Nicky Basford – Between Two Worlds

It is almost twenty years since I last wrote about Nicky Basford’s work. That was, however, far from being the last time I thought about it and engaged with it. Nicky’s exhibiting career has coincided almost perfectly with my time working in the fine art field, and her work has become something of a touchstone as I look back through the many artists and exhibitions with which I have been involved during that time. I have always been drawn to what is often described as ‘abstracted landscape’, but only where it also contains the mind and spirit of its maker. To me, Nicky’s work expresses the essence of her chosen subject through the prism of her soul.

Back in 2006, then based in St Ives, the Cornish landscape understandably dominated Nicky’s output, as it has for so many artists who have made a pilgrimage to this inspiringly remote, ancient and beautiful place. That work – whose confident blacks, browns and ochres made a big impression on me at the time – was usually contrasted with paintings resulting from her regular visits to her family home in Sussex, the colourful warmth of Provence or Tuscany, and - since her move back east - to the landscape of her home and studio in West London. This new group of works derives from time spent in Sussex (where she spent the lockdown period), a trip to Andalusia, and from a recent artist residency in Aldeburgh.

To some extent, the subject location of a painting is irrelevant. Although Nicky is more than capable of producing beautiful paintings that capture the visual appeal of a place, there is so much more going on in each work. There are the unavoidable biographical ‘facts’ of the artist’s life, travel, intense observational studies of the subject, the journey to the studio, the development of the structure, composition, tone and colour of an individual work into a resolved whole, and so on. Each painting or drawing is like an evolving fragment of the artist’s DNA, carrying the thoughts, ideas, successes and failures of all the works that precede it. It is an ongoing process that requires repetitive commitment, and yet the works themselves must transcend the prosaic and fly free. Nicky’s paintings always seem to express a love, passion and quiet confidence that gives them the requisite wings.

The paintings in this newexhibition display a new depth and dimension, perhaps informed by the artist’s increasingly confident use of collage, which underpins the delightful gem-like *I Was Here* series and the evocative paintings of Battersea Park, born of a necessary familiarity. This seems to have also had a beneficial effect on the larger more ‘painterly’ paintings. Of these, *Flora*, *Hard Frost*, *Bouncing Light,* *Shards of Light* and *Between Memory & Loss, Hope (Sunflowers)* are personal favourites. I once described the beguiling light that Nicky captures in her work as ‘redemptive’. I think that I was struck particularly by her ability to conjure the effects of light without it always being clear exactly where the light is coming from or where it is going to. It just ambiguously *is*, offering hope to anyone who cares enough to look for it. Nicky’s colours and tones have become richly varied, characteristically harmonious, and distinctively hers. And there is a confidently loose strength and energy in the underlying mark-making that provides structure and imposes restraint on these emotionally compelling flights of chromatic expression.

An artist will often use enhanced scale to signal and properly tackle a particularly important subject, and in this new show there are two strikingly clear examples. The two larger paintings *Between Two Worlds I* and *Between Two Worlds* II contain echoes of much of Nicky’s work stretching back over the past twenty years, but they are also clearly on the brink of something new. There is a moving contrast between the clarity of the past, the uncertainty of the present, and the opacity of the future. Her usual exuberant colour has given way to darker greens and blues punctuated with unresolved blacks that slightly elude definition. But there are also joyous sparks of hope, and that beautifully ambiguous light of possibility that has pervaded Nicky’s life, work and spirit in the time I have been lucky enough to be her friend.

Richard Blackborow, West Cornwall, March 2024