

Launch of *Gretchen Albrecht: Colloquy: Three essays, Two Rooms*, 9 July 2015

By Peter Simpson

According to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary; ‘colloquy’ means ‘a discourse, a dialogue (spoken or written); an act of conversing’; it comes from the Latin word ‘to speak’. Literally of course paintings do not speak; they sit silently on the wall, saying nothing, keeping mum, appealing mutely to the eye and the mind. Paintings do not speak to us, except perhaps metaphorically, but we speak to them, or speak about them, either silently in our thoughts, or audibly to our friends and companions, in a buzz of comment and speculation and opinion – and so the conversation about painting, the ‘colloquy’ begins.

There is one sense, however, in which paintings even abstract ones like these, do speak and that is through their titles. In the case of Gretchen’s paintings, titles are carefully chosen and are often eloquently suggestive. In the 24 paintings (including one sculpture) reproduced in this book, many of which are on the walls around us, we have, to choose some random samples: *Cloud over Whatipu, Pacific Annunciation, Penumbra, Sea of Faith, Claritas – (blind angel), Stygian Passage, Nomadic Geometries, Black Portal for Dad, Rosy Fiery Blaze*.

Immediately, confronted with such potent linguistic sparks, the conversation flares up. Linda Gill, in one of the three essays which make up *Colloquy*, has devoted her whole piece to this theme. She points out that there is a paradox inherent in the use of evocative titles by a strictly non-figurative abstract artist such as Gretchen: ‘One purpose of abstraction is to do away with the verbal, to insist on an unmediated response to the unique expressive possibilities of paint and painting. Many abstract paintings are ‘Untitled’. But silence won’t really do. And

Albrecht acknowledges this by adding words of her own, mediating between the thinking viewer and the visual presence of her paintings.'

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One of the things I really like about this book is that it such a pleasure to handle and read, so well designed and printed, the paintings for reproduction aptly chosen to complement the essays, and well reproduced. I am sure that Jamie Ross, as editor, had much to do with this happy outcome, though I'm sure Gretchen had plenty of input as well. Often these days art books seem to be affected by a kind of gigantism; they are often big and brash and encyclopaedic, virtually impossible to read or examine unless you are sitting at a table. There are local examples of this phenomenon but let me speak of an example from further afield. I have a book published in New York about the artist Helen Frankenthaler – a painter to whom Gretchen has paid attention in the past – that weighs in at something like five kilograms on my bathroom scales; it's enormous, and wonderful in its way of course, but so unwieldy, I hardly ever open it. I certainly never take it to bed; if I fell asleep it might crush me to death.

No chance of that with *Colloquy*; you could take it to bed with impunity. Another way in which *Colloquy* differs from many current art books is the generosity extended to the written word. Yes, Gretchen's name is on the cover and there is a rich selection of her paintings reproduced, but the title draws attention to the conversation around her work, to the dialogue it provokes among those who have looked at it closely. It has the effect of making of the paintings not something high, solitary and remote, with commentary banished to the margins or the back pages, but rather a companionable art, capable of

generating an animated conversation – a colloquy – among friends.

If Linda Gill's essay explores Gretchen's use through her titles of language and poetry in particular – uncovering connections to the likes of Keats, Marvell, Matthew Arnold, Octavio Paz and even James Joyce, Mary Kisler explores her connections to architecture and art history, finding analogues for her shaped canvases in Romanesque and Renaissance buildings, and fruitful comparisons for her colours and painterly technique in such Italian artists as Pontormo, Andrea del Sarto and Titian. Here's how she describes *Belladonna*: 'Tones of ultramarine, violet and indigo play out an animated rhythm...cooler tones massing on the left, shades of purple rising up on the right, like two waves facing each other across a star-flecked ocean. Only the horizontal bars of blue and pink, equatorial lines overlapping, not touching, anchor this pent up energy'. Nice.

Colm Tóibín, on the other hand, looks away from art and culture towards the world of nature as providing an inexhaustible source of nourishment and inspiration for Gretchen, speaking eloquently of 'the movements of the sea and the changes in the shore line, or the height and look of the sky. Or the colours of sunlight playing against cloud, or the gnarled way in which branches grow, or even the colour of flowers'.

Some of you may have wondered, as I did, how a famous Irish novelist came to contribute to such a book. The explanation is quite straightforward. Visiting Auckland during a writers' festival, Tóibín was brought to visit Gretchen's studio, and greatly struck by her work happily agreed to exchange some words about it for an example of it. His eloquent voice blends easily and fittingly with those of Mary Kisler and Linda Gill in

providing a troika of informative perspectives and responses to Gretchen's work.

Laurence Simmons, in a typically subtle introductory piece, remarks that all three writers independently find in Gretchen's work a dynamic tension between opposing forces – between geometry and expressiveness, between the muteness of abstraction and the talkiness of titles, between the manifold resources of culture, through language and art history, and the 'precision and wildness of nature'. 'The challenge for these writers', he says, has been to bring together the expressive and the contained, the exuberant and the precise...'

It is a pleasure to offer congratulations to all who have contributed so finely to this delightful conversation, this colloquy, to Mary and Linda and Colm and Laurence, the word-spinners, to the book designer Graham O'Neill of Design Solutions, to the printers, Crucial Colour, and the binders, Daniel and Nadene at Design Bind who gave the book its physical realisation, to Jamie who edited the book and managed the whole project so expertly, and above all to Gretchen whose wonderful creations surrounding us on all sides are so effectively encapsulated between these covers, and whose seemingly endless inventiveness continues into its fifth decade – the earliest painting in the book dates from 1972, 43 years ago – to the delight and astonishment of us all.

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