The Painterly Visions
of Derek Walcott and Donald Hinkson

Art

Review

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Imagining a museum tour, the poet identifies the lone castaway of Winslow Homer’s painting, “The Gulf Stream,” with his own St. Lucian fisherman, Achillé. Walcott underlines that the painter is “another Homer” because the old Greek poet and his epics have been a recurrent presence in the poem.

In the present exhibition, the style of Winslow Homer’s early work in watercolor reverberates in three of Walcott’s watercolors, marked by precise and delicate detail: St. Malo (1993), “View of Stockholman” (1991), and “Marblehead” (1990), the latter a location that also figures in “Omeros” (5.XXXVI.ii: 186.4). Yet Homer’s later style in watercolor became much broader, bolder, and more painterly by the end of the 1880s, when he began to paint while spending winters in the tropical environments of Nassau, Bermuda, and Florida. Painting in the powerful sunlight, Homer transformed the medium into a more sensuous naturalism.

It is the essence of this later Homer that we find in Hinkson’s current watercolors of Trinidad with their bold strokes and masses of shadow and light. Hinkson’s bravura technique even at times recalls the confident application of pigment that distinguishes the watercolors of John Singer Sargent. Hinkson’s “Coconut Estate” (1998) demonstrates this ease of execution, achieved by a master of the medium, who no longer fears the will of the paint on the wet paper. There appears in Hinkson a spontaneity of technique quite different from Walcott’s deliberately plotted and executed compositions.

Hinkson appears to work directly from nature, en plein air. Looking at his “Lambeau Road” (1997) or “Salt Air” (1998), we note how he captures the wind bending the palm trees. Much like the French Impressionists, whose work he first discovered in art books in the local libraries in Trinidad, Hinkson has rendered not only the physical landscape, but also the changing weather and light.

Walcott often conceives of his subjects in an entirely different manner, sometimes drawing directly on his poetry. We are fascinated to find “Ideal Head: Helen” (1998), painted in both gouache and watercolor, which looks back to the seductive heroine who figures so importantly in the St. Lucian plot of the 1990 epic:

... now the mirage
dissolved to a woman with a modius head-fee but the head proud, although it was looking for work. I felt like standing in homage to a beauty

that lives, like a ship, widening eyes in its wake. Who the hell is that?” an influent near my table asked a waitress. The waitress said, “She? She too proud!”

As the raven pools of the unimaginable ebony mask unwrapped from its cotton-wool cloud,

...it

the waitress sneered. Helen, “And all the rest followed” (1.IV.ii: 23.7-24.2).

Now as then she haunts the poet’s imagination, for he returns to her after nearly a decade.

Walcott also exhibits what he calls a “Story Board and Text” from “Omeros.” Borrowing the concept of “story board” from the dramatic arts, for he is also an accomplished playwright, he presents five watercolors surrounding a hand-written text excerpted from the epic. Two of the subjects again evoke the enigmatic Helen: a woman walking down a street and wearing the yellow dress that was Helen’s emblem, also a woman seated, impasive, although serenaded by musicians. Another vignette depicts three men under a tree, who might be fishermen resting on the beach at Gros Islet, the village on which the poem centers. The two remaining panels show public celebrations, perhaps parades like those in the epic that satirize political campaigns. However, the pair are signed and dated January 26, 1995. Both Walcott and the economist Sir Arthur Lewis, St. Lucia’s other Nobel laureate, were born on January 23, which now is celebrated as part of the annual Nobel Week in St. Lucia. Thus, Walcott appears to have sketched...
what he observes on Trinidad, Walcott seeks to reconcile his dual gifts as painter and poet. He addresses this conflict in “Another Life”:

I hoped that both disciplines might by painful accretion cohere and finally ignite, but I lived in a different gift, its element metaphor, while Gregorias would draw with the linear station of an eel, one muscle in one thought...
Gregorias abandoned apprenticeship to the errors of his own soul...
it was classic versus romantic perhaps, it was water and fire...
(Collected Poems 1984, 200-201)

Walcott represents his own aesthetic dilemma by recalling his boyhood painting excursions in the company of Gregorias (actually the St. Lucian artist, Dunstan St. Omer). St. Omer’s singularity of purpose contrasted with Walcott’s own awareness of his own different, metaphorical gift. Walcott’s poetry continually draws strength from the power of his visual imagination, even as his paintings reflect his affinity with language. In his early and sustained admiration for “Gregorias,” and in his essay praising Hinkson, and in his decision to share the current exhibition, Walcott generously reveals both his love for painting and his respect for painters, recognizing all the while that artists such as Hinkson enjoy a focus different from his own complex talent.