



Vivienne Koorland, *Les nouvelles fleurs des champs*, 1988, Oil, text on linen, 66" x 55". Courtesy LedisFlam.

Vivienne Koorland

Vivienne Koorland, a Jewish South African woman, makes paintings about history. Full of references to the Holocaust and European civilization, her work seems to fit easily into a contemporary art-world discourse that uses the past. With a difference, however. One finds no post modernist cool here, no objective querying of referents. Koorland's company is not the work of Andy Warhol or David Salle; rather it is the impassioned and embattled painting of Anselm Kiefer, the writing of Christa Wolf (*Patterns of Childhood*), the film of Marcel Ophüls (*The Sorrow and the Pity*)

and, more recently, *Hotel Terminus: The Life and Times of Klaus Barbie*.

Koorland's works vary widely in size—from as large as 7½ by 10 feet down to 9 by 5½ inches. They are usually monochromatic and densely layered with paint, tar, photographs, pages from books, and other bits and pieces of paper. They are awesome on the wall and can hush you into silence and sadness, as with *Non, Je ne me perdrai jamais*, in which a tiny postcard-castle is buried in a howling brushfire of brown and black paint. Or they can nudge you into reverie, then rage, as does

Pour ma Maman; again a castle, this time against a blood-red ground, surrounded by a Mother's Day drawing sent by a boy who was in hiding near Lyon and was soon to perish at Auschwitz. Or perhaps most poignantly, *Les nouvelles fleurs des champs*, in which the same child's flowers stretch forever upward from the ground to the sky, the yearning stems slashed by thin white pieces of paper reminding us of: Poelcapelle, Rosenheim, Prague, Berlin, Ypres, *Vive Maman*, *Nights of Contemplations: for John Heartfield*, *Sage conseil*—blood-sodden towns and cities from World War I and titles of Koorland's own paintings.

A by-now-familiar refrain reverberates in these works: How could Germany, which had a culture of such poetry, music, and art, wreak such havoc down upon the world? It all has been said before, hasn't it? So of what use are Koorland's paintings? What do they do? Are they merely rousing, somewhat romantic and melancholy, to no political avail? Just another liberal catharsis? Yes. And no.

To answer indirectly, let me say first of all that it is odd to find a woman making history paintings. With no access to power, women artists, writers, and intellectuals have traditionally cleaved to domestic and autobiographical subjects. Despite the fact that in recent years artists like Barbara Kruger, Cindy Sherman, Silvia Kolbowski, Jenny Holzer, and Mary Kelly have addressed and deconstructed social-historical phenomena such as capitalist consumption, the equation of woman with object-of-male-desire, knee-jerk responses to ideological clichés of class, race, and motherhood, it is nonetheless rare to find a woman inserting herself into a historical narrative. That has been left to the Jacques-Louis Davids and the Jörg Immendorfs. Indeed, only recently have women begun to see where they were—or might have been—in the French Revolution, in the Holocaust, on the streets of Paris or New York, in a segregated South Africa. In so doing, they have opened up new spaces in historical and political discourse.

Any woman who unsettles the conventions of historic narration intervenes politically. If Koorland's work is a little too neat, with too few frayed edges of uncertainty, it nevertheless punctures one's complacency. One can still weep over the untimeliness of a child's goodbye, and rage over the savage arrogance of a culture run amok. (*LedisFlam, Brooklyn, November 19–December 17*)
Eunice Lipton