

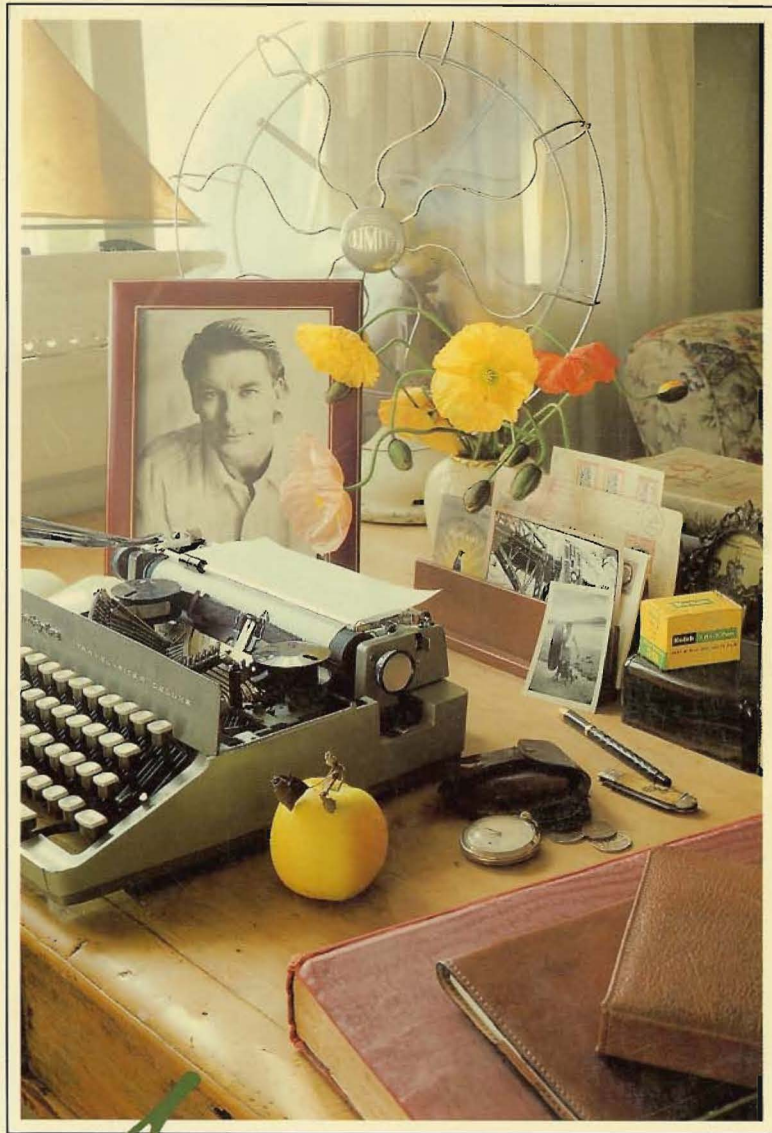
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GENTLEMEN



*Sprinklers
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RACHEL ROVAY

ORIGINS AND ORGANS

Rachel Rovay's paintings sit outside any identifiable mainstream, or even fringe, art 'movement'. You could not call her an expressionist, a 'bad' painter, an abstractionist, a resurrector of pop or a neo-classicist. Her painting does not recall the work of anyone. It is, to use a word not often used in reference to painting anymore, 'unique'.

The works reproduced here are from a show Rovay presented at Realities Gallery in Melbourne earlier this year. The series was linked by a tight theme and a similar style. Soft, organic shapes in subdued, almost sombre colours, arranged like classical still-lives draped on rich fabric. Occasionally one found a window in frame, but its function was neither as a light source, nor as an offer of escape. The suggestion was more that there was no way out.

If Rovay's paintings — layers of gouache, chalk pastel and ink on paper — refer to anything from traditional art practice, it could be an intuitive blend of surrealism, Dutch still-lives and perhaps the work of Ingres and Velasquez. At first glance, her work seems pretty; not decorative or trite, but sensual and fluid. After more prolonged viewing, the organic shapes take on a sinister atmosphere, as if they showed a body, lounging re-composed from some macabre dismembering process, the record perhaps of a murderous mutilation.

Rovay is direct when asked about the 'concerns' of this work. Without hesitating, she replies, "motherhood. The idea of motherhood is how it started. Within my environment, a lot of my friends, career people, are having children." At 31, it was a question that began to obsess her and had to be resolved. As Rovay says, "you have to make that



"I use art to resolve conflicts. I look at me in the environment; that's what art is."

decision. There is no in between. There was a time when I thought maybe I should have a child. But I kept seeing the negative sides — not having enough time to pursue your own interests, the usual things that women would feel. Probably, most women would go beyond that and say there is something *inside* me I want to experience. But over a period of a year, I've made a decision that I'm definitely not made for children — not now. I'm definitely not the mother."

Rovay has a very open approach to the role of art, but for her, one of its functions is to resolve such personal conflicts. Her earlier work dealt with quite different themes: the experience of being Jewish, moving to Australia at the age of 14, and the effect of a return in her early 20s to Israel; the effect there of the constant threat of war on people's lives; the landscapes of the old city of Jerusalem; industrial/found objects in an urban landscape in Melbourne.

"It's personal work, but in the last year I've looked at my own environment, which I'd never done before; *my* environment and myself, finding myself, and as a result, questioning other people so I could find some answers. Answers come from other



people (or at least from the interchange), and I'm very interested in their ideas and seeing where I stand in relation to other people and their lives."

"I use art" Rovay says, "to resolve conflicts. I look at me in the environment; that's what art is. It's not there to decorate the walls, but to look into whatever's bothered me. To make these problems concrete. And then try to resolve them. Try..." And she smiles.

"Whatever you do has to come from yourself, whether your subject matter is a landscape or your own head. You look at things from your own eyes, you don't look at it from any other point of view — unless you're imitating the exact style of another artist. You paint from your own experience, your own being, your own space. There is no other way."

The organic forms for this particular series are not sketched from models, but from Rovay's own body, imagination and memory. "I try," she says, "to create in a lateral way, anything *but* the obvious, and extend that to create an emotional impact. The moods are very very important, so the work changes accordingly.

"If my work is continuous, one idea follows another, even if the mood changes, the work can change with it. It's always flexible enough to achieve the final aim. But it's difficult with paintings, it's tougher. Stopping and starting is a killer. But that's the way my lifestyle is." (Rovay does casual teaching to support the impecunious career of artist. As a result, her working process is constantly interrupted.)

When strongly emotional work is dependent on concentration, when ideas and feelings can disappear if interrupted, the choice of medium becomes all important. This is why, says Rovay, she chooses to work with pastels, inks and gouache, and on paper. "The nature of the work on paper is more immediate than painting (with oils). Pastels are more immediate. But I use a combination — I use gouache to give me a perfect surface and *not* a white background on paper, and then I work on that and let the gouaches, the various colours from the gouaches, come through at certain stages."

This process gives her work an intensity, a layered depth resonant of ancient interiors, rooms closed off from the light by heavy drapes, grandmothers' drawing rooms, spaces thick with memories.

"The very dark background is almost the unknown. Out of that — sometimes it is a conscious decision, sometimes it's not — I've tried to bring certain shapes into light."

Rachel Rovay is concerned with the personal and with history, but history as it affects *her*. After the Realities exhibition, Rovay planned a return to Jerusalem and was excited about the potential effects this visit to her old homeland might have on her art. In the meantime, her studio drips with the work-in-progress of "male-female relationships", her new theme. "Really," she says, "I'm going backwards in a sense. You usually deal with that stuff first, then move into motherhood. But then, you've got to go back to understand the present." □

Megan Cranly