

*Carolyn Livingston at Pari Nadimi Gallery*



*Curator's Essay*

Looking at Carolyn Livingston's paintings I found myself without words. But strangely, this absence proffered a mental image: my words nearby, still warm (as words can be), bundled together in a sort of pocket. An image close up against the inadequacies of words. It may have come about not so much because Livingston's paintings are difficult to talk about or write about (although this might also be true), but because the intimacies that they depict are far away from words, in places where words are unnecessary or have taken another form. I think that my image is a good augury for a painting. It means that the looking and the living with that painting is the primary act and that this will continue for some time.

In Livingston's paintings it might be that words, having failed – failed even for many years, for something like forever – have given way to an embrace. This has happened because words are too often busy things of everyday negotiation and denial to be of real use, and because in these paintings, bodies – the line of a forearm, the back of a knee – have found a way (an ancient way) to remember to allow words to cease. A physical gesture, especially when transmitted by the hands, those most complex and sensitive things, can speak of love. Hands are often an important element in Livingston's paintings, a primary element of appearance and disappearance. We don't know how long these embraces will last, or whether they have come too soon or too late, but we do know that, unlike words, the magnitude of their time is infinite.

The time that these paintings invoke when they portray, together or in isolation, their figures is perhaps that of many successful works which take up the close relationship between birth and death. In Livingston's work intimacy is always a matter of both of these states, a matter of life beginning or ending, and especially, one intimates, of the possibility of life continuing. The stakes are high; intimacy is not something to be taken lightly even as these figures float, quiet in their bodies, or shed their bodies for a place we cannot know. Perhaps this is also one of the reasons why the gender of her figures is not fixed or clear.

In the womb, gender is nothing and time is everything. The single cell split finds its way into a figure like a fish in the sea. In the womb's embrace of history, through the repetition of something like the evolution of our species, we become human. Much later, in another place in our lives, it is in the intimacy of an embrace that none of this is forgotten. It is not forgotten because it has always belonged to the body and not to words. In the womb, at least for a time, we are before gender. In an embrace in the world long after the womb, this might be true again, if only for a moment or two. And in certain of Livingston's works such as *Two Figures in Time I* and *Two Figures in Time II* it seems to me that these bodies are not *fixed* in time but composed of it. Time as memory: a figure on older, mature legs is capable of giving, or receives, the embrace of a child. Floating in amniotic space. And because human time is always interior time (unless it is to be found

falsely, on a clock, a smartphone or a chip embedded in the body) Livingston's paintings are every bit as real as a depiction of, let's say, a landscape or an object.

Although Livingston's figures can be ethereal, when there are two of them, they strive for wholeness. Other figures, often the ones with less preciseness in the line of the drawing, are of disappearance, but with the sense that these disappearances are the disappearance of the whole, of everything.

There is no fixed gender here but only love. Caring, maternal compassion, or the dissolution of these things. As the psychoanalyst and paediatrician Donald Winnicott has noted, for a baby, the gender of a mother is irrelevant; the mother is not a person of gender but simply a person. It is something like this condition that it might be possible to return to in our most life-sustaining and intimate moments as adults.

It is in this way that Livingston's larger paintings invoke the theme of mother and child and in doing so, they find themselves on solidly contemporary ground. The body becomes an instrument of a love which defies or consolidates time in the specificity of an embrace. Arms, hands and legs transmit and arrange intention, fit together in ways which have been enacted so many times before in the history of the human body. So many times that we may as well say, again: infinitely. Yet this infinity belongs to *these* two bodies together, to their intension and specific meaning. Or to the intention of one and the inevitable allowance of the other. They move toward the erasure of "where it aches" as Michelangelo wrote in 1557 on a sketch fragment of one of his late drawings for the crucified Christ. And where it aches is in the blood – that deep. In memory that cannot be remembered but perhaps can be touched, assuaged.

Michelangelo is apt here because some of Livingston's oil paintings have the feeling of renaissance drawings; perhaps there is something of Michelangelo's late, intimate, ethereal drawings, or of red chalk sketches by renaissance artists suggesting humanist ideals. But Livingston's works are not a fanciful stage on their way to an idealised or materially pristine body: they drip, dissolve, are wet, red, aged (as blood ages), and although they suggest drawing, by representing the human body, they do what oil paint has always done best.

Livingston's pictorial language suggests humanist concerns which dignify the human condition, and yet, unlike much work produced in the high Renaissance, her figures are submerged in states greater than their own individuality and which are central to their humanity. When Livingston's existential concerns are expressed as two mature bodies merging without clearly drawn limits, these works can remind us of the Canadian painter Graham Coughtry's *Two Figure Series* of the early and mid 1960's. But here, importantly, Coughtry's thick and weighted abandon of impasto has been replaced with Livingston's unique process of thinning and sanding, bringing the figures toward a profound weightlessness of the quieted self.

Her single figures, especially, have a certain lightness, a disappearance. There is something profoundly intimate about these disappearances. Absence can be remarkably intimate. The place where something once was. Or the place where *soon* will be where something once was, the thing forever disappearing, forever held onto with all of the energy of a witness alone. The limits of Livingston's single figures are not so much drawn line but they are felt as so; the line between the body and its dissolution is the moment of a transfer out of visibility.

In Livingston's vertical format works, there is no drawing below the knee or calf. What parts of our body do we feel when we are in an embrace? Heads down in the foetal position, away from the harshness of the atmosphere of the world outside, down towards our core, curling, loosening. The places one is aware of, directing and accepting intention: hands clasping, bending at the wrist. Arms. Something of chest. A knee behind a knee. Much of the rest is indistinct, unconscious accompaniment.

We are thrown into life. Into death too. They are both a sort of leaving when the leaving is involuntary. We are left with tenderness, with love, as our means of true survival. And with consolation, and this is no small thing. The effort of love when it is not returned can be our disappearance. Just as easily as love's absence can do away with us, and its presence (in the moment – or in memory, which is to say, in the body) can sustain us.

~ E. C. Woodley