

Jennifer Joseph: Forever Friday

Most artists claim that they make art with a sense of compulsion and many have reported a feeling of 'withdrawal symptoms' if forced to spend too long away from their studios. For Jennifer Joseph this feeling is more extreme due to the intricate relationship between her art practice, her life and her continuing study of Buddhism. With almost monastic dedication she has, for over twenty years, lived a nocturnal life, deliberately shutting herself away from the distractions of day-to-day society to create art in the undisturbed environment of her studio.

Jennifer has consistently striven to make artworks that are not representative of any external subject matter but rather seen as objects in themselves. Buddhist use the Sanskrit word 'tathatā' (suchness) to describe the irreducible, indescribable nature of something or the ultimate unchanging reality of all phenomena. Each work of art, from the point of view of the perceiver, should be recognised for the wholeness and completeness of the thing in itself. Jennifer describes her process as a dialogue between her natural compulsion to make gestural marks, balanced by her aesthetic preference for minimalism and emptiness. It is almost as if an untamed flow of expressive marks are slowed down and distilled in her search for the essential painting.

This exhibition of new paintings, collectively titled *Forever Friday*, is dedicated to Dr Donald Grant, an important influence on her life. She visited him every Friday for many years for psychotherapy, up until he retired in December 2006. She initially consulted him as part of the recovery from an illness but as her art and Buddhist practise evolved, she used the relationship to help her in the process of developing insight and understanding of her own mind, somewhat akin to a Buddhist adherent regularly visiting a Master. As these three aspects of Jennifer's life developed and strengthened their interconnection deepened. Mutually nourished and enriched they were given ultimate expression through her art. *Forever Friday* comprises paintings from 2006 to 2007, which marks for Jennifer the transition period, leading up to and following the cessation of her sessions with Dr Grant. The relationship between Buddhist meditation and the act of making art is very important to Jennifer's

art practice. Each work is completed in a single session, often painted very fast and in what Jennifer describes as a state of ecstasy. These moments of exhilarating action are preceded by long periods of quiet contemplation. She does not pre-plan works and is unable to paint on demand but rather waits for the right moment to start each new work. After each work is 'finished' it is accepted or rejected after a further period of contemplation and scrutiny. She rarely goes back to alter or adjust a completed painting as an added mark would always stand out in her viewing of the work despite the fact that it would be unnoticed by others. If rejected the work would be discarded or painted over, directly over the old work or over a layer of black paint or white gesso, to become a completely different painting. Sometimes the remnants of an earlier painting are visible through the over painting and these become important components in the new work.

Over the past fifteen years, Jennifer has produced various bodies of work on recycled wood often in the form of wooden boxes, tea chests or tea chest lids. In these works, the 'past-life' of the wooden support became an integral part of the finished work. The stencilled lettering or inscribed box numbering are exposed or visible through the paint acting as an element within the overall balance of the individual work. In this series she was consciously striving to restrict the gestural mark, applying primarily bands and/or blocks of colour and often leaving expanses of unpainted support. Each mark on the work, be it pre-existing or applied, is intuitively placed with as much significance as a single syllable in a Haiku poem or a single stroke in Zen Buddhist calligraphy.

For Jennifer, texture, colour and composition are all equally important in the balance of the finished work. The texture or materiality of an untouched linen surface is just as important as that of a found wooden support. By contemplating the unpainted surface for extended periods, she is able to feel a personal affinity with the potential painting so that it becomes an extension of her inner self. While linen itself has its own inherent texture, she also delights in the uneven surface of gesso and, in this series of works, she has mixed

the acrylic paint with sand, ground pumice or ground minerals such as calcite or kaolin.

Jennifer describes the matt black panels in *The usual time* diptyches and in the polyptych works as resting points for the eye when contemplating the accompanying gestural panels. They can be seen as an image of blankness or the void ('sunyata' in Buddhist teaching) – an arena of potential before any marks have been applied or, perhaps, a negation of all possible marks that might be visible were it not for the black paint obscuring them. In Alchemy, the first stage of the alchemical progress is called *Nigredo*, or blackening, which, in Jungian psychology, represents a coming to terms with feelings of guilt, worthlessness and powerlessness, the 'dark shadow' aspect of the self. It is similar to the Buddhist notion of 'dukkha' or suffering that must be faced up to before continuing on the path to enlightenment.

For those of us who have watched the development of Jennifer's paintings over a number of years there is a marked sense of confidence and resolution in these new paintings. Some of the arrangements of lines, strips or flat fields of colour remind us of her earlier works but whereas before there was often a sense of tentative fragility which added to their appeal, now there is strength and assuredness. This exhibition reflects an important breakthrough both in her art and in her journey of self-discovery and I see a very exciting course for both into the future.

Michael Wardell
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