

Nothing more clamorous seems likely in the paintings of Liliane Tomasko than the rustle of a sheet, the scratching of a hanger on its rail as a dress is removed, the squeak of a hinge on an old window. In these paintings, the volume is perpetually turned low. But this pianissimo - depicted and depictive - is deceptive. For Tomasko is a painter of a very particular emotion whose mood is complex: poised between resignation and agitation, the paint itself hovers between fullness and denial, expressivity and nonchalance. The tension in her work is palpable not despite, but because of, its restraint.

She evokes a tradition of radical understatement in the art of the last 120 years whose luminaries include Gwen John, Vilhelm Hammershøi and that Michelangelo of quietude, Giorgio Morandi. (see "comparative illustrations") These are artists who aligned focused perception with reined-in touch and palette in ways that accord intimately with Tomasko's own practice. Like the art of her historical peers, her softness is too fraught to be reduced to soothing notions of serenity and subtlety, replete though her work is with both these qualities. The ambiguities in Tomasko - not just of how and what we perceive, the edges of forms, the depth of space, and so on, but of mood, attitude, intentionality - have as much to do with disquietude as with its opposite. Hers is a quietude that sets off alarm bells.

The American art critic Harold Rosenberg coined the term "anxious object" to describe unsettling works whose very question of status triggers a sense of alienation in the viewer. Tomasko's paintings fit this description. Initially, for sure, they are seductive, evocative, haunting images. But something in their facture - their touch, the way they look at the world - sets off chain reactions of doubt. In her disconcertingly charming way, Tomasko is a tough, difficult painter.

In terms of how she views and pursues her craft, Tomasko is what one wants to call an unapologetic painter: she paints without inhibitions or critical hang-ups. And she paints with a full embrace of subject matter that is at the same time empirical and symbolic - things observed and things selected for their meanings and values. She draws liberally upon rich traditions of painting, both as sources of ideas for herself and expectations for the viewer. Her being unapologetic, in this sense, is in striking contrast with many artists of her generation and of the generation previous to her own who, on the contrary, apologize for using paint by, as it were, placing the activity in quotation marks. Their activity is primarily process-oriented and conceptual, and when they engage with tradition they do so ironically.

Tomasko looks and feels her way fully into her subjects, putting her world into paint. Unapologetic painting, however, need not mean gushing, no-holds-barred, "ballsy" paint handling; tentativeness can still be its hallmark. The things Tomasko chooses to paint - an unmade bed, a limp dress, a forgotten corner of a room - are forlorn. Her understated delivery has nothing to do with the bravura with which a traditional still life painter might elevate the overlooked. On the contrary, by deploying a tentative hand and a washed-out palette, it is almost as if Tomasko has found painterly equivalents of the desuetude and sadness of her motifs. She risks surfaces that are as diminished and worn as some of the sorry-looking objects she depicts.

She avoids any kind of painterly relish - not just the slippery *fa presto* marks or the glutinous impasto that can be so satisfying to maker and viewer alike, but equally a polished, sealed-in pearly surface. Instead, her surfaces are evenly modulated in a kind of un-slick perfection.

There is a matte quality that is slowly seductive, but first impressions will strike someone in search of a quick fix of painterliness as puritanically disdainful of paint's inherent sensuality.

And then, of course, there is the fact that she chooses to work from photographs. This strategy, explored by countless artists since the invention of the medium in the 19th Century, has become ubiquitous to contemporary practice. But painting from photographs means so many different things to different practitioners-and to many, alas, so little. Some make merely expedient use of photographs when they don't have access to observable things, like a model for instance. Sometimes, the photograph is a means of depicting transient things or sensations that would otherwise be unavailable to a painter, like things that are destroyed, or move too quickly.; , Among certain painters making thoughtful, intentional use of photographs, however, the photograph is a thing in itself. Rather than painting around the photograph, to get at the objects in it they paint the photograph as an object in its own right.. And photographs become a means of signaling alienation, as the painter captures the washed out, flattened, mediated character of photography.

Tomasko is an enigma because none of these situations readily applies. She paints commonly available things; she photographs set ups in her own domestic or working space from things she owns; she paints totally static things; she loves paint; she wants her paint to work-which it does. There is fluidity in the paint, though the voluptuousness is close-knit and contained. What is the advantage to her, then, of the photograph?

Maybe it is precisely because she is a painter who looks so closely at the world that Tomasko needs the denial of fully perceivable data - a screen between herself and her motif - to gain the space for the painterly improvisation she achieves. Morandi is said to have benefited from the dust that permeated his studio, and sometimes filled his glass bottles with paint to "ready-abstract" them, so to speak. Tomasko's use of photographs might have comparable intent.

Tomasko's touch and her motifs find themselves in an emotionally charged state of equivalence. Objects that dominate the selection here -- beds, clothes, linens, bags and windows - have in common that they are coverings or containers that entail various states of opacity. The impression on a mattress signifies recent human presence; sheets and blankets are coverings that will take the shape of sleepers beneath them; dresses reveal as much as they conceal in their selective covering and shape-hugging capacities; bags take the shape of stuff in them and signify protection of belongings against the elements, a kind of private inner space to take out into the street with you; windows, of course, are transparent but block out air and sound and are themselves dressed. All, in other words, are textured veils, layers in our fabricated experience.

Like those touchstone artists cited earlier - John, Hammershøi and Morandi - Tomasko is an artist whose motifs lend themselves to the way they are painted and are symbolically appropriate to repetition and compulsive revisiting. She achieves pitch-perfect commonality with the textures she depicts.

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