Profile

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Sarah Raphael's surprising foray into abstraction marks an about-turn by an artist easily bored by standing still

Empty Speech Bubbles

A blinding migraine meant Sarah Raphael could barely leave her sick bed for almost eighteen months. Courageously and cleverly, she turned this to her professional advantage by making comic-strip paintings on which she could work just a little bit at a time. She could manage only short periods of work before the pain became too much. This meant that large single-image pictures were too demanding. Her new, detailed and painstakingly constructed works constitute 'Strip!', her first exhibition at Marlborough Fine Art, which opened last month to critical reactions of surprise and acclaim.

The surprise was that this was a new, unforeseen phase in the career of one of Britain's most celebrated young women painters. Her reputation during the last ten years has been built upon her startling portraits, reminiscent of early Lucian Freud, followed by a series of evocative, naturalistic Australian desertscapes. She had been swept along on a tidal wave of praise by a powerful clutch of critics and writers, including William Boyd and Clive James. Now the poet, Andrew Motion, has put his weight behind her with a celebratory foreword in the catalogue for her new show. What no critic expected was that Raphael would produce pop art for the 1990s.

Her large, playful, colourful pictures, consisting of hundreds of tiny panels, were produced during and after her pregnancy with her third child, Rebecca. Aged 38, Raphael juggles the pressures of the all-consuming schedule of a professional artist with those of a mother raising three young children, sometimes painting throughout the night when the children are asleep. During her illness, the nausea and pain were so tyrannical that she relied heavily upon the painkiller Pethidine. It was no ordinary headache. Any noise, light or movement was torture. It was in these difficult circumstances that she experimented with comic-strip art, a notion that had been swirling in her head since she was very young.

When her family lived in Rome, she read bright, jazzy, Italian strips from the age of four. Later at boarding school in England her

Sarah Raphael, *Strip Page 1*, 1996–7, acrylic on paper on canvas, 183.5 × 183.5 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)

parents sent her the *Beano* and the *Dandy*. She was always fascinated more by the artwork than the storyline. 'I was making up strip cartoons by the time I was eight or nine. What bored me was the business of having to tell the story, but I loved the composition and the way so much trouble and care was taken over every little square in Tintin and Asterix – sometimes *just* to show that it was the next morning.'

What makes Raphael's new paintings stand out is that she has turned the medium of comic art on its head by denuding the strips of any meaning. In narrative terms, her pictures go nowhere. 'In a way that is the point. The pictures say: "Read me. I am a strip cartoon with speech bubbles". I paint them with the assumption that the viewer will have read comic books. It will muck about with what they are conditioned to assume.'

Yet subversion and radical confrontation of traditional assumptions are not normally associated with Raphael, who has been, perhaps unfairly, viewed as an extremely accomplished but traditional artist from Agnew's. Her early CV includes a solid, establishment commission from the MCC to paint Sir Garfield Sobers for Lords; the *Guardian*, in collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery, chose her to paint the five founding contributors and editors of its Women's Pages: Jill Tweedie, Liz Forgan, Posy Simmonds, Mary Stoot and Polly Toynbee. In 1996 she won the Nat West prize, for her powerful depiction of the searing, harsh Australian outback. It was all marvellous stuff, but it did not buck any trends. What she is now doing is to turn 180 degrees and veer away from figurative and landscape art to provocative abstraction. The change in direction is reflected in her decision to move galleries, leaving fusty Agnews to join Marlborough Fine Art, the blue-chip stable for many of the most celebrated modern twentieth-century artists.

Raphael believes in constant exploration and stretching towards new ideas. 'I grew up loving figurative painting and wanting to do it because it is what I am best at. I came to abstraction reluctantly. It was never my intention. The point was that I had run out of the desire to paint narrative pictures. I meant them at the time, but basically I realised, if I was honest, I did not really have a narrative in my mind that I urgently wanted to do.'

She hoped to challenge the idea of conceptualism in contemporary art. 'I wanted to paint and make things in reaction to the kind of art that was exciting everybody in which things aren't made any more by the artist; they are *found* or *borrowed*, and are given or *endowed with* a meaning. That has become the job of the artist: to give meaning to meaningless things. It's not that I don't like that or find it interesting, but because I am so attached to painting I thought: what is it that painting alone can do? That is what I want to do.'

The new pictures contain hundreds of tiny boxes, each filled with stripped-down forms, objects with just a hint of familiarity but from which any immediate identity has been pared away. A giant multi-coloured crossword comes to mind, or even the electronic insides of a radio. There is a hint of Egyptian hieroglyphics.

Sarah Raphael, *Edward Chad Varah*, 1993, 346 × 286 cm. Permanent collection National Portrait Gallery

Sarah Raphael, *Sometimes a River*, 1995, oil and raw pigment on paper laid on canvas, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)

Sarah Raphael, *Strip Page 6*, 1998, acrylic on canvas with papier maché collage, 183 × 183 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)

They cry out to be read, but provide no message. The eye hovers and seeks a story which is not there. The form is suggestively narrative, while the content is stubbornly abstract. There is joyful spontaneity as well as rigid control. There are speech bubbles but no words. They appear to be a liberation of the subconscious rather than a layered series of meanings. We recognise forms – lemons, bulbs, trees, cones – but are left doubting if that is what we have seen, or even are supposed to have seen.

This all brings us back to her migraine. There is a blurring, a dizziness, an intensity, but no one single focus. As Andrew Motion writes in his introduction,

> The yellowish [shapes] are still there (now strangely shaped into Martian nipples), and so are the empty thoughts; but they are dominated by boxes full of other, smaller, differently coloured boxes. Everything is flat, clear-cut and yet at the same time woozy – like the shapes which appear when you rub your eyes too hard. Or maybe like the start of a headache...

Raphael produced most of her new work in a glass conservatory attached to her house in Camberwell, which now doubles as a second studio. Her children feel it is their space too, and freely wander in and out. Her old studio, down the road, remains empty. Raphael welcomes the necessary interplay between working and looking after her family. It has been how her life was always run. Her father, the novelist and Oscar-winning screenwriter, Frederic Raphael, and her mother, a respected editor, always took their children's artistic endeavours seriously. Her mother collected and kept every drawing her daughter made. 'They always took what I did seriously. They encouraged. Drawing was never seen as just a childish distraction, even when I was very young. It always seemed normal to be an artist and to earn a living by doing that.'

Raphael is happy to have been able to find a way to return to work after her illness in a manner which stretches and stimulates her. She feels her comic-strip abstraction is the start of an area of work in which she has far from finished exploration. 'I would hope to keep things which I like about figurative painting – a sense of form, sense of light, line and order – and to make something that appears to be meaningful, but ultimately does not mean anything other than it is a picture. That is its meaning.'

Raphael was very aware that her reputation rested on her previous figurative work and that a new departure into abstraction was a risk. 'I would lie in bed and worry that it was not serious, not heroic, not romantic – all the things I get attached to in painting. Comic strips were definitely not a heroic idea. It's really quite playful. I felt my reputation as a painter was a lot to do with feelings and symbols behind the work. My desert paintings were dignified and serious. They felt serious. It was a serious matter, but this was, at least superficially, a frivolous idea; but of course, it is all really the same thing. It is hopefully not any different, but just a progression.

'Comic books were the key to unlock my abstraction because they declared meaning,

Sarah Raphael, *Strip Page 8*, 1998, acrylic on canvas with papier maché collage, 183 × 183 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)

but I held it back. This is provoking you [the viewer] to try and read meaning into it, and you will try and find that you can't. That will be frustrating and annoying.'

Is there a danger that the viewer is disappointed? 'I hope so. I hope you get crestfallen, and are then forced to look again at the picture. The whole point of a painting is that it's good enough to keep someone looking at it. The intention is that you look for a meaning, are disappointed, and then you're forced to come back to see all it is is just a painting.'

Raphael readily admits to having a low boredom threshold, and has always forced herself to experiment to keep her mind stretched. 'Technically I assimilate styles very very fast; I am like a sort of mutating virus. Fortunately, I have a very ferocious and ruthless mentor, who taught me at Camberwell, and has been vile about everything I have done, which is really good for me. He is always saying, "What are you doing? You can't keep working within your means. You have the sort of talent which needs to keep developing – lots of people have a facility to paint and draw well. Is that the best you can do?" So I think the stylistic changes in my new work are quite superficial. I have always accepted I was likely to be taken less seriously as a painter if I followed my nose and allowed my low boredom threshold to keep me interested and moving. I could not do it if I thought I was just repeating myself. It is a very long day painting. If it is not new and searching, I might as well go for a walk instead.'

Raphael is impatient with security, safety and stability in any artist's career. 'A lot of artists get to a point where they are recognised for some type of art and this is their identity. They think, "I had better keep doing that as otherwise people won't know it's me and won't think I am really serious". At that point, they lose me generally – even really good artists. I can see that technically they are amazing, but come on, guys, it's not that hard to get really good at doing something if you do nothing but that for 70 years. I can't see the point of it. If you look at Picasso, he followed his instinct wherever it went. I would sooner fail at trying to do that rather than carving out a little niche for myself and for which I am venerable and respected.'

Her change of gallery is important. She felt it was time to move on and, like a star footballer, was delighted when she was poached by the rival gallery just two doors down the street from her old gallery. 'I always felt my pictures were battling valiantly against the surroundings; I had to beg them to put up canvases on the wall when I was doing the desert show. They would die on the red velvet. I did feel I was cycling uphill and I thought I wouldn't mind having my work in a gallery which was neutral in its space, to see how the pictures would do when they didn't have to battle against their surroundings.'

Raphael's life is defined by her compulsion to paint: 'It is an ongoing struggle between the best and the worst of myself. I am so ludicrously ambitious in that I have a ridiculously inflated idea of my own importance. Therefore, all the worst things about me will be tempted to come out in my painting – my flashness, my desire to impress people, my desire to show them how fucking good I am, to absolutely smack them over the head with my opinions – all the stuff that I try and control. I observe that when I am alone with myself – like some evil twin. I can see that bit of me and it goes blah blah blah, and chats away and is rude to people, and when I am painting and trying to work out technical pictorial compositions, that bit of me goes blabbering away. I don't think painting is therapy. It is not to do with that. It is to do with the business of making art. The fact is that the majority of things one makes fail if you use all of the art of the past as your barometer. It is important to remember that, otherwise more of my pictures would fail than already do. Look at Massacio, for Christ's sake. He died when he was 26. If I didn't think about that I would be unbearably pleased with myself. When I paint I discover what I think about things. It is a compulsion which was just always there.'

Heady acclaim and high profile exhibitions, for all their rewards, are not what Raphael feels most comfortable with. She is repulsed as well as attracted by the hype and hoop-la of exhibiting her work. 'I don't want to show in England for a long time. It is the thing I hate about being an artist. I have got completely the wrong temperament. Showing my work brings out my worst character defects. I get so upset in advance, weeks before the show. I get so distressed at what people will think and say. I am torn between thinking that the pictures are so awful and hoping no one notices them, or I feel these pictures are really good, but I bet that no one will notice. It is a nightmare, but I also feel embarrassed that I feel it is a nightmare. It is somehow dreadfully ungrateful. I either want too much or too little.'

Few doubt she will bear the ordeal once more. But what it will be is anybody's guess. The metamorphosis of Sarah Raphael is far from over. □