

Laureen Marchand: Beholder

Laureen Marchand offers a gallery full of roses in her exhibition **Beholder**. They are not the full bodied, heady-with-scent kind, arranged in lush bouquets bursting with obvious beauty; instead, they appear singly, in twos, threes and small bunches, suspended from somewhere outside of the picture plane, heads down and on the verge of decay and decomposition. At first glance, they appear dispirited and despondent. Closer consideration reveals much more than that.

Marchand's journey to the rose garden has been less than direct. She has had a long history of working figuratively, with narratives ranging from straightforward to subtle. However, she has also painted inanimate objects in such a way that they take on human characteristics or suggest human emotions. About a decade ago, she discovered the power and persuasiveness of the rose. Aware of the symbolism and multiple meanings attached to what is probably the world's best known blossom, she explores love, loss and the spirit of self in these beautifully crafted paintings.

The rose as symbol has a long and rich history, with often contradictory meanings. It is a symbol of both purity and passion, of virginity and of fertility, of life and of death. In Marchand's work, these contradictions are further amplified by her decision to depict roses that are no longer pulsing with life. Her roses have already told their obvious stories, and are now free to take on more elusive meanings. She examines the dead and dried blossoms with an intense gaze, finding the life that is still within them.

Such intense study requires careful consideration when preparing for each new work. Marchand takes a very deliberate approach to composing and arranging her dried roses to achieve a composition that is both visually appealing and suggestive of meaning. She sets them up using multiple light sources, to produce a layering of shadows and an intensity of colour. Her goal is also to create a composition that isn't just about the roses, but also about the space that they inhabit. She then photographs them, and often manipulates the digital image to achieve the desired range of colour and richness. Despite this thoughtful approach, there is still a certain amount of chance, of serendipity involved at each of these stages. How the shadows overlap and interact, how the individual blossoms relate to each other, how the colours suggest a mood—all of these add to the power of the image.

The image is then worked out on a painting board in what Marchand describes as 'an elaborate contour drawing'. She then applies a wash in a yellow or red hue to produce a warm underpainting. Colours are mixed in response to the photo image. She begins to paint, and again the choices are deliberate. She aims to clearly develop one area before moving to another, and selects an area that appears to be

key to informing the rest of the painting. That area will either be the background shapes and colours or the main object. With the rose paintings, it is the heads of the flowers that are the foundation for the rest of the painting.

It is clear that Marchand takes great delight and satisfaction from the act of painting, and in doing so, imbues the work with a richness and life that are in contrast to a literal view of the images themselves. The blossoms, leaves and stems appear to float above the surface of the board, suggesting an existence and meaning far beyond simple death and decay. This dual concern with both the formal elements of painting and the desire to suggest something beyond the painting provides the opportunity to ask questions about the nature of beauty and of loss of beauty.

The work is well within the tradition of still life painting, wherein the objects depicted are often metaphors for the mysteries and complexities of human existence. The paintings are also examples of the use of the same or similar images to explore a range of ideas about our world and our responses to it. French Impressionist Claude Monet, in his series of twenty-five canvases titled *Haystacks*, painted the same large round hay mounds over a series of several months in order to explore differences in perception, in light, and in the changing seasons.

While Marchand uses similar images throughout this body of work, she aims to invoke a specific mood in each painting, and invites the viewer to explore that mood. Her titles provide hints and signposts: *The Glow*, *Light Heart*, *Secrets in Water*, *A Moment Ago*, *Closure*.

Marchand encourages the viewer to ask what remains when what we normally think of as beauty is lost. Is there more to beauty than meets the eye? Are there different, deeper kinds of beauty? Are we given opportunities to rediscover ourselves and our ideas about love and beauty? Out of a feeling of loss, can we find a new awareness of the things that are important? The work in ***Beholder*** exudes a state of grace and calmness that invites contemplation on beauty, loss and the passage of time, and an acceptance of the challenges of change.

Catherine Macaulay

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