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signatures

Vivienne Koorland Remaps Postmodernism

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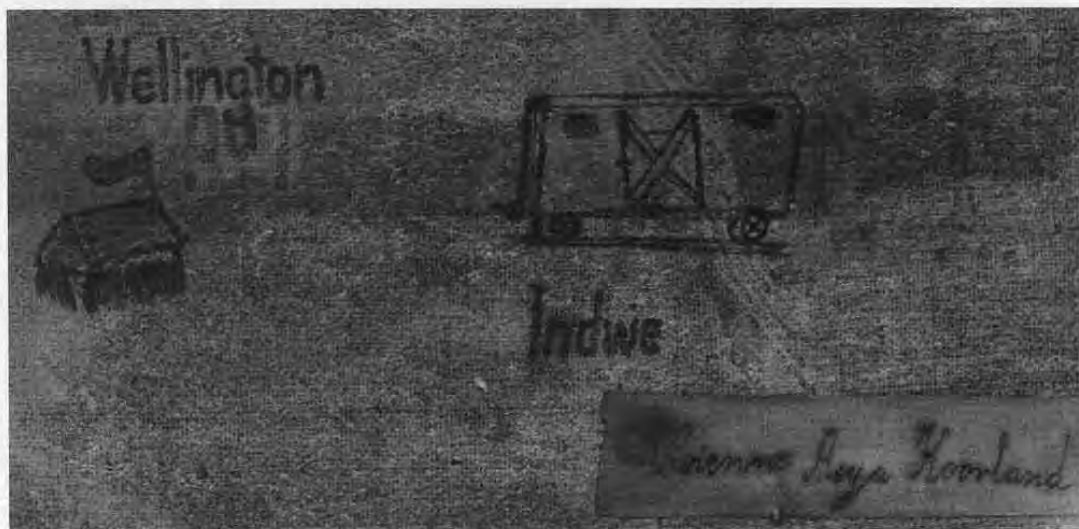
What Vivienne Koorland restores to painting is, very nearly, painting itself, along with a kind of painterly intelligence that has been tough to find, at least in New York, for better than a decade. That she does so from the stance of a consummate—and *true*—postmodernist, fashioning her work out of a literature of loss, anonymity, and elliptical suffering, led me to consider her talent and feel, well, a little scared. She's *that* good. Like the visionary directors of the

American cinema in the 1970s, Koorland has confronted the universal riddle of violence: If it's so bad, why are we drawn again and again to dwell on it's meanings, while still delighting in the illicit charge? Why are we enticed by the reduced form of it, and what happens when the complex truth of its making is revealed? Further, how can we act ethically in a world both so suffused with the legacy of violence and punctuated with its reinvention, on film, in art, on the streets, internationally—everywhere? Finally, in what ways does violence plague identity, driving it to its extremes and leaving it either crippled and anachronistic or untenable as a political stance?

What's required, it seems, is a new type of aesthetic and ethical cartography, which Koorland has taken as one of the organizing metaphors of her recent work, exploring the *idea* of mapmaking in a broad, Fredric Jameson kind of way. Koorland is a Jewish South African who has lived in Europe and, most recently, the United States. She speaks three languages and wishes the politics surrounding apartheid hadn't prevented her from picking up a few more. An inveterate postmodernist, she understands, perhaps more fully than any other contemporary artist, the central lesson of the midcentury: its fragments cannot be glued back together to reform a pristinely civilized vessel—while they retain, in their visual record of faded aspirations, irreplaceable chips of hope, they also come to us with sharp edges.

Left: Vivienne Koorland, *South Africa Over Hungary*, 1993–94 (Oil and stitched burlap on linen). Courtesy of Kent Gallery, NYC.

Below: Vivienne Koorland, *South Africa Over Hungary* (Detail). Courtesy of Kent Gallery, NYC.



It's useful to remember that what was for centuries coherent in Western representation has been, via modernism's offenses as well as its triumphs, busted all to pieces. It is against this statically background of optimistic edginess—the defining feature of millennial aesthetic mood (like a TV documentary abruptly interrupted, but with friendly messages about minor “technical difficulties”)—that Koorland has made her contribution to what poststructuralism has reduced to “discourse,” but what I'd rather think of as a “tradition.” In Koorland's case, we're looking at the tradition of painting. But not the tradition classically stated, through the usual organs of reactionary fussing. Koorland engages painting in the same way that Mark Morris or Bill T. Jones engages choreography, or Paul Beatty and John Ashbery poetry—as the inescapable reminder of how memory operates, how the memory of memory operates, and how memory collides or coexists with current sympathies. Through the haze of these epistemological fluctuations, Koorland posits her definitions of postmodernism, using painting as her compass, her guide to a recapitulation of memory.

Often incorrectly located somewhere in the iffy elbow-room between postmodern market geeks like David Salle and the mythopoetic gravitas of postwar Germans like Anselm Kiefer, Koorland is most certainly not trying to append herself to bored American Pop or red-eyed postwar European visual arias. She appropriates, but her technique bears only a nominal resemblance to Salle's film-still school of painterly education (Salle lives to stall movement). She deals with the sucking hole at the center of the century, the holocaust, its prosecutors and its victims—and perhaps most importantly, its ghosts—but the compositions she assembles out of her relationship with Nazi genocide suggest Messaien's cagy (if messianic) metaphysics rather than Wagner's fuguelike nationalism. Her paintings make me think of Rilke, minus the awkward godliness. Her critical emphasis is on the watchworks of recall in an age when promoters of fast times would rather endorse collective amnesia (witness Ronald Reagan's visit to Bitburg). What she inscribes in her densely textured canvases is a legend of urbane modernism transformed into postmodern internationality, affect into engagement, Dubuffet without the giant heads, Klee without the cute. Her experience as an artist speaks to an experience of the world, a globe wrapped round by beginnings and ends.

Almost as frequently as she has been cast as the mistress of serious Pop (she appropriates from the letters of dead German soldiers instead of the Eisenhower administration) or an easy-listening remix of sturm and drang (No metal in these paintings, but aren't those crushed flowers?), Koorland has been labeled a painter whose central obsession is “history,” as though her work represents an archive rather than a dynamic, contemporary body of expression. I'm sure many of the critics who want to make her into the librarian of late modernism mean the history tag as a compliment, but it effectively destroys any potential of reckoning her very real and ongoing interrogation of the postmodern dilemma: How can you live in history, and by extension time, while attempting to transcend it? Koorland's answer: You can't. Fools strive to outrun histo-

ry; painters work it into their art. And once history gets worked into art, it obtains a leverage against itself that it lacked before.

Not really a master painter in the vein a colorist like Joan Mitchell (she says she has enough to be concerned about in painting without having to wrestle with color), nor a gauzy, abstractionist like Susan Rothenberg, and about as far from Rothko, at least representationally, as one can get, Koorland at times comes off like a monochromatic ally of Willem de Kooning, or like Cy Twombly minus the bawdiness. But where de Kooning and Twombly exploited the environment of an ascendent pop culture, populating their canvases with a loopy, profane catalogue of provincial ribaldry and grotesques (what pop culture is really all about), Koorland has dug deeper, finding her subjects for representation in the detritus of heroless European stories, often told by children, soldiers, and nameless mapmakers—figures whose power to question authority, as Koorland implies, was voiceless.

In her own voice, Koorland recovers the tongues that her subjects have lost to history. She does not, however, *mimic*; she *interrogates* the difference between her perspective and the perspectives that history has deposited in her care. By what right, she asks herself, does she take a child's drawing and reproduce it over the scrubbed palimpsest of an inverted military map? Through such apparently predictable layerings, Koorland establishes a new reality that occupies a space well beyond ventriloquism or pantomime and recovers the fled possibility of sacrificed justice while keeping intact the personal resonances of her chosen narratives. Stories still get told, even while they are infused with invigorating, yet potentially corrupting, new power. That they maintain their strength against the internally disturbing influx of fresh power (not a bad thing, but a thing that can knock art down to the level of polemic) is testament to Koorland's ability to coax luminous surprises from compressed dispatches.

Koorland's exhibition at Kent could be viewed as three distinct pictorial groups, each of which corresponds to a specific period in her recent career: flower paintings, map paintings, and drawing paintings. In this sense, the show was a mini retrospective of Koorland's engagement with the 1980s and early 1990s, and the gallery evinced an idiosyncratic yet consistent vision in assembling it. The first group included paintings such as “Inside Us Anguish Remains” (1989), which establishes the basic flower motif in Koorland's pictorial vocabulary; the formal aspect of the motif is derived from a drawing of flowers made by a child deported from Izieu, France by Klaus Barbie. The original is itself a study in the sort of naive graphic simplicity, based on a sure line, that sentimentalists often read as childishly unencumbered but that in fact tends to establish a basis for hefty visual explorations. Retaining this basic form, Koorland has recast the image against a pale yellow background, replacing the balloonlike flower shapes with Stars of David composed of single lines and words clipped from newspapers, clippings that tell the stories of Holocaust survivors. This radical reincorporation of a graphic, historical fragment is typical of Koorland's approach to painting: she begins with a sliver of the human graphic tradition that



Vivienne Koorland, *As It Happens Sometimes: Cape Town Over Verdun*, 1993-94 (Oil on linen).
 Courtesy of Kent Gallery, NYC.

has become iconic (the child's drawing can be viewed either as an inviolable summary of tragedy or as a reduced "form" of floweriness — in either case, some of its specifics have been erased) and reinvests it with an enlivened set of symbolic associations. In this way, she writes her stance as an artist into histories that have become anonymous, revealing herself while crediting the particular suffering—or joy—of her subjects. She restores language to the silent contours of forgotten lives.

Not content to rest on an already formidable accomplishment, Koorland insists on taking almost every one of her paintings one step further. Her appetite for complexity is endless—so thorny that it puts her in a league with the likes Paul Celan in terms of her ability to think her way into her work. In "Panorama" (1989), she extends the flower image to another pictorial level, imposing in place of its roots a black-and-white Christian panorama of Jerusalem from the 1940s; retaining the basis color scheme of "Inside Us Anguish Remains," Koorland in this painting interrupts the upward, scrubby rendering of the flowers' black stems with colorful, lithographic cigarette box scenes—cropped details from possible panoramas—of South Africa from the 1920s, whose unnatural colors oppose the stark, roughly drawn flowers above. No place in her personal atlas, she suggests, remains untouched by the ripples of the original flower drawing's aesthetic reverberations. And though the South African experience of racial violence may appear distant from the the Holocaust, somehow more manageable because of its contemporary persistence, it is still very much a part of the variety of the fascist tradition she seeks to indict. Jerusalem, in this sense,

acts as the source of rootedness for several diaspora populations, dispossessed by both violence and the difficulty of grounding, literally, their troubled cultural narratives. This idea of rootedness, however, is not allowed to enthrall the painting with its optimism—the piece was rested on small cement blocks and leaned against the galley's wall rather than hung conventionally. South Africa, of course, comes off as the most elliptical aspect of "Panorama," the most optimistic site, and one can't help wonder, for an artist who has abjured color, if colors are attached to her memories of her homeland. But the matter of Koorland's homeless color is another issue altogether. Of course, notions of rootlessness and aesthetic unmooring are going to constitute an aspect of any artistic project that employs appropriation to the degree that Koorland's does, but even when she's following "obvious" ideas, one's sense that she's looking into the dark glass of political orphanage is pretty thorough. Works like "As It Happens Sometimes" (1991), which encloses a graphically disturbing painting within a fireplace mantel (it falls into the group of "drawing paintings"), almost drip irony, but the images they contain defy resolution to such a degree that it's nearly impossible to attribute to them a saccharine domestic elixir. Home may be where the hearth is, but it's clear from Koorland's interpretation of events that for plenty of dispossessed children in the wake of the midcentury's violence, homefires were supplanted by barbed-wire ghettos and bleak, no-man's vistas.

Interspersed with the flower paintings was a sequence of Koorland's map paintings, mostly completed over the last three years and executed on large and small scales—

from tremendously ambitious wall fillers to diminutive pieces painted on the endpapers of old, unbound book covers. Calling them “map” paintings probably begs the metaphor a bit, but cartography is a useful way of approaching these preposterously dense works. “Cape Town over Bosnia” (1993-94) and “South Africa over Hungary” (1993-94) both employ a superimposition technique, in which a battle map lurks beneath a crudely—but beautifully—rendered map of Koorland’s South African hometown. For the paintings in this series, Koorland has consistently used an appropriated vocabulary of images: small buildings (sheds, outhouses perhaps, or a cartographer’s symbol for “school”—they resemble Monopoly hotels with flags), a motorcycle with a rider, and a turbo-prop airplane, usually in flight. For “South Africa over Hungary, these images of hospice, escape, and arrival are joined by a fourth element, whose epistemology is that of confinement, deportment, and death: a box car. This emblematic summary of Nazi atrocity robs space from the rest of the painting while continuing to participate in the work’s overall composition. Placed within a foot of Koorland’s signature, the box car anchors, with enormous irony, her unflinching enmeshment of art and politics. Koorland claims all her heritages at once, then courageously extends her lineage—as a woman, a Jew, a South African, a European, and an American—to the indictment of all horrors. The surfaces of the paintings are tirelessly worked—layer upon layer of oil paint has been laid down on linen and thinned back, lending to the paintings a weathered quality, like shucked cornhusks, elderly skin, or the shingles of oceanfront houses. Additionally, “South Africa Over Hungary,” besides inverting the underlying military map, incorporates stitched burlap into its surface, and the roughness of the material contributes to the overall impression of the painting as an object telling an ancient story in a fresh and dynamic way.¹ Again and again in Koorland’s work, one has to stop and consider the undeniable understanding that what’s being looked at is not as old as it seems, that one of the artist’s most demanding technical skills is her talent for building the illusion of history (thereby trapping the idea of history inside quotation marks) into the surfaces of her paintings.

When Koorland allows her palate to shift, it’s usually within a tightly restricted chromatic register: ochre and dust give way to sepia and grey. “As It Happens Sometimes: Cape Town Over Verdun” (1993-94) opts for grey, overlaying a map of the notorious French field of slaughter with Koorland’s familiar Cape Town cluster of forms. The title itself winks as it weeps; it happens sometimes, we say shrugging our shoulders, because it happens all the time. Regrettable incident becomes omnipresent theme. Via these expansions, Koorland can be understood as the scourge of the Nuremberg defense: Nazi mapmaking is perhaps a case of exculpation raised to its highest bureaucratic level, in which rules become the icons of distance persecution carried out by field commanders studying sites, like Poland, as reductions of aerial views; the symbolic density of daily lives is recast as dots and squiggly borders, which then become either objectives or obstacles in a web of troop-movement arrows. The cartographer’s

apparent signature, unlike the feigned signature of her own that Koorland adds to some paintings, transforms the authoritarian visual mode of the map into a mask against responsibility. The mapmaker, however, like the artist, can’t hide. By juxtaposing her real and apparent signatures with with cartographic signature of authority, Koorland again lifts a sign from an icon—this time in a severe network of ironic complicity—and comes as close to speaking the truth as any artist could reasonably hope.

Of the show’s 18 works, the drawing paintings, as I’ll call them, were easily the most difficult to “read.” As was the case with the mantelpiece version of “As It Happens” (typically, Koorland binds herself to an image and inspects its permutations from a number of angles, often transferring elements of one title to another painting), “Terezin Painting: Eva II” (1991) finds an exact, unaltered reproduction of a child’s drawing bounded by an elaborate frame, this time a thick, uneven, wood affair, to which are attached geometric forms (I was reminded of several of Jean-Michel Basquiat’s “rough” frames for his early Eighties paintings). Platonism, Koorland’s implies, and modernism’s obsession with its articulation of pure form, is woefully out-of-step with the world’s material urgencies. This opinion does not rule out the possibility of beauty; to the contrary, “Terezin” is one of Koorland’s loveliest works, a frugal panorama that offers stripped-down rhymes for her other panoramic paintings: What appears to be two young boys bear a figure on a stretcher while a woman helps an elderly invalid walk down the street; punctuating rhythmically the top half of the painting is a row of four-pane windows, which provide views of nothing behind their decidedly imprecise geometries. A solitary fourth figure buttresses the painting’s lower right corner. Looking away from the others, she could be read as a stand-in for the artist, trapped inside the painting’s formal conventions but with her eyes turned to another place. Inside and outside, simultaneously.

Where, then, do we locate Vivienne Koorland as an African artist, and further, as an Afro-European artist, and a white African American artist? The answer, obviously, is that we don’t. Koorland does her own locating. She has recently reclaimed her South African citizenship, and she seems to be looking forward to reclaiming more of her heritage. Though one would be hard-pressed to argue that she hasn’t already repossessed a vast chunk of it. If the thing as such for Koorland is identity and its frequently destructive relationship with authority, we can be sure that she will spare no delicacy in her quest to remap the distinctly postmodern terrain of distance, even across the harrowing contemporary landscape of skin.

NOTES

¹ Frequently, a painting that Koorland has developed in another context will portend the ironic (doubly so if she inverts it—one thinks, inevitably, of Baseltz) basis for a later painting, whose logic develops through process.

Vivienne Koorland’s paintings were exhibited at Kent Gallery in New York City from October 29–December 24, 1994.

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