

Vicki Varvaressos: Recent Paintings

...abstract art is not something to love for itself, but is a language to be used to project important visual ideas. ¹

Some of our current “abstract” paintings are, in the best sense of the word, endowed with artistic life; they possess the throbbing of life, its radiance, and they exert an influence on [wo]man’s inner life via the eye.²

Simon Schama, the visual art historian, academic thinker and writer about most art subjects has, on a number of occasions, stated that *“Twombly” ought to be a verb meaning to hover thoughtfully tracing glyphs and graphs of mischievous suggestiveness, periodically touching down amidst discharges of passionate intensity. Or “Twombly” may be a noun meaning a line with a mind of its own.*³

‘Varvaressos’ could also be a verb or a noun that, in this case, means to scrawl, draw and colour intuitively and with mystery, or lines and hues that shape themselves. Vicki Varvaressos’s current exhibition demonstrates the word at work. It also demonstrates how, like the pre-World War Two impressionist Kathe Kollwitz, Varvaressos wants to be effective with her art for as long as she can.⁴ She also hopes, for a long time, to continue planting, digging and cutting in her abundant lower North Shore sprawling garden. Her passions intertwine.

Varvaressos is a solitary artist (and gardener), never a member or a participant in any art movement. Nevertheless, she is deeply grateful for what other artists have ‘lent’ her while not becoming a disciple of any. As she matures and retires into her world of art and vegetation she maintains that she does not know what the ‘paint’ will do as she doodles, scratches, blobs and spreads it on to canvas. A painting

transforms itself as she brushes it on. It emerges independently and mysteriously. She cannot force or direct it. As she explains, *'it is all pretty mad, and like a dream. It's where the paint takes you.'*⁵

In this 2017 exhibition of sixteen paintings Varvaressos paints while metaphorically walking and looking in her garden. She does not paint floral beds or any elements of vegetation. Rather she evokes ambiguous shapes, smells and tones of the ethereal that floats through her eyes and mind and keeps her making art. After all, all that is made in the studio is a distillation of direct experience, usually specific and perceptive and formed of intellectual and visual encounters. She makes no drawings and plans little as she prepares to paint. The brush hits the canvas and a painting, given time, evolves, always employing the artist's own pictorial language and giving the viewer an insight into a radiant and very bright personal world of colour. *Criss-cross* (2016) and *Floating White* (2016), for example, both create a continual and exhilarating tension between the foreground and the washed back of the painting covering the canvases. The palette is rich, bright and even clashing, although it suggests less rather than more.

Varvaressos walks in her garden, literally, but in her paintings the vision translates as a metaphorical visit and so *Fuchsia* (2015) looks anything but a floral bunch or a garden corner. However, as Varvaressos said in the past about another abstract painting, *'...it sort of has these growth things and it is plant like.'*⁶ Once again, the creative effects of the paint itself take over and it is evident that the surface makes and invades internal feelings and moods rather than offering figurative images. Schama and Twombly would be very proud, even given the two blue and brownie/mauve patches that, at first glance, are not as linear and scribbly as the rest of the surface but do have delicate changes in hue. A second look assures the viewer that lines and scrawls, even here, are essential.

It is important to recall that, although Varvaressos paints figurative canvases as well as abstraction, it is always the visual experience for the viewer that is her aim and what drives her on. Thus, even the titles of the individual paintings are only there for identification, as she wants '*the image to breathe, not spoil, the visual involvement.*'⁷ The titles are certainly not to be used as literal translations for subject matter that, especially in this exhibition, does not exist. It is evident why *Black Crescent* (2016) is titled thus: there is one particular line that evokes this shape and colour. The subject, if it exists, is not, however, bound by this line. The painting is a furious mixture of scrawled lines intertwined by sheaves of colour that are backgrounded by a grey wash that fills edge of frame to edge of frame, and there is much more.

Inspecting canvas after canvas in this show there are always elements of surprise. Varvaressos, through her own fascination, enjoyment and even passion, brings something new to each canvas - its own serious realization. The black scrawls that seem to float off the canvas, emerging from the bland, back, backdrops are nevertheless delicate, ironic, and sometimes nervous. Each line has its own history and it certainly does not illustrate or decorate but it does encircle, isolate and frame. This is more than evident in *Purple Shard* (2015) and *Spiral* (2016), where the graffiti-like lines seem to slip and slide into and away, referring to nothing and yet helping to form the whole canvas swept field.

Untitled [Yellow] (2016) forces an experience through the artist's resolution of tension with a mood of both active and static, stability and movement, discord and harmony, constancy and change, and light and darkness. *Silverland* (2016), commanding elegance, has a similar painterly language and origin. It is, perhaps, a little more academic and with its rapid and continuous scratching evokes an inventive, if not audacious and exciting surface. Here are two canvases among many in an exhibition that is only a small

selection from an abundant source of visual images. They all literally knock the breath out from those who are fortunate to view and inspect each canvas.

Varvaressos found her obsessive voice early and developed a language of her own, one that has served her well for many years. This 2017 exhibition demonstrates the best of the best. Here she has established art that demonstrates a delicate and sublime balance between the linear, the scrawly and a painterly clever palette in a masterly fashion. I believe that these are impressive examples of an artist reaching an important and significant place in her art practice. As Apollinaire said over a century ago, *'One could give the following definition of art: creation of new illusions.'*⁸

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¹ J.P. O'Neill (ed), *Barnett Newman: Selected writings and interviews*, Knopf, New York, 1990, p141.

² K.C. Lindsay and P. Vergo (eds), *Kandinsky: Complete writings on art*, Da Capo Press, New York, 1994, p757.

³ Simon Schama, *Hang-ups: Essays on painting (mostly)*, BBC Books, London, 2004, p223 and Julie Sylvester (ed.), *Cy Twombly, Fifty years of works on paper*, Schirmer/Mosel, Munich, 2004, p11.

⁴ Martha Kearns, *Kathe Kollwitz: woman and artist*, Dover Publications, New York, 1976, p172.

⁵ Vicki Varvaressos interviewed by Joseph Eisenberg on 18 June and 3 August 2014 and (by telephone) 17 April 2017.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ L.C. Breunig (ed.), *Apollinaire on art: essays and reviews 1902-1918*, Viking Press, New York, 1972, p223.