

Optic Nerve

María Gainza, trans. Thomas Bunstead

Upon an encounter with a painting that shares exactly the 'surly, boastful look' of herself 'as an eleven-year-old', the narrator of this intriguing novel admits: 'I know, I know, this is about as far from hard-nosed criticism as you can get, but isn't all artwork — or all decent art — a mirror? [...] Isn't theory also in some sense always autobiography?' The narrator — she is called María, like the author, and this book would appear to inhabit the territory of auto-fiction — reflects, in glimpses and fragments, on motherhood, childhood, adolescent friendship, strained familial relationships. Most of all she reflects on paintings and painters: it is this, above, all, that matters to her, and that gives shape to her digressive, intricately woven narrative. As a guide and critic, she is excellent company — wry, astute, self-deprecating. Her sphere of reference is broad and catholic, the book flecked with quotations. The prose, in Thomas Bunstead's translation, is restrained, funny, by turns (or at once) luminous and melancholy. I was put in mind of Rachel Cusk's 'Faye' trilogy, in this and in the anecdotal, allusive structure. The text moves fluently between art criticism and history, biography, anecdote, memory and the imagined past.

To encounter art in a gallery, she advises, 'keep your eyes unfocused to begin with' and be open to the 'first jolt'. She is interested above all in the subjective experience of art, and all that we bring to that encounter: 'bodily', unconscious, associative and sub-rational responses. An equally astute and curious attention is devoted to lesser-known or now-forgotten artists (both Argentinean and otherwise), whose works are to be found 'hidden away' in remote corners, in private collections, or only in recollection, as much as to the likes of Toulouse-Lautrec, Rousseau, El Greco. Even these more familiar names, still, tend to be those of artists in some way peripheral, disdained or iconoclastic in their own lifetimes. It is a book fascinated by the passage of time, the fragility of fame, and the possibility of art's endurance.

We might be inclined to find images of the works described. I have no problem with that; I like a book that asks me to go seeking and invites me back in. And it's worth noting that she speaks up for the reproduction as a means of access to artwork — rejecting the truism that prints of Rothko don't work, for example. But it certainly isn't necessary to be familiar with the work in question, though you may feel compelled to seek it out. Ekphrasis, at least in the conventional sense, isn't quite the objective, here. She gives a 'doubtless reductive description' of the first painting we encounter — in fact, a sparing and precise observation that provides just enough to go on. She writes with authority and precision of artists' technique, style and context (Gainza is an established art critic). But the possibility and the limits of writing or talking about art are as much her concern — in response to Rothko, 'Rarely do the inadequacies of language become so patently obvious. [...] All you really want to say is 'fuck me'.'

Each chapter is discrete, and the connections between narrative strands are often oblique; a motif (the sea, cats), or a concern with, for example, the quest for and meaning of success. But the book as a whole is not merely episodic. It becomes richer and more complex, until a self-portrait of the narrator emerges — oblique, layered, realised as much in what is left undeveloped or partial, and culminating in something quite unexpected, that loops us back to the start and casts new light on the pall of anxiety and sadness that has shaded the book. Various preoccupations, details, and quotations — even the practice of quotation itself — now carry new resonance. Right at the beginning of the book, she told us: ‘you write one thing in order to talk about something else.’

‘Writing doesn’t happen in gaps’, says her aspirational, ‘loudmouth’ friend — they were united in ‘snobbishness’ as adolescents and now enjoy the occasional fraught reunion (shades of Ferrante, here). But it is through the gaps, through juxtaposition and elision, that our own encounter with the book itself takes place; inviting us to make connections across the surface of it, shifting our focus and attention, picking out details. As John Berger put it in *Ways of Seeing*: ‘We are never looking at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves. Our vision is continually active, continually moving.’ In this book, as in Berger’s, the history of art becomes a continuum, an ongoing dialogue. We are left with a profound enquiry into the place and function of art: in culture, in the gallery, in private homes, and most of all, in the narrator’s life — as remembrance, as joy and consolation, as meaning, as refuge.

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