

VIVIENNE KOORLAND

EXHIBITION OF SMALL PAINTINGS  
FROM THE NINETIES

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The core of her work is about the slippages of memory and the persistence of memory. She has often chosen to speak through the imagery of children. One recurring theme is the archetypal motif of a child's rendering of a house. This most simple and affecting architectural metaphor is closely bound up with the transcribed act of remembering.

There is a painting of hers of this very kind in the permanent collection of the South African National Gallery in Cape Town, *Tomaz's Garden*, 1990 (plate 4). It is a lyrical and moving piece which has its source in two kinds of imagery: on the one hand, a child's (Tomaz Kauders) drawing from the Terezin ghetto, and on the other, in fifteenth century Flemish depictions of the *hortus conclusus* with flora. Pasted onto the canvas and surrounding the house which is painted an intense blue are the protea flowers indigenous to South Africa. They flicker on the surface like the butterflies of Terezin.

Vivienne Koorland's art evokes the concept of anamnesis, which at its simplest is about being able to remember. Her approach operates on a level more complex; implicit in this is a refusal to accept oblivion. Tuned to a pitch of sharpened intensity, it is evidence of the pull between the compulsive need to remember and the search for the material means to make memory palpable. In pursuit of this she works and reworks her canvases, using oil on linen, charcoal, burlap, book pages, collaged fragments — inscribed with a handwriting, delicately, painfully, painstakingly wrought.

There is a precious quality to her work. This term is used not in its negative, egregious sense, but rather to connote a process where her natural facility is tempered by a fastidiousness of choice, and a consciousness of self that involves a rejection of anything not central to her reading of her subject.

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## THE UNIQUE IMAGE: Paintings by Vivienne Koorland *Tamar Grab*

History is traced through its representations: the words, images and objects generated by events, ambitions and fantasies. It is with the residual materials of experience, both large and small, global and particular, that Vivienne Koorland's work is concerned. Creating a personal archive of referents, a mental landscape which points to her own life-history as well as to the momentous occurrences of our century, she transposes the traditional instruments of record-keeping and recollection (the book, the photograph, the map) into the space of art. Here handwritten scripts are juxtaposed with printed texts and images, individual letters and alphabets with words and phrases, painted icons — a house, a flower, a signpost — with newsprint and collaged motifs. Public and private, present and past converge on the unifying plane of the painted surface. Pictorial time deviates from historical time, paying no attention to logical systems of chronology or sequence. The materials of history and the tokens of memory, their representations, are distilled into a pictorial world suggestive of the condensed irregularities of a dream. Drawing upon the disparate images and scripts of historical witnesses — the illustrated record left by a Jewish child who perished in the Holocaust, a photographic detail of a zeppelin bearing the words "Welcome Mandela" in the New York sky, the table of contents from a pamphlet for visitors to Hiroshima, a journalist's photograph of a starved African infant — Koorland constructs a politically resonant world, autobiographical and allegorical, supremely tactile, in which fragments of cloth, paper, paint and glue constitute a multi-layered, allusive, painterly surface: flat, non-illusionistic and opaque. This is an art of quotation rather than description. It never depicts reality head-on. It never seeks to record incidents, whether catastrophic or quotidian, but only to question their representability and through recontextualizing the images and words they generate, it alters the pace by which they are absorbed. Koorland's paintings and drawings require contemplation and reflection, modes of encounter far removed from the culture

of the soundbite, the headline or the newsflash. They are about time, invoking the frozen moment of photographs and words, but subsuming these into the temporal dimension of painting — the stretching, pasting, tracing, scrubbing and erasing that constitute a modern painted surface.

Take, for example, a complex and ambitious work like *Vive Maman*, 1987, which references the genre of history painting in its monumental scale and epic form of address, its way of magnifying, even universalising, the particular (plate 1). Koorland has pasted onto an expansive painterly surface the large pages of a French turn-of-the-century book about Norman churches in France and an article from *The New York Times* detailing a World War II execution. This ground provides the support for the artist's copy of a child's drawing of potted flowers. Emblazoned above this transposed image, a wrenching wreath of blooms shapes the words "Vive Maman." At the bottom of the canvas is the signature "Jacques" in the scrawled script of the child who drew the picture and the cry that surmounts it. Jacques, a Jewish child in hiding, deported from France, died in Auschwitz. But *Vive Maman* is an exultant painting. Koorland transcribes Jacques's awkward drawing onto the canvas, empowering it by superimposing the flowers over a text that eulogizes the architecture of medieval French churches, ostensible places of refuge and symbols of hope and spirituality.

Three kinds of writing coexist on the canvas: the chauvinistic commentary of the French pages equating stylistic purity with racial purity; the reportage of the newspaper; the hopeful scribbling of the child who draws flowers as a salute to his mother in the face of annihilation. Jacques's name, inscribed over a photograph of a Norman church, cuts across its facade, a pained graffito exposing the empty words and rhetoric of the printed text. Placed as it is at the lower right-hand corner, the child's signature signifies both the author of the drawing within the work and the maker of the

painting. The artist's presence is thus invoked obliquely through the voice of the child but is also omnipresent through the orchestration of the other scripts and voices contained within the painting.

Through Jacques, Koorland can pay tribute to her own mother to whom she offers the salvaged bouquet, but she is not the child. It is she, after all, who has established the conjunction of official rhetoric and private speech, of printed page and her own mark, of polished reproduction and clumsy doodle that constitutes the finished work and enables one form of writing and recording to offset the other.

Handwriting is central to much of Vivienne Koorland's work yet she rarely uses a script that is identifiably her own. She speaks through the inscriptions of others, allowing the historicity of the written words to express itself through the formation of the letters, their archaic or idiosyncratic character, their scratched and smudged physicality. She may copy a printed text in a specific, historically located script or she may use a particular calligraphic style as a vehicle for writing culled from a different context. In *Contents I*, 1996, the contents page of the Hiroshima guide is altered in scale and character (frontispiece). Words are positioned onto strips of canvas, pasted over a palimpsestic ground washed with layers of thin paint. Each chapter in the pamphlet chronicles the account of a witness and each title in the painting is a poetic invocation of a life shattered by the cataclysmic explosion. But it is the handwritten fragility of the script chapter headings in the painted work that suggests the human cost of the event that stands for the ultimate symbol of destructiveness. Each person's story is encapsulated here, not only by the words used to name it, but by the trace of the hand that undertakes the work of writing it out — slowly, painstakingly, purposefully.

Koorland leaves the processes of making a painting visible on its finished surface. Its past is an essential element of its identity as an object. Seams and edges, joins and overlays mark the boundaries

perfect structures, the damaged monochromatic covers themselves suggest the declining world of the bibliophile, the antiquarian and the traditional scholar. These works, which need to be read as much as looked at, represent World War I battlefields. The schoolroom is again invoked: borders are marked in short, hatched, parallel strokes; military advances are symbolized by sinister black arrows pointing relentlessly in the direction of attack; names of places are printed out. The schematic inscriptions belonging to the language of mapping inform only those able to decode them.

Names of places, arrows, borders and boundaries seem like so many arcane markers on the page. But transposed into the realm of art, these images signify differently than in the military or history textbook. Now neither documents nor archival material, but decontextualized and transformed, they operate poetically rather than functionally. The familiar or strange-sounding names of the places call up communities of people displaced and dispersed, a violated world so irreparably changed through war. A mental mapping of personal experience overlays the detached language of the cartographer, demanding interpretation. Koorland's work does not offer a dispassionate account of the past. It is partial, invested, committed, and for all its far-reaching, wide-ranging referentiality, intensely private.

Associated with life and death, with giving and congratulating as well as mourning and lamentation, flowers recur in many of the works. The mythologized proteas of the Cape, rooted in front of the primordial house of infancy, or raining down like a veil of coloured accents in a darkened landscape, invoke the specificity of a loved place, now lost, while the *Marie* paintings depicting a vase of flowers have an elegiac quality, metaphorically resonating with celebration as well as with death (plates 4 and 10). In *Inside Us, Anguish Remains*, 1989, which retrieves its title like a found object from the barely decipherable text contained within the painting, a collaged fan of

fragile stems supports an array of tattered flowers shaped into Jewish stars (plate 2). This forlorn collection of uprooted emblems spread on a yellow ground is made up of bits of torn and crumbling newsprint, deliberately composed to resist a reading, while at the same time emulating the all-too-legible yellow *Magen David* worn by Jews in Nazi-occupied Europe. Neither wreath nor bouquet, this arrangement of flowers infuses the genre of still life, in particular the discredited feminized practice of flower painting, with violence and the assumed seriousness of history painting.

In Vivienne Koorland's work history is recalled iconically and indexically through images and scripts. Her paintings are monuments to lost sites, objects and skills — to the book, the pen, and the hand-drawn document into whose sphere they subsume the mechanical reproduction, suppressing its reproduced banality by imbuing it with the visceral quality of the unique artifact. History and memory come together in the detail, the global narratives of our time permeated with the private stories of an individual life. The result is an art which is intimate, monumental and minute, simultaneously political and introspective, generalized and yet tantalizingly secretive.

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