

Elena Sisto: The Big Picture

Essay by Nancy Princenthal

With her present paintings, Elena Sisto is stepping back a little from the works that directly preceded them. That is, rather than forms pressed right onto the surface—shirted and jacketed torsos, cropped below chins and above waists; a single sneakered foot—we are now given a woman's head and perhaps her shoulders; glimpses of landscape beyond; and, even more distantly, fragments of urban skylines.

Self-portraiture, the big tent under which Sisto's work falls, is inevitably partial, in both ways. Of course the whole isn't always greater than the sum—or even one—of its parts; sometimes a detail speaks volumes. But bringing the viewer very close is a way to challenge comprehension. Closer still, and we'd have full-out abstraction. Sisto has always stopped short of that, but she enjoys walking the edge between figuration and its sublimation into pure form. And even when she pulls back far enough to give us a bigger picture, she makes the fact of painting, its objecthood, media, processes and history, central to her story. "What we're outside of we don't really understand; what we're inside of we can't really see,"[1] wrote the painter Rackstraw Downes, in an essay about choosing, against early training, to paint from life. Sisto fully embraces both of the intractable mysteries Downes describes.

Roughly half the new paintings feature a female face. As in Adrian Piper's acidly funny 1991 artist's book *Colored People*, in which photo-portraits of artists are crayoned "Tickled Pink," "Scarlet with Embarrassment," "Green with Envy," and so on, the skin-tones in Sisto's faces comprise a range of unnatural but rich and evocative colors, among them spinach green, midnight blue and deep flower-power purple. This last is the color of the face in *Orangefield*, which sports snazzy, highly reflective tinted glasses that effectively obscure the eyes behind them; in none of these painting do we get more than a provoking hint of identity and emotion.

Sisto's abbreviations for facial features—a couple of (seemingly) quick of strokes each for eyes and brows, nose and mouth—borrow from cartoon shorthand, from the schema by which children organize their first pictures, and also from the calligraphy of Matisse; there may also be a hint of the firm, graceful contours in the early “Women” of de Kooning, onetime sign-painter. Deft and subtle, Sisto's line describes expressions that are guarded (Orangefield), quizzical (Spirited Away), melancholy (Mr. Moonlight), anxious (the furiously blushing-pink Strawberry fields) and alight with expectation (the fiery orange Vagabond [for Agnes Varda]). But subtly.

If their facial features are reduced to spare essence, and their unlined skin to flat, deep-colored shapes, these women's hair is elaborated with rococo splendor. The lofty, tumbling, rippling white and silver curls call to mind the towering gray wigs of eighteenth-century royals, powdered and perfumed, beribboned and bejeweled; one thinks of Fragonard and Gainsborough. But anyone who knows the artist is also aware of her own wonderfully lively locks. Sisto has a wry sense of humor; she is no innocent, and she does not lack for energy or style—or candor. She is painting full-throttle, and in full awareness that age, like gender, are loaded issues. Forgoing the in-your-face sex of Carroll Dunham, and also the hairy, blood-shot, insomniac angst of Philip Guston, she is not quite as proper as Lois Dodd; the emotional range she covers is broader than Alex Katz's. But Sisto shares things with all these painters, including gifts for concision and grace, and for honesty.

The other significant proportion of new works feature big white canvases, generally propped on an easel, and all cheerfully, luminously blank: another kind of inscrutable face. Several are situated in rural landscapes, which they largely obscure, although sometimes the canvases are themselves intruded upon by flora and fauna: a big polka-dotted blossom, a needle-nosed wasp, which leaves its shadow on the canvas. An extravagant moth preens itself in front of a canvas behind which lurks, almost invisibly, a curly-haired head. As with the portraits, Sisto's touch with these easel-in-nature paintings is spry and highly alert. A saw-tooth-edged, creamy orange oval makes a lake surrounded by grass. We feel the lush,

prickly carpet of new grass and the syrupy air of high summer, sweet and thick, as we do, elsewhere, the chilly advent of winter, represented by wind-tossed, gnarled trees, their last brown leaves nearly gone. Confirming the abiding allure of nature, Sisto also credits the nostalgia that seems an inescapable aspect of our relationship to it. Just slightly, she anthropomorphizes these bugs and blossoms: a flower can be said to have a face, its petals a big bonnet—a connection easily accessible to children. And she renders a setting sun the way a child would, as a half-sucked candy, bright red-orange, its rays sturdy as the spokes of tricycle wheel.

Sisto doesn't actually paint outdoors, but she does spend a significant part of the year in rural upstate New York; her primary studio is in the city. Negotiating the two is not just a personal matter (and one that she freely acknowledges is a privilege), it is also a societal and cultural one. The tension between industrial development and the ever more threatened environment barely beyond its reach is a subject that goes back to Monet and his peers, as when a steam-train bridge slashes through the beloved landscape of Argenteuil. Giverny was a dream born when the rural world became a threatened luxury. In Sisto's exploration of the tension between city and country, the former is not cast as pure evil nor the latter as unassailably benign. While the power lines and tall buildings that lurk in some landscapes' far distance do cast grim silhouettes against blazing skies, the small quick Signal is a glorious, glamorous image of a city in brilliant twilight, stars sparkling, sky darkening.

Nature and culture are the twin poles of our character, of everything we are and do. "Instead of being a way of using painting to look at nature, [realism] was a way of using nature to force on yourself fresh ways of looking at painting,"[2] wrote Downes, who does paint en plein air. To the question of whether art serves nature or the reverse, Sisto replies with a vigorous yes.

[1] Rackstraw Downes, "What Realism Means to Me," in *In Relation to the Whole: Three Essays from Three Decades*, 1973, 1981, 1996 (New York, Edgewise, 2000), 37

[2] Downes, 48