

The Danny Williams Tarot

There's a complacency, inevitably it seems to me, to much of - what to call it - patternist painting. (As a movement usually "Pattern and Decoration" or "P&D"). Especially among - oh, what to call them - the secondary/tertiary practitioners, happy enough to draw a modest, if playful, curtain across the embarrassing depth of the world, the modernist motion of The Grid to reassure it of a measure of profundity. And much of it quite agreeable - in the way of a handmade quilt. And what, after all, is more agreeably complacent than a quilt?

To whatever extent Danny Williams new painting shares a patternist formality, complacency is not among its qualities. No quilt-like comfort here. Rather an agitated sideshow-like exoticism. A tarot-like uneasiness. Think garish posters advertising mysteries in tents. Or the turn of a card to address more personal uncertainties. What have we got here, percolating out of the always immanent pattern? As a signal out of static. Pictures of things. Or sometimes almost pictures of things. Discrete, afloat against the background noise of gaudy possibilities. These masks, masked faces, tigers, birds, kings, mermaids, human torsos, wings (detached, angelic wings) are charms, milagros, gaming pieces. Language, maybe - at some pictographic, pre-syntactical stage whose parts are loose and recommend themselves to prophecy. Just take your chances, step right up and gather a few and toss them on the glittery board of life. And, to be sure, most of these brilliantly colored acrylic and gouache on heavy paper images do obey a certain tarot deck or game board uniformity. The flat, schematic quality of course. But size as well - which, at about 22 X 30 inches, makes them that much easier to shuffle. Close your eyes and pick one out. You might get lucky.

Here's the thing, though. The uncanny and propulsive thing. The way all this emerged from an immense dark depth of field. The twilight fields, in fact, near the village of Autouillet outside Paris where Danny spent a some years (he tends to place himself, at intervals, about the world like a gaming piece) with paper, charcoal, pencil, ink, whatever, plein-air drawing, realistically as temperament permitted, that faint moment. Just that indecisive moment "Between Dog and Wolf" - the title of the show at Barry Whistler that exhibited these drawings in 2014. His painting prior to

this dark interlude anticipates the present work. Same palette. Same flat ornamental/emblematic concerns - though tending stricter, more symmetrical, constrained. The story goes, however (always there's a story), that his rooms in Autouillet were very small. No room to paint. And so he found himself, one evening, in an alley with materials - paper, charcoal - and began to draw. Just draw the scene before him. Like a student. The embarrassing depth of the world soon opening out into the fields, the nearby farms where he would spend whole days and, especially, evenings drawing that strange depth as, in the loss of light, it deepened. The "crepuscule" as he calls it. Some color at first, but finally black. "It was a complete surprise," he says. "I never in a million years thought I would be out in the fields in rural France drawing from the landscape - more and more I noticed that process of light leaving the sky, and it got to be more and more interesting to me." And very interesting to me that he would return from that extended deep, dark gaze to his old studio near Fair Park (the eternal carnival, of course) back to that carnival-colored flatness. Bright and rising, as it were, out of the dark as cryptic messages out of the ink in one of those fortune-telling 8-balls. Though the messages now, it seems to me, more potent - loose, expressive and oracular. "He means it" or "She means it" is the phrase our mutual friend, the late artist Doug MacWithey, would use when surprised by a certain authenticity. "He means it." And he does. And now it's time for another story:

Back in the day, before Bombay became Mumbai, Danny was staying at the Bombay YMCA - "...a last stop," he notes, "for people (from) the US, but an entirely respectable home for middle-class Indian bachelors." One evening (once again), having departed that quiet neighborhood in the company of some Indian friends and approaching the Bombay Central Railway Station - whose ghostly, cavernous, red-upholstered upstairs dining hall, a survival of the Raj, was their destination - he was struck by the clamor rising out of the night. All senses suddenly involved. The lights all over switching on - "...everywhere colorful displays...auto and rickshaw taxis bunched together in attempts to advance in (opposite) directions." Horns and bells and vendors shouting. "Human voices of all tonalities." Sweating porters. Little shrines with votive candles. "Pest Control Man"

on his bicycle with his sign that Danny coveted. The whistling of the trains and unintelligible announcements from suspended klaxons. All of life, congestive and eruptive. And then out of this - among it and yet out of it somehow - a weirdly gentle song in a pure, clear, childlike voice. From some speaker, surely - maybe even one of those klaxons. Yet serene.

How do you get serene from this? Or might this be exactly how you get "serene." Well, here you go. Later he will be informed by his very patient Indian friends that this was the voice of Lata Mangeshkahr. "The Nightingale of India." But for the moment he was spellbound in the nameless mystery of it. As if given here to understand serenity and meaning as emergent in the clamor. From the clamor. Holy crap - and here the expletive has meaning. Look at how this works. Has worked for Danny Williams. How arising from the darkness is the clamor, and arising out of clamor is the meaning. Or the truth. Or the pure and childlike nameless mystery, at least.

David Searcy
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