

# THE NIGHT PAINTER

"...the eternal eyes which Night has opened within us." - Novalis

Raha is a night painter. This has nothing to do with absence of light. Rather it has to do with the blurring of a distinction. There is on the one hand "painting itself", the activity of painting, the object produced, the thinking around it. Primarily, of course, it has to do with the crystallization of something, be it in material or immaterial form; something that will be named, represented, categorized, catalogued, theorized over.

A dead thing always, meriting some posthumous tribute. Then there is something which is "not painting": "life itself" would be both too general and too specific to serve as equivalent; "everything else" a known quantity, which this is not. But say it is the mirror of what a painting is: the point at which a painting stops being a painting, the very point of contact with this "other thing" which is both itself and its beyond. The unknown quantity of which art is the subtrahend.

Most paintings stop where vision ends. There on the wall, or on the page, or on the concept, they block further vision. Others of a much rarer kind seem to exist primarily outside their frame. They begin their work once you look not at them but through them. They continue to move once you've turned your back to them, like Matta's vortices, which move in ways quite other than physical, or Agnes Martin's lattices, which begin to speak; or Van Gogh's olive groves, whose pulse seems to die down, the blood to thicken somewhere above and behind them; or those spots in Artaud's drawings, the tachygraphy of a third hand which is their real subject, that third hand which is the unspeakable inverse of anything "artistic".

The night painter is in the habit of starting from the "other side" of things. Sound emerges from where sound has ceased, movement from where everything has been stilled. Light is distilled from thick, palpable blackness, which has nothing to do with darkness. There is a serenity and a density to the night painter's works, a nearness which has come from far away, a presence which never quite "is". Feldman and Schubert are night painters in music, Walser and Hedayat in writing; Goya and Rembrandt had their long spells of night painting.

Raha's primary matter is light: black light, blinding light, the maze of an encounter with light. Yet this light, constantly renewed, is always unfamiliar. It is like opening one's eyes at dawn to the blinding sun: slowly forms take shape, geographies spell out, but to increasing strangeness, retaining a quality of hallucination. Her art operates in this half-waking state. And as light solidifies and forms become clearer, somehow they become more hallucinatory, harder to wrap around consciousness.

That is why one is never done looking at these drawings, these paintings. The first encounter with them is a kind of shock, a vertigo of sensation. But then you begin to realize that seeing them is not enough. That they will continue doing what they're doing: their intricate rhythms and musical modulations, the walkways and pathways in and out of light, the surge of dark waves that bring figures out and hide them again. Seeing them one is subject to a kind of longing, a desire to "become one with ashes". The ashen arabesque continues where you cut it off, out of the frame, out out into the night, the boundless and everlasting dominion of Night.

This is not just an attitude in painting, but a talent for life.

## WHERE IS IT?

What are these forms, these presences? Where do they stand in relation to figurative or abstract painting?

The debate between figuration and abstraction in art is of course an old one, and apparently no longer so acrimonious. It would be hard today to find anyone in the art world firmly ensconced in either of these positions. Most would seem to agree in a kind of middle ground, or even a third point where both terms cease to be a necessary distinction. So-and-so's coy self-portraits are thus described in terms akin to abstract painting, and of course Jackson Pollock was a figurative painter all along.

Yet if one can speak of an "age", this age, in any generalized sense, it would have to be said that our century so far is resolutely figurative. It prefers the image to the reality, the metonym to the metaphor, the signpost to the landscape. And its chief horror, the taboo of the age, is a close ally of abstraction: ambiguity. The possibility that something can be two things at once, that it can gainsay its own intentions or have none, that such a state can be maintained and even become desirable: blissful irresolution.

Morton Feldman relates the story of how, waking from a nap one day in the studio of his friend Philip Guston, he found the painter totally immersed in a canvas, working it at close range. Guston makes a solitary mark, turns to Feldman and in a confused and helpless state blurts out a question: "where is it?" The question is the most exquisitely ambiguous of all questions, the question which calls itself into question. Where is the mark or where is the painting? Where is the questioner in all this helplessness? Where is the question?

Guston, along with Francis Bacon, is one of the chief referents for Raha's particular kind of dance between figuration and abstraction. It was Guston who most forcefully introduced into the history of art the notion that both things could be two sides of the same coin, that abstraction could be the mask of figuration and figuration the mask of abstraction. Contrary to what one might think, he does not do this by making them equivalent, but by reaffirming the difference. It was his example to be absolutely, viscerally abstract at one point of his career, and then absolutely the "cartoon" figurative at another, and still be true to himself. He was able to do this because he found a common ground (or it found him), "one reality", able to uphold and generate both forms of expression: that "one reality" was the surface, the canvas. Indeed, Guston is one of the great painters of surfaces in the history of the medium.

It is what gives a surprising unity to her paintings and drawings. Her starting point is the opaque two-dimensional plane from which she scrapes out, builds inward, articulates distances. Often it is a thick arabesque which covers everything, ingrowing, outgrowing, continuing beyond the edges of the canvas. Always it is the adventure of a tactile eye, conceiving distances were none were to be had, depths that could well disappear from perception or flip around like the double perspective of a Necker cube.

Within the dense, complex, tactile experience of her images, Raha is often able to engage in bold variations of forms. For example, suddenly, it is a nearly white canvas with a tenuous armature of lines, sculpting out spaces that seem to encroach upon invisibility. Or a block of color suddenly dominates the field with an almost humorous poignancy.

For many years, Raha's paintings were mostly of the kind I have just described experiential variations of a kind of organic living space of the mind. Certainly abstract but always with some "human" element to them: the suggestion of a window, a doorway, city landscapes, bodily textures, vague figures seen through slits of eyes... but gradually, ever more boldly, the figure has asserted its way into her paintings. They are present in most of the works in this exhibition.

Playfully, tenuously at first. Baroque little figures begin to peek out through the crevices in the thick folds of ink. Something resembling a head though not quite sits sideways in the fanciful architecture. **A bare foot shows itself discreetly that much clearer from beneath a robe.** The eyeless upturned face of a child, half-blotted out, makes its plaint on the same scale as a window in the next room. Beyond a doorway, on a raised platform something lies bundled up on a cot most probably human, curled up, sleeping...

Much like in Bacon's work, these figures, when not simply stray bits of collage, are all in the process of becoming and studiously avoid any narrative intent. In a more recent series of paintings entitled *Vioi* ("Lives" in Greek), Raha comes closest to pure figuration, even to a kind of photorealism (the paintings are derived from film frames). But it is worth the while to look at them more closely.

These hands, seen from above: what are they doing? Have they just finished rolling a joint, closing a robe, threading a needle? No doubt engaged in practical matters. Yet in the conjoining of fingers there is the whisper of a ritual, a silence and solemnity. That very whisper seems to be what they're about, the fact that what they do is so intimately open to us and yet just beyond our hearing. It is the clearest of acts caught at the very moment of its vanishing.

A large v-shape of blackness cuts into the upper half, others hem in the body fragment from all sides, and in the crisscross of luminous shadows one begins to see the diagonals and triangular divisions, the graceful interplay of positive and negative space. Then there are those horizontal gashes in the cloth or canvas like two serene black eyes, and to their left these very curious black marks, like an incomplete diagram or like defects of grain, scratches on a film. By this point the image has become pure surface, pure tactile vision. It is hard to tell whether one is looking at abstract shapes or at precise representations. Indeed it has escaped us and the confines of its frame entirely, led us precisely to ITS clarity.

Somewhere outside the limits of this enigmatic picture, preceding or following it like the previous or following frame, is an eureka-the reveal-through-light the "holy moment" when all becomes transparent. One look which would simultaneously take in everything and see through everything, the particular and the universal, the vertical infinite of an instant in the dogged continuum of time. One gesture and all gestures, everything and nothing.

But here we get simply what IS, a ray of light in the gutter: The substance and its ambiguous other. To have made her figures so much harder to grasp the clearer they become: that is the genius of Raha's art.

# THE TEMPLE OF LIGHT

Raha's projections and film installations are a natural extension of her work as a painter. Slides, pieces of found film or hand-painted film are manipulated in front of the light beam of one or several projectors. In a sense they are a return to the source of her paintings, to primal light, transparency of vision. The images can be of her own work or of any number of things, projected onto a wall or even onto a painted canvas. Thus layered, combined in a continuum, they delimit a universe of potentialities rather than of things, here experienced in a communal setting, the pagan ritual in the Temple of Light.

The key thing is rhythm. Always the movement, up and down, side to side, forward and back, in and out of focus. The work of hands, the dance of shadows. Syncopated to the click-click of the slide-projector, the steady murmur of the small ventilators being the pedal point. Usually accompanied by music in live performance, for which Raha has found notable repeat collaborators: the saxophonist and sound artist Briggan Krauss, renowned avant-garde cellist Charles Curtis, multimedia artist Aki Onda and sculptor, inventor of bizarre self-playing instruments, the genial Panagiotis Mavridis.

An essential part of these performances is of course the presence of the artist herself. Never in the spotlight, always in the dark, her energy nonetheless seems to move every particle of air in the room her anarchic, serious, childlike, warlike, melancholy, wisened energy. Like a black butterfly which flits about the room, darts from corner to corner, causes a minor commotion here and there. Never settling, spurred on by the silver dust which trails from its wings in an endless arabesque of forms, illuminating the night air. Spontaneous, continually renewed, ACTIVE beauty.

## CODA

The butterfly takes off across remembered seas to land on the shoulder of the Pirate of the Slums. The slum is inundated in morning light, snores, laughter stirring at the edge of sleep. These are all saints who stay here, "saints without teeth" (saints don't need teeth). A kind of happiness reigns: the happiness of a painted bird in a painted cage: precisely that, only real, real happiness.

The Pirate is older than the oldest sin, the brine is in his skin. He holds to his bottle in order to avoid seasickness, day and night. He looks you in the eye across the seas in his and conjoins you to a toast. Beneath his smiling eyes the mouth is wide open, the bottom lip upturned in a kind of horn, in an enormous toothless laugh, dripping in sound.

A toast then. A toast to this bottle, to the light through the bottle. A toast to the rain and the dogs who bark at the rain. A toast to the slums of Chaleh Harz and East Harlem. A toast to the palace and the temple, to Paris and Isfahan. A toast to lost souls. A toast to teeth without saints and saints without teeth. A toast to Forough and Hazrat Ostad. A toast to Darius, Abbas, Jafar. A toast to Morton and Philip. A toast to Stan and Hollis. A toast to Jonas! that evergreen pirate. A toast to Stom. A toast to you, Baradar, to YOU who are, You who Are...

"And insofar as art." Insofar as art is. And insofar as art. Insofar as in. As in and. As in as. As is. As. And horses, galloping.

Quotes from the essay Novalis, *Hymn to the Night*. The Guston story is recounted in Morton Feldman's essay "After Modernism" anthologized in *Give My Regards to Eighth Street: Collected Writings of Morton Feldman*, ed. B.F. Friedman, Exact Change, 2004.