

THE ENTROPIC GESTURE: The Paintings of Elsie Kagan

Essay by David Gibson

Elsie Kagan's painting is a form of revelation. It commingles a search for beauty with a sustained effort to manifest how reason, reality, and temperament can aid us in the creation of something new. Mining the history of artistic expression, searching for touchstones and wellsprings of inspiration, and being able to turn that research into a living and breathing new expression that can aptly invigorate the contemporary perception of beauty, is what Kagan does in her work. Kagan's is not only a technical virtuosity but an educated way of painting that refuses to lean on ability alone. It desires a greater statement, one that is filled with the promise of creation and the threat of destruction. There is a primal element in abundance that builds and drives her interest in genres and art movements: a systematic use of energy that creates a dynamic force within each work and throughout her entire oeuvre. Kagan's system is her combined use of historical styles commingling with a composed and manipulated brushwork and background tonality to simultaneously achieve a look that is inspired by the classical past and yet driven by a progressive need for gesture and idiosyncrasy. The themes and motifs that inform and energize her work are bound up in the conflict between the physical and the metaphysical, and in reading the details so specifically that the overall structure merges with its colors, forms, and overall dynamism

Over the last several years, Kagan has been working through different genres of painting that span the entire history of classical and modern expression, from a Renaissance muralism associated with the architectural paintings of Michelangelo and Tintoretto, to the quasi-religious arrangements of sexual poses by Peter Paul Rubens, to the mythical or spiritually infused landscapes of David, Friedrich, and Bocklin; to portrayals of landscape as depictions of manifest destiny in works by Alfred Bierstadt and Thomas Cole; up to a confrontation with mid century expressionism.

Each of the different periods in Kagan's growth as an artist reflects not only her struggle between subject matter and style, but also a willingness to allow chaotic forces to undermine perception. This is what differentiates her from any painter of bourgeois values. In her hands, the traditional norms, and the tropes which emerge from them, are perceptually radicalized. Her work makes new versions of old ideas but she also tramples well enough upon them to not only replace the shopworn associations we have with their sources, but to stylistically atomize the images.

Kagan does three things to her flowers (in still... and the enormous room) that alter how we perceive the subject in her work, and as well, how we may be apt to perceive it wherever it is found, in the future. First, she messes up the framing structure, the background, into which the object we call "a bouquet of flowers" fits snugly. The organic quality of gesture blends the object with its setting, creating a moody, almost dramaturgical, tension.

Second, she explodes the forms themselves, using limited but effusive colors, with bursts above and dense tangle of root-like forms below. Chromatically, she does not hew to just red, green, yellow, etc, but pulls strands of color out of enclosed sections to wander into the foreground like a scent come alive. These play foil to the concept of an organized and realistic event while still showing how much energy is at work.

Thirdly, Kagan erases whole areas of the central figure, leaving only a silhouette, and creating a negative space that could possibly represent a flower in the bouquet that has gone missing, or that never existed, or only existed in dreams. Kagan leaves it up to the viewer to do the work of imagining the rest.

In her landscapes, there is a likewise a tweaking of forms and a stylistically rough or thorny handling of gesture to capitalize on implied narrative, theme, and mood, and to impose the structural chaos that is her leitmotif. Works such as *The Problem of Space Remained*, *Nothing Was Simply One Thing* (2013), *Ways To Be Good and Happy*, and *Full and By* (2012), each create a specific challenge that enlarges her ability to manifest an entropic quality as a foil against historical bias and a way to move perception of a traditional form into a contemporary context.

The organizational and gestural difficulties in each relate to: a painting of space, assessed and dramatized yet not satisfactorily addressed; the temptation to anthropomorphize simple aspects of an image that are equally illustrated as depicted; re-imagining a heroic mis-en-scene that sets the stage for an event which never occurs--the appearance of a heavenly host, when in fact, the heavens parting is enough to want in the first place. The ironic displacement of a heroic presence is underscored by the parting of clouds as if they were curtains on a stage; and what seem to be ships cruising across a rough sea, little ships of early exploration; turn out to be sheets billowing in a midday breeze or large leaves on alien trees. Dense with detail, color, and gesture, each of these works establishes a new way for us to look at painting as an activity in the present and a history in the past.

Each of these works, and the whole body of accomplishment looking back over the half decade of Elsie Kagan's creative industry, advances the further application of a vigorous and highly organized structure of esthetic intent. Every gesture seems to brim with energy, which achieves its best effect when we are esthetically hampered by the idiosyncrasy of her images, and when, after other concerns have passed through our minds, we come to deal with the energy itself, which breaks away from the places, objects, colors, and movement to become an idea about how thought itself is the energy that creates mass for the viewer to consume. The entropy that ensues connects us through the work before us to a metaphor for the utility of inspiration, which is balanced on a rail between the after effects of rational choices--choices we make about what is happening before us and why, and the sensory and gestural appeal of formal qualities in Kagan's paintings that feed our instinctual drive to bury ourselves in the magic of pure perception. Entropy is energy dissipating, but never disappearing. It rests in the earth, in the products of the earth, and in the mind, waiting to be used again.