

Helene Schjerfbeck: une vie de fantasme

An artist unknown to me at Andrew Bracey's recent exhibition was Helene Schjerfbeck. After a brief look at the artist's work, I decided to carry out further research. Schjerfbeck piqued my interest because she was female, post-impressionist, worked in a period of Modernism I value and depicted her pain in paint.

Schjerfbeck was a Swedish and French speaking Finn who gained a travel Grant from the Imperial Russian Senate to study and work in Paris; there, she led an almost stereotypical artist's life for several years.

In Paris, Schjerfbeck and Gwen John developed as artists. They had similar childhood experiences. John's mother died when she was eight and Schjerfbeck's father when she was fourteen. Both lives were emotionally impoverished by their loss, "Ma sécurité émotionnelle a été perdue (My emotional security has been lost)." they agreed.

Although neither artist attended school as juniors they knew that art was their talent and their refuge, "J'ai peint des coquillages à Tenby (I painted seashells in Tenby)." reminisced John, "Mon père m'a donné des crayons (My father gave me pencils)." replied Schjerfbeck.

Tenacity and mental robustness enabled Schjerfbeck and John meet the challenges of being artists and female, despite the odds being stacked against them. Schjerfbeck obtained a scholarship to the Finish Art Society Drawing School and won an art prize at age seventeen. And John attended the Slade School of Art winning the Melvill Nettleship Prize for Figure Composition in her final year.

Both experienced broken love relationships. Schjerfbeck's engagement was cruelly ended by letter, so she expunged her ex-fiancé's name from any link to hers. No one knows who the fiancé was but, "one day," she predicted "les femmes transformeront les intimités en art (women will transform intimacies into art)."

During gallery visits Schjerfbeck and John became seduced by subtle, muted colours, thick paint applied in mosaic-like small touches and the chalky effects of paint surfaces. "Le réalisme est mort! (Realism is dead!)" said Schjerfbeck.

On several occasions at the Louvre the two artists found themselves musing over paintings alongside an Austrian flâneur whose French was imperfect, although he could ask for 'pain' quite adequately. Schjerfbeck, John and the man fell into linguistically hybrid conversations. Although seemingly meek and self-effacing, the artists had strong-wills and fierce intelligences, which led to ardent discussions on the artworks. The man raised the issue of feminine sexuality and gave examples from his studies of where women fell short of men: they are more vain, jealous, dependent, and submissive; but less moral, active and able to love than men. His comments irritated. Schjerfbeck dismissed him for failing to understand women and suggested that a more investigatory approach using empirical data would improve his processes. She suggested he examine more closely the painting in front of them ('Portrait of a Black Woman' 1800 by Marie-Guillemine Benoist). After a period of scrutiny, Schjerfbeck itemised Benoist's obvious skills; how the artist had revealed her moral compass, ambition and ability to love. The sitter gazes at us without hint of, "vanité ou jalousie", Schjerfbeck concluded.

Later, the artists did concede to an interest in the man's musings on what he termed a 'sub conscious', "It is primitive aspects of the soul that create art" the man had reflected, "not rational thought." Having earlier agreed that realism was dead, Schjerfbeck and John ruminated his comments, "Mon subconscient fait de l'art...mmm? Truths, within our paint and on the surface? Truths in our self-portraiture?" The expression of their inner selves was a subject the artists continued to paint, with the clear intention of portraying their isolation and interiority.

In Schjerfbeck's self-portraits, her eyes do not meet the viewer's gaze. Often, she depicts herself looking over her shoulder or gazing slightly down and to the right. Looking down and to the right indicates attendance to internal emotions according to body language theory; this feels congruent. But have we got her wrong? The use of a mirror during self-portraiture inverts the composition - the eyes should look left not right - this denotes a person talking to themselves. So, what is she saying? Another Austrian, a friend of John's, Rainer Maria Rilke said, "...your solitude will be a support and a home for you, even in the midst of very unfamiliar circumstances, and from it you will find all your paths." Is this what Schjerfbeck contemplates as she paints?

Schjerfbeck's European travels continued after Paris. She spent several years in St Ives; then on to St Petersburg, Vienna and Florence (at the request of the Finnish Art Society) to make copies of Old Master paintings. And, after a time teaching in Helsinki she lived a secluded life with her ailing mother but continuing her painting between care and household tasks. After her mother's death, Schjerfbeck did not return to the artistic centres she had known but continued in solitude, to paint until her death in Sweden in 1946.

Today, in the age of the selfie, Schjerfbeck has a lot to teach us about masks and masquerades. She painted her canvases with intense pleasure, as if applying foundation, blusher, lipstick - mirroring our attachment to superficial appearances. What we present to the world is not who we are. "One day" she said, "nous serons postmodernes (We will be postmodern.)".

Anne Stansfield is a visual artist, based near Lincoln. She studied at the universities of Bolton and Lincoln, graduating in 2018 with BA in Fine Art with First Class Honours and gained two graduate awards: Best Fine Art dissertation; & Student of the Year. Residencies: East Midlands Graduate Residency, Surface Gallery Nottingham 2018; Art House Graduate Residency, Wakefield 2018.

Significant Exhibitions: Royal Academy Summer Exhibition (2014); Harley Open, The Harley Gallery, Welbeck, Notts (2020) - Harley Prize winner.

Stansfield is a conceptual artist. Having had a career supporting vulnerable adults her work is defined by resistance (subversion some might say) and advocacy. She works in varied media - 2D & 3D pieces, film, and found items - especially for site sensitive work.