

Response to Janice Gobey's work
Respondent: Graham Brindley – September 30, 2010

Red Line
White Line
One bedeviled
One benign
Separate lives
Become entwined
Blood line
Clinging vine

There is a powerful binary force at play in these works by Janice Gobey. A dramatic union of two opposing elements. The literal warp and weft of cloth is itself a metaphor for the complete unification of separate strands, but these beautifully rendered paintings seem not to speak of harmonious unit or the equilibrium of Yin and Yang, instead there is a palpable tension in their amalgamations.

The dictionary defines a knot as *an intertwining of parts of two or more strings*, but a knot tied in one thread only becomes a constriction, a clot that interrupts the flow.

Other definitions describe a knot as a *lump, a hard mass or problem*. There's nothing overtly ugly about the knots that Gobey has painted, quite the contrary, but there is an unsettling quality about them. Likewise the tension created in taught cloth when it is stretched to its limit evokes a sense of high anxiety. Perhaps these furrows, convolutions, broken threads and frayed edges infer a bumpy ride over life's corrugations.

Gobey's paintings have an intimate sensuality that goes beyond their depictions of smooth, silky fabric. There's a latent sexuality implicit in the play of light on their Baroque-like sumptuous surfaces and their voluptuous erotic folds. There is also an inherent air of risk associated with the colour red that evokes a sense of passion and danger. I am the voyeur.

A potent energy is generated when these emotive elements become conjoined in a serpentine embrace, fiery red with pristine white. Are these implied, ardent machinations of the heart reference to personal relationships? I am reminded of the ambiguity in Sophie Calle's work *Exquisite Pain*. In this series she deals with issues of romantic rejection, memory, self pity and painful loss, but we are never quite certain whether the scenario she presents to us is an authentic personal experience, woven fiction or a construct of the two.

Louise Bourgeois, another of Gobey's contemporary influences was also renowned for probing the depths of the human psyche. Her autobiographical works mined her own personal history to resolve issues about herself and her relationships to others, challenging the male power figure with compelling feminist statements that linked mind and body.

Suspended from the gallery ceiling, a large scale installation echoes the painted version of this union between red and white. A red tendril entwines a taught swathe of shimmering white fabric, and then oozes its way down the wall terminating in a bloody pool. This dramatic *pas de deux* repeated in a subtle network of cast shadows.

Moving around the work, enables a union of a different sort, we are able to view the paintings through and against the draped and stretched fabric allowing a correlation between the real and the illusionary. I feel as though I am engaging with the inner workings of the heart, the vessels and arteries carrying the coursing red and white corpuscles.

The installation, like the paintings has a curious sharpness about it considering the soft pliant nature of the fabric, and results from the physical tension created in the stretched material. The paintings too show discernable attention to the detail of the painted edge and the contrast in colour and tone giving them a crispness and credible form. Brush strokes and modulation of paint are carefully considered and bear witness to close observation and an intimate understanding of the subject matter, yet they are loose enough to allow the viewer to engage with the sensual act of painting. Clearly photographic reference has been used, not in a slavish manner of hyper-reality, but as a creative compositional device. Focus shifts in a kind of depth of field within the pictures, neutral warm greys for a softened background for the crisper red and white bands, and in one painting the raw linen left as a backdrop gives contrast in both colour and texture and serves as a visual reminder of actual woven material. In another picture a singular red drape is poised ready to reveal its concealed secret, we are presented with a vague hint of human presence as the furtive, ethereal shadow of the artist emerges into our peripheral view.

In the genre of still life painting, fabric was often used as a metaphoric inference of wealth or as a moralizing religious homily, whilst drapery was also employed as a theatrical device for emphasizing human form or bringing a sense of drama and opulence to history painting. Sir Kenneth Clark when discussing its use in painting wrote "Drapery by suggesting lines of force, indicates for each action a past and a possible future".

The heroically scaled canvases of contemporary Scottish artist Alison Watt depict compositions of tightly cropped swathes of fabric alluding to female genitalia or of bodily impressions left in bed linen. Her loaded paintings speak strongly of human presence or more precisely of absence – "What I came to realize was that

the painting of the fabric was more sensual than the painting of the body”
Gobey’s work echoes these same sentiments, by animating the inanimate and through anthropomorphic association she brings a kind of human psycho-drama to the still life genre, giving it contextual relevance in a contemporary world of complex relationships, gender focus and emotional angst.