

Is There Such a Thing as a Well-Read Painting?

I don't mean a painting that advertises its references or wears its learning on the surface for all to see. Nor do I mean a work that requires a library of art-historical knowledge to unlock its meaning. I mean something subtler than that. A well-read painting is perhaps akin to a well-drawn one: specific without being rigid, thoughtful without being didactic, resonant without demanding attention. It carries the weight of looking, thinking and living. It feels handled by experience.

I have had the pleasure of watching Sarah Pickstone's paintings broaden in scope and deepen in complexity over recent years. They possess this quality of being well read. Although any obvious figurative reference has largely dissolved, the presence of drawing remains central. Not drawing as description, but drawing as a way of thinking. There is something in these paintings that feels simultaneously strong and tender, structural and inquisitive. They are built rather than arranged.

Those qualities are often what hold my attention in painting. They give a work a kind of thoughtful patina. However immediate or energetic the surface may appear, there is also the sense of accumulated time beneath it: the time of looking, adjusting, questioning and revising. The time of ideas being tested through material. Such a patina cannot be manufactured. It emerges only through long use of mind, hand and body. Pickstone's paintings feel inhabited in this way. They have been worked through by an intelligence that is both articulate and curious, weighted with experience yet still open to discovery.

At first encounter, the paintings appear unmistakably contemporary. Their scale, confidence and gestural energy create a powerful visual momentum. Forms rise and tumble through the picture plane. Fractured marks scatter and gather like fragments of language, weather systems, musical notation or coded messages. There is a sense of movement everywhere. The eye is pulled upward, across and back again in a continual process of navigation.

Yet unlike so much contemporary painting, which can often mistake speed for vitality, there is also a profound slowness here. The paintings do not simply perform immediacy; they contain duration. Their rhythms feel drawn from something older and deeper than contemporary image culture. The marks carry echoes of long histories of making and looking. These are paintings that know painting's past without becoming beholden to it. One senses distant conversations taking place beneath the surface: with Giotto's sense of structure, with the spatial invention of Uccello, with the material intelligence of fresco, even with the primal directness of cave painting, all are absorbed into the work's DNA.

What is particularly compelling is the way Pickstone loosens any stable distinction between abstraction and representation. There are moments when forms seem almost to coalesce into bodies, landscapes or architectural fragments, only to dissolve again. Lines cut through masses like wind through weather or water through rock. Colour gathers into tangible weight before breaking apart into dispersed fragments. The paintings seem less concerned with depicting things than with embodying experiences of movement, gravity, balance and transformation.

The large works possess a remarkable sense of physical presence. Seen from a distance, they read as coherent structures, held together by an underlying architecture. Move closer, however, and that solidity begins to shimmer. Relationships reveal themselves in layers. Marks overlap, hesitate, correct and respond to one another. The paintings become records of thought unfolding through action.

The material qualities of the surface play a crucial role in this experience. Pickstone's use of distemper – a medium made from pigment bound with rabbit-skin glue – gives the paintings an earthy, porous luminosity. The surface absorbs light rather than reflecting it. It possesses something of the tactile density of Italian fresco, where colour seems embedded within the substance of the wall itself. This material presence slows the viewer down. It invites proximity and attention.

What initially appears bold and assertive gradually reveals itself as something more nuanced and vulnerable. The paintings contain force, certainly, but they also contain care. Beneath the confident orchestration of form and colour lies a gentleness of spirit, a willingness to remain open to uncertainty and adjustment. Like the characters in a great novel, Pickstone's paintings continue to unfold through encounter. They ask something of the viewer. They require presence. They make room for memory, joy, doubt and longing. They are relationships to be entered into.

In that sense, Sarah Pickstone's paintings are both deeply read and deeply lived. They carry the accumulated wisdom of looking while remaining fully alive to the possibilities of the present. They remind us that painting is not simply a matter of making images, but of sustaining a conversation across time: between thought and feeling, structure and freedom, history and imagination.

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