

More than meets the painter's eye: The Art of Gabrielle Martin

A painter is someone who navigates between observations of the 'real' (the world of phenomena that lies outside the subject) and their own imaginings or desires (typically, but not always, opposed to the 'real'). And the preponderance of one of those aspects in the work of a given artist is as much a part of the 'DNA' of their vision as a 'signature' inflection of the brush, or a predilection for a particular tonality or palette. We bundle all this together when we refer to an artist's 'quality of imagination' and feel we are in the presence of an encompassing, individuated sensibility – the way of seeing is the way of saying.

In the paintings of Gabrielle Martin, there is a consistent way of seeing across the three genres she works in: landscape, still life and portraiture. What intrigues me throughout is her leaning either towards the observational or the imaginative, and in what proportion or interplay? Our first impression might be that careful observation is her primary mode, yet for this viewer a persistent but subtle tension suggests otherwise. Yes, there is acute and masterfully executed observation in spades, but her work is also pervaded with a stillness and a hushed quality, and unusual and intriguing compositional traits that suggest an intent far removed from slice-of-life realism. Added to this is her predominantly cool palette and use of mid-tones, that bring associations of melancholy, nostalgia, and introspection – perhaps even an echo of the neoclassical current in modernism, however subtle or subverted to her own ends. Here we might invoke antecedents like Puvis de Chavannes, Félix Vallotton, Gwen John, Morandi and early Picasso.

Consider her landscapes: in several, one half is occupied by trees, the other by receding land or water. What to make of this favoured breach of balanced Claudian edge-masses in layered, horizon-bound recession? Am I alone in taking these trees to be stand-ins for the 'real' (they seem very much like figures in landscapes – Picasso's itinerants? – while never ceasing to be trees), while the 'empty' halves suggest a metaphor for boundless mental space? I am reminded how, in Chinese art, the unpainted backdrops to landscapes are primarily an analogue to a creative force or void (qi), as much as they might, incidentally and happily, do service for skies or aquatic bodies. Yes, I could be accused of making much of 'straightforward' landscapes of mood, but in my experience, patterns, repetitions, reoccurrences in art point to meanings, buried, unavowed, or consciously intended. With Martin, I feel strongly that such compositional tendencies are not self-conscious conceptual or deconstructive stratagems, but are a consequence of an authentically creative, poetic, and personal sensibility.

Take *Mulberry, Plum and Olive Trees with Cypress Hedge*. What a mysterious and charged painting, for all its apparent mundanity. The bare trees, ground unseen, writhe in frozen movement, caught between our gaze and an impenetrable hedge. The up-thrusting branches and beckoning sky tell us this painting is all about what lies behind that hedge. Once again, there is the 'real' – the embodied – and the 'beyond,' which is only-to-be-imagined. This dichotomy again seems to be the dramatic and poetic key to the work.

In *Railway Embankment with Blackwood Thicket* this tension reaches a kind of quiet apotheosis, an almost iconic power. We drift into this painting, borne on dreamy, breeze-bent grasses rendered with a masterful painterly feathering worthy of Pissarro or Wyeth. But where does it take us? This 'no man's land' between the railway and the edge of town is a place where Martin's daughter used to play and is reminiscent of the gorse-filled paddocks of her own childhood. Yet here this marginal

landscape has a dream-like quality, neither quite real nor wholly assembled from memories. This 'abandoned' place could be a child's playground, or dream theatre, where fanciful futures might be rehearsed, harsh realities negated, adventures undertaken and abandoned. And where better for dreams to arise than a place with nothing to declare, like those parts of our lives unfulfilled, forgotten or yet to be lived?

What of the portraits and still lifes? An artist's subject matter is chosen *because* it speaks, or can be made to speak, however obliquely, of and to their governing sensibility, which comes to an artist as a psychic pressure in search of a form. Where is the real Courbet to be found? In a colossal, multi-cast masterwork such as 'The Painter's Studio,' a fleshy portrait or a handful of apples on a table? The answer is, of course, in all of them. He never ceased to be Courbet. The same can be said of Martin.

Let us take the portrait of Thea. She is at once very real, intelligent, and keenly aware, and yet, through Martin's minimal but intriguing deployment of symbolic props, she is also much like a character in a psychological novel. Martin's imagination, her sensibility which imbues all she paints, invests her portrait subjects with subtly implied narratives, in my view not far removed from the quiet dramaturgy underpinning her landscapes. Thea's eyes are downcast, her expression taut, her posture upright. She is reading, but barely. The book looks set to be cast aside at any moment. The curtain is closed, but a gentle breeze lifts its lower corner. The book and tablet on the desk face down, placed randomly, as if they have been abandoned. The sprig of grass seeds echoes her hair, kempt but with a hint of pent energy – removed from its wild and proper 'nature', cut to a manageable length. Her cropped legs emerge into our space, as if she is already half not-there. Does this painting suggest an imaginative life more pressing than the 'real' world outside, or does it voice an invitation from the world beyond hedges, books and ruffled curtains?

Her portraits work as portraits *and* paintings precisely because of her ability to 'listen' to the inner promptings of her imagination while being attuned to the sitter, her countervailing attentiveness and curiosity being nowise different from genuine respect and acknowledgement of other selves. Martin's imaginative interpolations enable, as much as they coexist with, portraits of fully-rounded and self-present people.

I'll finish this appreciation of Martin's art with a quick note on a marvellous little painting, *Still Life with Plums and Black Bowl*. With its lovely shifts of warm and cool colours, this might be a disarmingly beautiful poem-in-paint on how life, in all its scrumptious, plummy glory, often needs a container just to, well, contain it, make it bearable. It's one of those little paintings that is perfect in its way, and also paradigmatic of how subtle nods to other artists can enrich, not diminish, the feast: Bonnard, Arikha, Cézanne, Renoir (he of the still lifes, not the lives stilled) Albert York and perhaps our good friend Courbet of the apples and flowers. We forget, in a world (and an art world) of the clamorous and cacophonous, just how much a small, 'humble' painting like this can enrich and sustain our lives. This is painting as domestic gift and gratitude.

As a cautionary note it should be said that – like all good art – Martin's work cannot be exhausted by any given reading. For these are paintings that invite us to slow down and look carefully – much as I suspect they were painted – and given their resistance to easy answers, and the patient attunement required to enter their contemplative space, I believe that whatever these imaginatively authentic paintings might yield will in turn be authentically our own.

Selwyn Rodda, Artist and Writer, 2025