as possible.

The paintings are mainly small to medium in size (no painting in the collection exceeds 160cm along its length). They do not overwhelm the viewer, but invite her to draw close. Unlike gigantic works seen in public spaces which speak of monumentality and grandeur, these works are more suited to a domestic interior – works that can be lived with, can be handled and moved by a single person, and that invite inspection.

There is something intimate in the tone of the works themselves. As in Robert Priseman's *Girl Looking Down* (the painting of a girl's face against a dark background, gazing downwards), there is a silence – even a mystery – to most of the works in the collection. The paintings do not easily reveal themselves (they

are not 'one-liner' works), but ask for a personal engagement from the viewer to look, reflect, and return some of the time taken in making the work through beholding it.

For me there is an echo in the work between the time taken by the painter, absorbed in their solitary task, and that given by the viewer, welcomed in by the painter to engage for however long in its private world. This intense engagement feels particular to viewing small paintings: statues, large paintings, theatre or the cinema address large crowds, in the plural, but a small painting demands a close engagement by a single person. The paintings speak to their viewers as equals, one-to-one.

The paintings speak of people, places, forms and colours that are well known and close to the artist. Whether in the vignettes of buildings in Sean Williams's, Marguerite Horner's, or Mandy Payne's paintings, the battered sink in Lee Maelzer's, or the vigorous red and black brushstrokes in Karl Bielik's work, each painting has a voice built up from the nuances of visual and painterly choices that the artist has taken through making the work. They make the general particular: from (in most cases) a rectangular canvas surface, and tubes of colour, the artist finds their way to expressing something they are satisfied with – that they want to communicate to the viewer.

Paintings answer back – as in a game of chess the painter puts down each layer, hoping they might win that turn, or at least advance their chances of success – if the layer is not 'right' another will follow until eventually the painting either 'comes off' or is discarded (until perhaps another time when a new game can begin). Through all these choices, and indeed from all the works the painter has ever made, a voice starts to form for the individual artist's practice – potentially as recognizable as Billie Holiday's.

What is fascinating about the Priseman Seabrook Collection is that all the paintings it brings together were made in Britain, and in the twenty-first century. It assembles the individual voices of the painters in a single grouping – inviting

the viewer to tease out connections and overlaps in approaches (as has been done in this catalogue – the works organized into three broad categories).

Now, as the collection is seen in another country (and another continent) for the first time, we invite viewers in China to see the work through two lenses: as individual works that may speak to you personally, and as a grouping of paintings that might suggest something of the location in which they were created – whether in the colours, the atmospheres, the brushstrokes or the subjects. Perhaps in seeing the responses to the works in new countries, we may gain a better understanding ourselves of what makes this collection Contemporary British Painting.

Matthew Krishanu, May 2017