

One Hundred Flowers: chromatics and care in the work of Anne Labovitz

*'Colour is Bliss'*, Roland Barthes.

I am at my desk at home, a quiet place in the remote North West of Ireland, the very edge of Europe. I am viewing Anne Labovitz's work. The images are sumptuous, glorious paintings in a range of sizes, defined by their intense palette. I glimpse the aqueous blues, shades of vermilion and cadmium orange. I peer into an Aladdin's cave of colour and gesture and considered composition. I am awed by the exuberance of energy. I feel the excitement building around this exhibition in the making, aware of the absolute necessity of its coming into 'being'.

This exhibition aptly named RESPONSE, addresses a range of concerns that have defined our life and times in the last six months. While the work emerges from the tensions of these times and the artist's need to make and have agency, it is also prefaced by a career steadfastly devoted to art making that is actively engaged while also contemplative and inward looking.

Labovitz has achieved much recognition for her socially engaged practice and ambitious public projects. Her process is relational in the way it takes as its point of departure the rich seam of human relations and the relevance of social context. The expansiveness and reach of those projects is paralleled by her consistent, focused and robust studio practice, one that has steadily evolved from a wealth of training and experience, in addition to a myriad of global and local networks. It's in the quietness of the studio that she finds the space to be centred, true to her creative impulse and how it manifests.

We bridge the geographical distance by talking, intense free flowing conversations connecting Dublin to California and Sligo to Minnesota. Technology permits us to transcend time-zones and oceans. The thread of our connection develops around an understanding of the need, now more than ever, for a culture of Radical Care, a conviction actively espoused in so much of Labovitz's work to date exemplified in such projects as the I Love You Institution and 122 Conversations and distilled now into this exhibition of paintings and drawings for Burnet Fine Art.

From our conversations and in looking at the work, I sense the importance of the years she lived in Germany, and her artists' residencies in Berlin. An interest in words and text deepened during that time, surfacing through into the mid-size canvases. Here and there text and words emerge as notes spinning from the unconscious mind. Phrases such as 'Safe Travel' and 'Bon Voyage' whisper their warm intent, acquiring more poignancy now.

In the center of the gallery the jewel-like intensity of a series of small paintings evokes the shimmer of Venetian glass. This series emanates from two permanent mosaic installation designs currently in production in Italy destined for Minneapolis St Paul International airport. Whether in mosaic or in paint Labovitz is a gifted colorist with an intuition for the emotional register of a particular palette.

For her, color is a core value, its optimism felt as much as seen but shape and form, and how these are deployed in the non-objective picture plane, are also key components.

In the work 5.22.20.1, swathes of bright, affirmative and contrasting colors mingle, cohere, and happily coexist. I am reminded of the spiritual values ascribed to color by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Swedish painter Hilma Af Klint. The framed works on paper, which I think of as ‘colour field’ works, convey movement and vibrancy as marks are layered and meshed to create intricate layers of highly worked and coloured surface. The abstract expressionists Jackson Pollock, Lee Krasner et al might seem like a point of reference here but many of them were influenced by the early European modernists. Labovitz’s own referencing of her debt to the German expressionists, whom she deepened her appreciation for during her years in Europe, brings the wheel full circle.

The art of Anne Labovitz is characterised by its versatility and innovation and underpinned by the artist’s resilience. Hope, kindness and gratitude have been invested in this work, as practice and as principles that will sustain all of us in these fractured times.

To be in the gallery with Anne’s paintings is to feel their joy and the warmth of their embrace. I view the show from afar and already it is like walking through a field of poppies on a sunny day, wishing to ‘Touch a Hundred Flowers.....’ while not picking one.\*

\*From Edna St. Vincent Millay’s poem, Afternoon on a Hill, written in 1917

Marian Lovett, Sligo, Ireland, October 2020

The writer wishes to express her thanks to the artists for her time and generosity and to Burnet Fine Art for commissioning this essay.