

The Unbearable Lightness of Seeing

“Without realising it, the individual composes his life according to the laws of beauty...”
Milan Kundera 1984 ¹

Moments such as this invite an opportunity to compose our own feelings about the magical endeavours of American painter Winston Roeth. Needless to say I worry that any attempt to make an aggregate of his painting practice will at best be that...an accumulation of distinct but pleasurable experiences I have shared with Winston and his work over 25 years. How might I give shape in a few words to such a long and concentrated undertaking?

Having been first introduced to Winston in 1995 I would go on to form a treasured friendship and close working relationship with him, visiting and staying regularly at his Broome Street loft on the then fault-line of Little Italy and Chinatown in the heart of NYC's Lower East Side.

Back in the early 90s, SOHO still retained enough of its cliched character – a personality I had read and dreamed about as an Art History student, and even as a youthful gallerist. I fully expected to bump into de Kooning carrying linen rolls or witness SAMO painting in a doorway and though I never did of course, the “Broome Street” years - especially those pre 9/11 - have coalesced in my memory, like a hand-held cinematic collage that in retrospect, has been vital to me personally and professionally.

The loft that formed Winston and Susan's living space bridged two studios and had a Shaker-like simplicity that I immediately fell for. (but recognise I'm too accumulative to institute in my own life). Then in 2004 in what seemed an abrupt shift, Winston and Susan moved to Beacon N.Y. leaving behind a dense thirty-year history in N.Y.C. for a softer version of small-town Americana, that, like the endless stories of N.Y.C., we assume we know through literature and film. By now you will have realised that these are the observations of an antipodean whose naivety was shaped by everything from Faulkner to Kerouac, The Walton's to Scorsese, and that despite the difficulties that had clearly beset many of these smaller working towns up and down the Hudson and elsewhere in America, there were vestiges of the hopeful idealism that sustains an unlikely energy and possibility in the American landscape.

My view of their retreat into the arcadian bliss peaked recently when Emma and I finally visited Winston and Susan in Waldoboro, Maine - our first to their treasured summer home. Scorsese's *Mean Streets* abandoned for Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* - well not quite but the shift was not just physical, it was conceptual. Despite the surprises, there was also much that was familiar. Winston and Susan share in an intimate nomadic spirit where they seasonally pack down the essential framework of their lives into two cars and shuttle between these disparate worlds. I'm certain it's not in fact easy but it sure feels seamless. Sitting in his Maine studio I found myself forgetting which one I was in, even though just

¹ Kundera, Milan, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) – Part Two: Body and Soul

outside there was a Disneyesque field complete with grazing deer, the field running gently downwards to the distant saltwater inlet. The raucous collision of Little Italy's and Chinatown's commerce that took place directly outside his Broome Street loft in the 80s and 90s was replaced by a bucolic vision that would've lulled many an idle mind, content to watch the light shimmer on the distant waters, the flora and fauna – the hallucinatory romanticism of it all. But as he had done for years with the noisy scramble of NYC at his doorstep, Winston turns his vision inside, painting to the looping soundtrack in his head – Coltrane and Davis, Joplin and Buddie Guy.

So committed to his search for luminosity one might be tempted to see Winston as distant heir to the tradition of *The Illuminists* and *The Hudson River School*, when in reality his paintings chronicle an intrinsic search for the ineffable rather than a description of its wavelength. Though the American landscape has also often stood as metaphor for the celestial or divine, for Roeth it feels less about locating the transcendent in the play of light upon the landscape. Rather Roeth's paintings prefer a more modest version of the sublime, something clear yet unutterable, ethereal but known.

As we have moved galleries between cities in New Zealand and then in Australia there are certain ceremonies we make in each site we occupy so as to colonise the space. This process of settlement involves hanging the first major painting of Winston's we acquired. There is also a painting of Gunter Umberg's that commands the same promptness and attention. Together they act as visual anchors in our home, points of orientation that go well beyond talisman.

The Roeth painting is titled *Resource*. On occasion I take issue with Winston's titles, mostly because they seem to defy the low-flying ordinariness of words. But this painting *Resource*...its title is perfect because this is a painting that I come back to time and again and will always do so because of its inexhaustible substance and refuge. For a decade it was installed opposite my desk in our apartment above the Auckland gallery. I often found myself there at the bookends of each day continuing a circular conversation with the work. I regularly asked the painting "are you blue". It never answered one way or t'other, though I imagined Winston smiling and suggesting it is, - with thanks to Miles Davis..."kinda blue". We know well that Winston paints many colours though he cheekily denies this on a regular basis. I can see him refuting this claim about colour with his hands....looking at you with those careful eyes and holding a small volume of air in his hands and saying... well it's really the light... bringing his fingers together in a soft mesh and reminding me again that the challenge is to look through the painting - beyond to what Kundera describes as "on the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth."

Matisse would join this conversation too, reminding me that Winston hadn't painted "blue" rather he had, as Matisse himself had done with the table, painted the emotion that it produced in me. It has always been clear with *Resource* that the Matissean ambition... to make "art of balance, of purity and serenity... something like a good armchair..."² was central to Roeth's ambitions. This pursuit of serenity is manifest in *Resource* in its distillation towards one fresh note, played with clarity and according to the laws of beauty.

² Matisse, Henri, Notes of a Painter, 1908

So, what kinds of emotions does a painting such as *Resource* invoke and how does it set about this task? When Robert Hughes described Rothko's Houston Chapel as the "last silence of Romanticism"³ he suggested that art was set to disappear inside itself in a deluge of indulgent melancholy. The burden that Rothko wanted painting, or more particularly believed his painting should and would carry, was beyond considerable. Hughes went on to suggest that Rothko's ambitions were granted a degree of retrospective legitimacy through his own death, but it is Rothko's paintings themselves that beseech such a mortal response in us, even in the hearts and minds of those hardened by the cynicism that helped corrode the foundations of high modernism - Hughes included. If Rothko had sought to invest painting with an incontestable gravity, the kind of pressure one feels in the faces of Masaccio's Adam and Eve in the *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* or Titian's *Saint Sebastian*, then Matisse's lineage - to which Roeth certainly belongs - continues in its aspiration to lift the heaviness, albeit replacing it with a state that is equally provocative - the unbearable lightness of being.

The weightlessness of Roeth's colours feels less to do with their shade and tone and more to do with the manner in which he liberates pigment from the restraints of binder, from the waft and weft of a painting's surface. The honeycomb, wooden or di-bond panels he chooses have a benign neutrality that supports pigment and process without insinuating themselves into the mix. They are seldom eager to be visible. We do not scan Winston's surfaces in search of the artful glitch – the marks of authorship, rather we accept that their sublime measurement is the result of judgement and feeling that could only be analogue.

The contrasting border that is common to many of his paintings including *Resource*, often containing iridescent pigments which circumnavigates the central chromatic proposition. Faster and linear - these borders guide our eyes around the edge of the painting before we inevitably, wilfully fall into the saturated space of the interior – the space Winston so charmingly calls the "drift". It is in this "armchair" that we are free to feel. No dictatorial art rhetoric or self-evident sociology but an empirical truth born of observation and judgement.

Like the delicate sculptures of Fred Sandback, Roeth's paintings invite a recalibration of our own sensory capacity. In their distillation of the componentry of seeing, they give vision an almost unbearable lightness and veracity, something that we will surely crave more and more as the intelligible lies that risk defining this unsettling moment threaten to overwhelm the unintelligible truth.

Andrew Jensen, August 2020

³ Hughes, Robert, *The Shock of the New*, 1980 Published Alfred A Knopf, INC p.232