

What the soul has heard tell of: new paintings by Mary Crenshaw

‘What happens is the mind
travels outward
because it wants to be the soul it has heard tell of...’
(1)

Mary Crenshaw’s new series of powerful paintings ‘Desirable Residence’ take home as their central theme. In paintings that boldly push ideas to the very edge, Crenshaw explores the craving for what home provides – comfort, shelter, security and stability – and the journeys we make to fulfil this need. In some canvasses the trajectory towards ‘home’ is starkly depicted, from a chaos of dense brushstrokes and a clutter of darker marks to the more serene image of a blueprint of a standard house against a white and blue ground. Most of the works convey a transitory state, often with the simple motif of home as a rectangle with an arched doorway and a triangular roof, set askew as if on uncertain foundations, or reduced to a black outline as though drawn as a graffiti protest against the lack of housing.

On one level, Crenshaw addresses the universal necessity and desire for a safe home, while on the other, the work becomes a painful critique of displacement and scarcity. Fantasy and failure drive the works’ dynamic counterpoint. With an unprecedented 68.5 million people displaced, of which 10 million are stateless, Crenshaw’s concerns cannot help but take on an urgent specificity.

‘I’ve seen how things
that seek their way find their void instead.’
(2)

The void that Lorca so eloquently evokes is poignantly present in Crenshaw’s paintings that were initially inspired by the new migrants in her Italian neighbourhood, begging every day, baseball cap outstretched. The begging bowl motif recurs throughout these works, sometimes shape-shifting into a small sailing boat or coracle, or perhaps even a crucible where substances are melted and transformed under high temperatures. The motif becomes a vessel where change in materiality happens under extreme conditions, lending the work an alchemical quality: the migrant’s dream is launched only to founder in a grim reality of homelessness and joblessness on a foreign street.

Being a migrant herself and having to be finger-printed amongst a queue of Ethiopian refugees, brought into sharp relief the fragility of the artist’s own construction of American identity and privilege. This troubling consciousness worked its way into her abstract paintings, making them act as ethical landscapes towards agents of social change. As Rebecca Solnit puts it, ‘Empathy is a journey you travel – if you pay attention, if you care, if you desire to do so.’ (3)

In one striking vertical painting, Crenshaw uses a blotch of Venetian red to suggest a tomato and the exploitation of tomato pickers in Puglia. In 2018, two over-crowded vans of migrant workers crashed, killing 16 people. Most live in squalor in make-shift homes and travel to work in dilapidated vehicles, increasing their vulnerability. The trauma of loss, the

turmoil of war and the cramped conditions of sea escapes are conveyed in the layered and overscored gestures and lines, in vivid contrast to the simple, clear icon of the longed for home. Crenshaw often draws on the quiet palette of Italian Grand Masters like Tiepolo – the ecstatic clouds, touched by celestial gold, blue and white, suggestive of God, Mary and the host of angels. While not overstated, Crenshaw's recurrent use of titanium white, yellow ochre and ultramarine blue do suggest hints of transcendency and a cautious sublime. But her purpose is not ethereality or spiritual bliss, rather to express the basic human right to shelter, the simple satisfaction of being at home.

The other key motif in this series is the tree. It stands robustly in many of the images like strong spine, overarching yet flexible, airy yet rooted. Its energy is fast and full, the leaves resembling falling gold coins. Crenshaw explains how she was inspired by the setting of the Poplar Union Arts Centre in Bow, the London area that once housed a huge, thriving factory for soft-paste porcelain. The artist was struck by the favoured blue and white pattern copied from Chinese porcelain that showed a house, a sheltering tree and compositional rocks. Porcelain is still given as a wedding gift, symbolising domesticity and stability. Stand back from the paintings and it's possible to discern calligraphic gestures resembling Chinese ideograms, showing the influence on the artist of French painter Fabienne Verdier. Verdier is known for calligraphic gestures on a grand scale, using a single outsized brush to create large, confident paintings.

But Crenshaw's tree is also a symbol of endangerment. She's aware of the lack of trees in Lombardy where she lives, destroyed in the 18th century to prevent the spread of malaria by mosquitoes. Now, as rapacious urban development threatens our arboreal heritage, Crenshaw seems to be demanding a place for trees, a view of leaves and their vitalising lungs. The tension caused by the growing privatisation and ornamentation of city greenery to enhance property prices resonates through the paintings. On one hand we have the sleek architecture of uninhabited apartment blocks, while on the other, we face a desperate need for affordable housing and increased numbers of homelessness. At a time when windowsills and ledges are weaponised against rough sleepers, the city offers its bridges and arcades as shelters. The dichotomies of luxury and lament, wealth and deprivation, and loving and loathing what cities do to us and demand from us, are tapped into in these glorious and often furiously restless paintings. Decisions hover in the colour layers, as 'the natural world' gets crowded out and the idea of home becomes increasingly deferred, dismantled and blurred.

Amidst the chaotic flurries of panic and overwhelm lie occasional pockets of lucidity, captured in graceful lemon swathes or tranches of deep, harmonious blue. Threatened by over-development, the voraciousness of growth, these lyrical moments reassure us that not all trees will become pylons, be uprooted or stand as metal simulacra. There's also plenty of textured body in this work as Crenshaw makes marks with her fingers, with a stick or a palette knife, as if desperate to differentiate herself as an individual through paint rather than through the state apparatus of immigration control. Is one of the most important elements of our individuality now measured in our level of security risk? These paintings are about home, displacement, dreams, place, and also identity. How can we sustain and nourish our uniqueness in ticky-tacky highrise boxes built with a 'poor door' for the council tenants whose needs allowed the building's erection in a high density borough?

As Rebecca Solnit attests 'suffering far away reaches you through art, through images...' (4) and this profound and complex work touches the pulse of what it means to

suffer the powerlessness of the dispossessed. It is a compassionate, passionate and important expansion of what abstract painting can and must do.

- (1) Brian Teare, 'Emerson Susquehanna' from *Sight Map* (California: University of California Press, 2009)
- (2) Federico Lorca, '1910' from *A Poet in New York* (New York, Penguin, 1988)
- (3) Rebecca Solnit, *The Faraway Nearby* (London: Granta, 2013), p.195
- (4) Ibid.