

A SMUDGED INTIMACY

Ashraf Jamal

One of the finest studies of South African art – the life of an artist – is Ingrid Winterbach's novel *The Road of Excess* (2014). At its heart is the painter Aaron Adendorff, in remission following chemotherapy and radiation, with 'a certain vulnerability around the kidney.' Vulnerability defines the entire book, which is not only shaped by the artist's inner turmoil, but the distinctively South African world that informs it. No filter exists between these worlds. They interpenetrate each other, exposing the complicity of colonialism and apartheid in the forging of Adendorff, who is not only aware of his imminent passing, but the passing of a world he thought he understood.

'The eye is a witness. What it's a witness to is not clear,' Winterbach notes. It is this lack of clarity, despite the persistent act of looking, which inform the novel, and the journey that our painter-protagonist undertakes. The novel's title references William Blake's *Proverbs of Hell*, in which we read, 'the road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.' As to the truth of this view, I cannot quite say. But, as a wager, it

certainly positions a very particular art form – Expressionism – at the novel's epicentre, as a specific aesthetic and creative force in South African culture, one which is also central to the work of the artist I will be examining – Cheryl Franz.

Following the confession of bodily vulnerability, Winterbach turns to painting, and to the protagonist's discovery that 'something new began to happen in his art. Less detail, less tonal modelling, the configuration rawer, crasser than before, with more daring in his approach.' All these are the vital signs of Expressionism – signs that emerge out of a physical and psychological damage. Subsequently:

his palette gradually darkened. The texture of the paint began to thicken... He began to work with clusters: a greater concentration of forms in the middle of the canvas, suggesting the proscribed image – not through any recognisable representation, but via the intensity of heightened expression. Warm clusters of emotion, longing, memory.

A melting together and a densification, foreshadowing the non-present image. Although Aaron restrained himself from painting anything recognisably figurative, this remained the basis, the frame of reference, the point of departure. His longing for the image lay in the root of its absence.

The tension between abstraction and figuration – not seeing, yet seeing – proves the novel's crux. Later, we read:

gradually, very gradually, the image began to make a comeback in his work, after it had seemed for a long time as if something was straining to emerge. Certain parts of the canvas became even more compressed, more dense, calling up the abstract echoes of images, recognisable objects. Strange and still indeterminate forms began to rise. During the very last stages of abstraction, the paintings were dark, mainly black and grey, and gradually – sometimes it felt like



Cheryl Franz, Unbroken Wings Series, Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm, 118 x 78 cm.

CHERYL FRANZ

a lifetime of struggle – he replaced the purity of the abstract mark with the impurity of representation.

One cannot ignore the snarled complex in this novel – purity and impurity, abstraction, and figuration – and their entanglement in an embattled life, society, history. If Expressionism is the defining movement in South African art, it is because we remain witnesses of what we cannot quite understand – an obscenity, a perversion. We possess a conscience that we cannot suppress. Our best artists present us with the tenuousness of figuration, the paucity of enshrined clarity, the foreshadowing of some negative capability or resistance to the finality of things. If the figure persists, it must also be refused. If density is invoked, it must also be seen as illusory. If there is a ‘densification’ of ‘emotion, longing, memory,’ there is also its ruthless evacuation. This, I feel, is the case when considering the works by Cheryl Franz. While deeply subjective, incalculably febrile and wild, her art nevertheless seeks to find a hold, some tether, no matter how fragile it may be. Our objective – if such a thing is possible – is to assess how Franz arrives at her clusters of energetic forms, and what these tell us about the nature of her expression.

My first intuition was that, in Franz’s muted or monochromatic tones and the deliberately rudimentary deployment of forms, the pronounced emphasis on line (a crude, wild rectilinearity), the artist primarily insists upon the diagrammatic, that is, the gestural inclination

View Point : Reflections - Tensions I, Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm



View Point : Reflections - Tensions II, Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm



— what Gilles Deleuze calls a *line of flight*. By this, he means that expression — in this case, Franz's — is driven by the desire, not for closure or completeness, but to express a taut-fraught-bonded unravelling. In other words, Franz holds onto figurative form, yet like Winterbach's artist, she is far more inspired by its dispersion, its *estranged becoming*. This is why the dominant register in her art is its energy field. While the artworks are framed, circumscribed, they nonetheless hurtle onward, outward, inward. The mark-making is febrile and wild, yet more profoundly about a smudged intimacy, in which the conflicting mediums and techniques compel the viewer to enter an oblique story, a tenuous arrested passion.

Three traditions converge through Franz's reckless use of techniques: Impressionism, Expressionism, Action Painting. The combination reveals a desired tension between an impressionistic sonority, an expressionistic psychic entanglement, and the fauvistic splattering of action painting that is typically associated with Jackson Pollock. In their combination, we arrive at the fudged complexity of the artist. I consider Franz's to be an 'arrested passion' because of the tautness of her declarative energy. In her work, we are always at some threshold, some pivotal point and place — invited, yet thrust away, seduced then scandalously abandoned; held always in some equivocal place in which worlds hidden are momentarily seen, where the implacable muteness of a painted expression nevertheless howls inwardly.

Ireland Series. Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm, 45 x 64 cm





View Point : Reflections - Tensions III, Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm



View Point : Reflections - Tensions IV, Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm

These reactions were triggered by a divergent series of paintings – one of birds, another inspired by a visit to Ireland, the third, anonymous – untitled. I would like to begin with the ‘untitled’ series, which, for me, is Franz’s most powerful. Therein we encounter an acute loosening of forms, yet the perceptible world remains discernible. The three best works in the series do not announce themselves or carry any explanation. One suggests a nocturnal tempest, another a Twombly-esque dance of lines which never ceases to entrance, as is the case with any inexplicable mystery. Charcoal is the dominant medium in these two works – carboniferous, elemental, implicitly incendiary. In them, a greater daring is operational; a readiness to embrace the unthinkable, to refuse the representational, despite the fact that the viewer’s eye will invariably conjure some image. (After all, we inhabit an occularcentric world — we must see something, anything, for fear that we will not only go blind but mad if we do not.)

In the other two ‘untitled’ works, we can recognise trees. These, however, are not arborescent forms which, symbolically, are attributed as markers of knowledge. Nor are they stately, infused with self-belief and power. Instead, they lean askance, their branches in a tizz, frantically embroiled, animate. Franz’s trees are rhizomatic, weedlike, feral, unconstitutional, illiberal – excessive. Similarly, her paintings of Ireland are not representative of the country, but of her sensations and experiences therein. They are distinctly pastoral. We see a gate that opens onto a rustic thatched homestead, yet



Untitled I - Mixed Media on 300gsm Arches Cotton - 39 x 39cm



Untitled II - Mixed Media on 300gsm Arches Cotton - 39 x 39cm

what provokes sensation is not the sublimated picturesque, but the whiplash of white paint which refutes the invitation to enter a cozy scene. If her paintings of Ireland appeal to me, it is because they refute the comforts they inspire – the thatched cottage as a place of retreat, the woodland pathway that beckons, banked by an arched thicket which is overridden by arced slashes and splashes of white paint.

Birdlife dominates the third series, entangled and enmeshed once more in scrub and bush and tenebrous air. *Storm over Sheffield Beach* is an aria. That it is accompanied by the following statement by Winston Churchill – ‘Sure I am of this, that you have only to endure to conquer’ – yet again reveals the artist’s provocative stamina. As I’ve ventured, Franz recognises the greater triumph that stems from both involuntary and self-courted difficulty. Both aspects – outer and inner – define a life, but it is the latter through which we can galvanise historical hurt. Without our singularity we are naught. Which is why I insist upon Expressionism as the defining condition of South African art, and why I find its gnarled root in Franz’s art.

Not given to explaining her work (and I’d say deeply sceptical that what she might say on behalf of her work might acquit her), she has however acknowledged the insight of Churchill, and, more profoundly, that of Emily Dickinson, notably the poem ‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers. As the title suggests, a triumphalism lives in flight. “‘Hope’ is the thing with feathers – That perches in the soul.’ Thus, the airborne world which Dickinson and Franz imagine is also inward, a drive that ignites our living being.

Cheryl Franz, Ireland Series, Mixed-media on Arches cotton 300gsm, 45 x 64 cm.



Storm over Sheffield Beach, Mixed Media on Canvas 145 x 100 cm





This recognition is critical, because while Franz draws and paints the world, it is a profoundly internal perspective. Hers is the sonority of the soul.

However, to understand Franz as an artist, as a human being, necessarily requires that I emphasise the acute ambivalence of my reading thus far – one in which the history of colonialism and apartheid are inescapable, the other in which Expressionism, and all its subjective excesses, is definitional. How so? Because if we are to assign to Franz the critical importance of Emily Dickinson's vision, then we must accept that Franz shares a closer kinship to regulated excess than its anarchic extremity. True, Winterbach's painter holds fast to the ghost of figuration. He does not let go. What distinguishes Franz is that she shares Dickinson's understanding that a fire prevails 'in the chilliest land' and that no despair will override hope. Endurance is key. At its best, art is bonded to its extremity, which it must control, must tame, despite the impossibility of this drive. As to whether Winterbach concurs, I'm not sure, given that she more radically holds fast to 'the desiring of desire. And to hell with control'.

This is certainly the case in Franz's reckless mark-making – her line of flight – yet, after Dickinson, it seems that Franz embraces restraint. This tension is evident in *Scops Owl*, a marvel of containment and wildness, the bird a presencing in a thicket of rustling energy. Her *Hadedea* is a dipped and pointed colophon, grammatically bird-like, its beak

Scops Owl. Mixed-media on Paper, 43 x 61 cm



Triptych - Aerial Realm: Where Eagles Dance. Mixed-media on Aluminium Panel, 61 x 122 cm x 3

atop a maelstrom. But I must conclude, as I began, with the more indecipherable of Franz's paintings, this time pointedly more colourful. The first is a triptych titled *Soaring I*, the second is *Dancing Through the Waterfall II*. These vertical works – the elongation is critical – are, like *Francolin in the Garden*, the most obfuscated. Nothing is quite seen, though everything is intuited. The last is a mixed-media amalgamation of paint and charcoal, while the others are in acrylic. Titled *Soaring*, I wonder, do we soar? Or are we not, rather, enraptured – blind while tethered?

When encountering Franz's drawings and paintings, one cannot escape that they are never quite what they seem. A rupture is built into them. She wills a world that negates clarity, pulling us into the stark entanglements of twentieth and twenty-first century art. Like the 'untitled' works, *Soaring* breaks away from figuration, but if this is actively the case, what is 'soaring'? My answer is energy. As I've declared throughout, the intangible far outweighs the tangible in Franz's paintings. Her best works keep the figurative in abeyance. Her branches transform into roots, the underworld becomes the overworld. Perhaps, then, I should steer away from Dickinson and err on the side of Winterbach by declaring, 'to hell with control'? Then again, Franz holds her cards tightly to her chest. We are presented with an unresolvable riddle, caught in what Winterbach calls 'this matrix, this disrupted and unstable space.'

In *Dancing Through the Waterfall II*, we do see the 'waterfall' – a broken vertical slab of white paint – but it is the greater tremulous discordance all about that dominates the scene. This is the case in all of Franz's drawings and paintings – the illustrative is quashed, the burden of the figurative obliterated. The far more potent signature is that of an artist who, in sharing Dickinson's proclivity

Dancing Through the Waterfall II, Mixed-media on Aluminium Panel, 61 x 122 cm





for the barest of surety – a hope abetted, abused, yet triumphal – still, by virtue of occupying a very different abusive history, found a way to hold fast to the most fragile of private dignity – the singularity of a snarled and snarling artist. Because, as I’ve stated, Franz both invites and rebuffs, ensnares and overrides. Her layers of paint, her story, is provocative, and deliberately so.

As to what this snarled choreography tells us? It surely speaks to an artist who, at this moment, remains most comfortable within a suppressed tonal spectrum, for whom the wild line far outweighs decorum, for whom the vitality of art-making thrives because of its eviscerated innards. There is no orchestrated depth of field – Franz is all about the smudged intimacy of forcefields. The peace her paintings might afford is illusory. Hers is a modulated turbulence. The worlds her artworks address are private – insofar as Expressionism is a radically subjective realm. Their sonority is another matter. Her paintings and drawings sing, holler, or simply breathe. They are radically emphatic. They signal us out and say, ‘I am a part of you, as you are of me.’ This is my point regarding what Franz does. Although I don’t personally know her, I do recognise, understand, and feel what she is and makes; the reason and condition for this thrum and holler and bother. I may have no idea of her personal history, nor the precise nature of the impact of empire and apartheid – and our now misbegotten democracy – yet for me, it seems clear that her creative journey negates the crudity of forms, the ‘types’ that human beings are subjected to, and the hurt of history. Instead, she opts for the endurance needed to survive, the greater pleasure that comes with being unlicensed, free – trapped though we all are by compromise and dread.

Francolin in the Garden I, Mixed Media on Arches Cotton, 1140mm x 1450mm

If Cheryl Franz's adventure in painting and drawing tells us anything, it is that we must unchain ourselves, assume risk, remember hope in the midst of fear, then venture into that darkening pathway she has painted for us, knowing that night is never the end, that brightness prevails... in a thatched and cosy retreat, an aria of birdlife, a dense thicket, flood and froth, or drunken curlicue of root-like branches ... in a beating heart in which all of life's depths and superfluities converge.

ASHRAF JAMAL is a Research Associate in the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre, University of Johannesburg. He is the co-author of *Art in South Africa: The Future Present*, and the author of *Love themes for the Wilderness*, *The Shades*, *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa*, *In the World: Essays on Contemporary South African Art*, and *Strange Cargo: Essays on Art*.

Hadedda (Detail), Mixed-media on paper, 40 x 30 cm

