

Vivienne Koorland: Contents, Songbooks, and Other Paintings

All works of art have at least two lives. One is immediate and experienced in the here and now. It is vitalized by the reception of the materials and forms at the very moment the work of art is viewed. The other life is vitalized by the work's place within history, by which is meant both the history of art in general and the history of the individual artist. Significant works of art must hold their own in both arenas: they must sustain our attention and admiration as they are seen without the justification of any historical pre-information, that is in the present, and yet they must also be satisfying and make sense in the context of what has come before. Finally, in order to be truly great, they must allow for a meaningful dialogue to take place between the two realms of their existence. Vivienne Koorland's paintings fulfill all these requisites.

This is readily evident in the selection of paintings exhibited at the Gallery of the College of Staten Island primarily drawn from Koorland's series *Contents* and *Songbooks*. Before delving into any considerations of their history, we must take on the drama of their sheer visual impact. Koorland's paintings and drawings characteristically treat the visual field as a mottled and monochromatically painted surface, often pieced together, which is written upon. In that sense they recall lists, maps, and in the series represented here, table of contents pages and songbooks. Their theatrical presence is immediately announced by her dramatic use of scale. Seen together, the paintings' visual and emotional impact comes from the juxtaposition of truly monumental, wall-sized canvases with preciously small and engagingly intimate ones. Upon closer analysis, each work has a sensuous impact achieved through the complex play between the expressive and dynamic physical presence of the materials and forms that compose it—and the awareness of the hand and eye of the artist who put these elements together. In fact, the paintings achieve their artistry precisely through the nuanced, yet powerful tension achieved between the paradoxical exposition of crude matter and refined aesthetics.

For the former, each work is greater than, but indebted to, the sum total of its parts, consisting of, among other things, stitched pieces of raw canvas, pasted bits of paper and book pages, and thickly applied paint. Overall, Koorland makes her statement by a product that is distinguished by its

deliberate lack of finish. Indeed quite to the contrary, her forms' ragged edges, broadly stitched parts, irregular lines, and pasted sheet fragments communicate the conditions of urgent haste, makeshift improvisation, and provisionality rather than a considered, polished, and "finished" work of art. They project the circumstance of poverty, in the way of scarcity or dearth, rather than that of affluence traditionally connoted by large oil paintings. For all intents and purposes Koorland's paintings appear distressed, a condition that made an explicit contribution to her earlier Holocaust iconography. The paintings' physical distress or trauma sustains its capacity to relay significance in the later works through the deeper wells of psychoanalytic interpretation. This effect of her work communicates the ultimate sense of urgency—the will, drive, and necessity to make art—even under the direst of circumstances. In the earlier works those circumstances were defined externally reflecting a war torn and dilapidated existence; in the later works they are defined internally as the incomplete and embattled terrain of the psyche.

Against the rough impressions of her materials, Koorland achieves aesthetic refinement through, among other strategies, her monochromatic harmonies painted in glazed, translucent layers built up on the surface like shimmering veils. Her preferred colors are alternatively shades of earthen browns and blues. These predilections are designated not only in her paint color choices but also, often by the written words on the canvas itself where, for example, the names of different shades of blue are enumerated. For the most part, the paintings are filled with large handwritten words distributed expressively throughout the canvas, creating magnets of compositional focus.

The words function on several levels, not least of which is to endow the paintings with an enigmatic subject matter, as well as with the aura of enigma itself. They stand between the deliberate, ramshackle qualities of the physical materials and the refined compositions and sophisticated manipulation of color and light essential to the production of her nuanced paint layers. In a sense, the written word mediates between the physical world and the artist's imaginary one. They often do so in the voice of a child. The cursive writing is made with open, rounded forms reflecting a deliberate, childlike care. The repetition of forms, as in *Alphabet*, as well as of some of the words like Mommy, Mommy, Mommy, is reminiscent of

a schoolgirl's exercise. When they are coupled with irregular sewn or "hand drawn" dividing lines as they are in the *Contents* and *Songbook* paintings, they contradict the published, official look associated with these printed genres, and contribute to the "guilelessness" presumed of the works' maker.

Researching Vivienne Koorland's history proves this poetical assumption to be far from reality. She was born in Cape Town, South Africa in 1957. Her mother, with whom she has very special relationship, is a Holocaust survivor. Koorland began her official training at the tender age of 17 when she entered the Michaelis School of Fine Art of the University of Cape Town. She has subsequently gone on to study art in an impressive range of international art institutions including the Hochschule der Künste in Berlin, the École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris, and Columbia University in New York, where she currently lives. Her family background as well as her own travels have made her uniquely sensitive to the issues of national identity and the role of aural, written, and visual language in its constitution. Her works are permeated with references to geography and topography, center and periphery, insider and outsider. Koorland incorporates all of these both literally and metaphorically in her art, so that they turn up again and again as the combined prerogatives of place, age, and time.

Vivienne Koorland's work may be stylistically linked with the modern art movements indebted to the works of Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. This especially in the way the visual field is mapped as a surface for the collection of materials and marks that are evocative of the artist's personal experiences as memory and subjectivity. On the level of subject matter, in particular, German history and the Holocaust, her work has been likened to the German painter Anselm Kiefer. In the end her work remains intensely personal. Unlike Holocaust histories, the particular associations of her *Contents* and *Songbooks* remain part of the private reserve of the artist and those closest to her. Their evocations are deliberately, emphatically, and one may say, publicly personal. Their message resides in the relationship between the positions of "otherness" or alterity of the earlier Holocaust works to those of interiority and subjectivity expressed through the more recent ones. They provide for us a paradigm of creativity and aesthetic communication in the first person.