

Monochrome

Painting in Black and White

National Gallery London

October 2017



Robin Richmond: Towards Uist from the Isle of Skye



Ingres: Grande Odalisque in Grisaille

My palette has been almost monochromatic for the last few months. This is only significant in that I know myself, and am known as, a colourist. Not that black, white and grey are not colours of course. My reasons are complicated. I have been painting the tempestuous landscapes of the Inner Hebrides and have incorporated the grey lava sand of the westward beaches of Skye into the paintings, making the paintings out of the very stuff they are describing. At the same time, I have been working on a series in watercolour about the delicate tonalities in the bark of silver birch trees, using the deep black of Indian ink and the rich organic umbers which come from walnut husks, known as *brou de noix*. Also, since seeing the Hokusai show at the British museum last spring, I am profoundly moved by the graphic “simplicity” of Japanese painting.

So, a decision on my part to restrict my colour range (albeit temporarily) does not come from reasons to do with “aesthetic asceticism” or a desire to “eliminate distractions” or to designate “a shift to an otherworldly, spiritual context”. These are the terms used to explain the 50 + works in this new show at London’s National Gallery. Yes, for Cistercian monks to abjure colour as “forbidden fruit” in stained glass makes complete sense. And for printmaking which employs graphic skills to adopt a restricted range of inks it is totally obvious. Even for Ingres to redo in greys or *grisaille* his famous grotesquely long torso-ed Odalisque is moderately interesting (making her a very peculiar poster girl for this show) but it all doesn’t add up. For me, at least.

Whilst applauding the “smarting up” (as opposed to the dumbing down) of so many exhibitions recently, I have to confess to being mightily confused by this show. An exhibition should have a strong visual narrative which does not lean too heavily on accompanying text, and though it is always a privilege and wondrous to see, amongst

many other greats, Petrus Christus, Memling and Dürer in conclave, it seems very arbitrary to organise a meet with Marlene Dumas and Cy Twombly, just because they are all working in black and white or *grisaille*. The curators say of the reduction in the colour palette of their chosen artists that they can thus “experiment with form, texture, mark making and symbolic meaning”. I simply can’t see how this differs from any other sort of painting, and the story they are trying to tell is very unclear. The show certainly has intellectual heft but it lacks coherence.

The last room, an immersive installation by that master of light, Olafur Eliasson, creates an otherworldly space using mono frequency lamps that bleach all colour from everything. In a room full of typically sombre art critics, me among them, it was not a huge surprise that we all looked like we were wearing black and white. We were.

Robin Richmond