ALMINE RECH

Genieve Figgis
All the Light We Cannot See

Nov 21 — Dec 19, 2015 | London, Savile Row

Almine Rech Gallery is pleased to announce Genieve Figgis's first solo exhibition at the gallery from November 21st to December 19th, 2015. The exhibition will be comprised of a selection of new paintings.

Barely more animated are the English conversation pieces where, if the adults have the stylised hauteur of fish in brilliant livery, the little ones of the family, arrested by the painter in playful or light-hearted moments, suggest the image of darting minnows among the motionless, intent, mature fish. And these aquariums are lighted by the eighteenth century sun which seemed fated never to set.

—Mario Praz

In 1785, John Adams was appointed the first Ambassador to the Court of Saint James. Adams, questioned by an associate as to whether he had any British relatives, replied: "Neither my father or mother, grandfather or grandmother, great grandfather or great grandmother, nor any other relation that I know of, or care a farthing for, has been in England these one hundred and fifty years; so that you see I have not one drop of blood in my veins but what is American."[1] Regardless of the characteristic bluntness—some might say surliness—of his answer, Adams's ambassadorship was a success. During his first meeting with King George III, his former sovereign, he nevertheless described himself as, "more fortunate than all my fellow Citizens in having the distinguished Honor to be the first to stand in your Majesty's royal Presence in a diplomatic Character." In his response to Adams the King concluded by saying, " I will be very frank with you. I was the last to c onsent to the Separation, but the Separation having been made and having become inevitable, I have always said, as I say now, that I would be the first to meet the Friendship of the United States as an independent Power. . . let the Circumstances of Language; Religion and Blood have their natural and full Effect."[2]

Genieve Figgis' first exhibition at Almine Rech Gallery stands as an eloquent testimony to the monarch's prophesy; in *All the Light We Cannot See*, she rewrites the fashionable mid-eighteenth-century painting genre of "conversation pieces," in a language of clotted blood and mystical delirium which reconstrues the proposed narrative as one of dissolution suffused in luxury. In her "cover version" of Thomas Gainsborough's famous canvas, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews* (c.1750, National Gallery of Art, London), as well as more immediately topical works, *viz.*, *Royal Friends*, *Royal Gathering, Royal Group* and *House* (all works acrylic on canvas, 2015), she transforms the genre's representations of landed gentry, depicted in relatively informal poses, typically outdoors and upon estates where the atmosphere of ownership and permanence are illuminated by Praz's "sun which seemed fated never to set."[3] Gainsborough's original painting, a double portrait of Robert Andrews and his wife, Frances Mary Carter ("not quite the girl next door, but probably the nearest marriageable girl of his own class"[4]) departs from the seeming informality of the conversation piece, and therein lies its uncanny effect, elevating it to a level of Masterpiece-Capital-M above such esteemed practitioners of the genre as Arthur Devis, Johann Zoffany, Philip Mercier, Francis Hayman, and the early William Hogarth. If the original portrait was designed to commemorate the subjects' expanded properties through their recent marriage, Figgis relocates the couple to a landscape of endless dissolution, the beauty of her liquid pigments connects the luminous blues of a melting sky to vibrant ochre and black swaths of paint seemingly in constant motion. This is not a landscape that can be owned. The luminous pinks and whites of Andrews's now skull-like visage benefit the painting and its viewer but not the sitter, whose painted identity has now dissipated as surely as his own earthly remains.

“Today the families descended from this favoured society are being forced to sell their pictures.”[5] The petal-pink gateposts which frame Figgis’s *Gentleman on a Horse* almost verge on solid forms, but they only serve as a counterpoint to the bloody volcanic force erupting behind the black hooded gentleman in top hat who sits calmly in front of the maelstrom. *Living Room*, invites us into a dissolving festive gathering posed against the luscious flowing yet coagulating crimson backdrop of a brain aneurysm.

“Let the Circumstances of Language; Religion and Blood have their natural and full Effect.” George III’s presentiment emerges in both the histories of Britain’s former colonies and in the darkling light of her paintings as the words of a blind clairvoyant. What concupiscent irony that separated by centuries and sensibilities, the Mad King George can welcome Figgis to his dead and living court, the assembly bedazzled by the light we cannot see.

—David Rimanelli

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[1] *Adams, John; Adams, Charles Francis (1851). The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States: Autobiography, continued. Diary. Essays and controversial papers of the Revolution. The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* 3*. Little, Brown.*

[2] Ibid, page 479.

[3] Mario Praz, “*Conversation Pieces*” (1971), cited in Joseph Burke, “The Clavey family by Arthur Devis”; *Art Journal* 18, 1977- National Gallery of Victoria [http://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/the-clavey-family-by-arthur-devis/]

[4] Judy Egerton, National Gallery Catalogues (new series): *The British School*, 1998, page 82.)

[5] Burke, ibid.