

## AFTER ABSTRACTION

Reflections on Helga Michie's and Ruth Rix's Artwork at the Occasion of the Cross-Connection Exhibition, Magdalene College Cambridge January/February 2023

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This would be the moment, perhaps, to tell you how privileged I felt when, back in autumn 1983, almost exactly forty years ago, Jocelyn and I were introduced to Helga Michie through the poet, writer and independent scholar H.G. Adler and his wife, the artist Bettina Adler, at their home in Earl's Court, London. Sometime later, I met Helga Michie's daughter, Ruth, about a decade after she had completed her studies with Fritz Wotruba at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna.

Yes, it would indeed be the moment to share with you how I, as a student, learnt through Helga, by carefully dosed degrees as was her habit, about the traumatic reality of the Kindertransporte, which she had experienced; and how I was introduced through her and the Adlers to the world of last surviving first generation emigrants, mainly in London but a little later also in Birmingham, Bristol, and elsewhere. How invaluable I continue to feel by what cannot but be a continuously difficult experience for a German at least of my generation.

When considering Helga Michie's and Ruth Rix's artwork it is impossible for me not to remember the writer Ilse Aichinger as well, Helga's twin sister and Ruth's aunt, together with the sculpturer Bettina Adler. In conversations, especially with Bettina Adler and her husband, the worlds of Franz Baermann Steiner, Elias Canetti, Veza Canetti, Anna Mahler, Marie-Louise von Motesiczky were as present as was the Israeli artist Jehuda Bacon and Gisèle Celan, not to speak of Aristide Maillol, with whom Bettina had studied for a while in Paris in 1937/38. Some of Bettina's works, mainly sculptures and drawings, can be seen at the British Museum, the Marbach Literaturarchiv and soon, I understand, at the Ben Uri Gallery in London.

By a similar token, it would now be tempting to identify common biographical traces in the artwork of mother and daughter, Helga and Ruth, so effectively on display in this carefully curated exhibition next door. But this I will not do; for genuine art as it is exhibited here at Magdalen College is so much more than a mere reflection of biographical underpinnings. It entails imaginative and form-conscious transformations and transfigurations on the basis of what Ruth Rix calls "the secret ground". One could also say: Art is the disrupter of the rational for it consists of so much that is simply inexplicable in terms of mere logic. Most of that is concentrated in the

beginnings of any artistically creative process, the first stroke of the brush, the opening phrase, the chiseling of a new form out of the existing shape of a stone, in other words, the initial treatment of our material and what we make of it, the execution of an idea – in the fullest double meaning of the word execution, for we can carry out an idea or kill it by doing so. At any rate, all beginnings have to deal with what initially is and empty space, a white canvas, or a sheet of paper. But the type of material we use predetermines what is likely to happen with it under our hands. I remember this to be a phrase from conversations with Helga Michie when she emphasized the sheer heaviness of print work, producing woodcuts or lithographs. Dealing with materiality and abstracting from it by working through it, is after all the prerequisite for producing something of immaterial meaning.

## I

When the wavelength of imagination is broken by intention or default the naked eye receives fractals of a grander vision. There are also the waves of memory that roll towards the shores of our individual timescapes that enter artwork. Periods in art history constitute waves of their own. After the period of abstraction returns the concreteness of spaces and the reanimation of forms, perhaps combined with a different, of not unseen of, layering of colours. What comes to the surface after abstraction comes to the surface of what has been simmering beneath. The ‘secret ground’ to use the title of one of Ruth Rix’s paintings, is the provider of images the foundry of the immaterial, the chaos of memory pretending to accept systematization and analysis only to resist both. This ‘secret ground’ can consist of traumata, pitfalls and fallacies, and often provides material for self-deception.

On an artist’s palette, the most vivid substance are shadows enriched by colours. It is then as if silences are being mixed with speech generating an optical shadow-speak. It is just possible in today’s situation of our culture that we can often no longer see the light for the shadows as they lengthen, deepen, and absorb. Yet, even in their darkest mood these works of art by Helga

Michie and Ruth Rix work through the shadows of trauma and provide surprising tinges or even manifestations of light but never of pure lightness.

When bringing the obvious together, light and waves we might be tempted to compare Ruth Rix's treatment of light with a phenomenon known from physics. I am thinking of James Clerk Maxwell's discovery of the electromagnetic nature of light waves and his realization that these waves also penetrate empty spaces. What he referred to as 'ether' is in connection with the visual arts in general, and Ruth Rix's way of using light effects in her paintings in particular, our receptive awareness; for one is struck, even penetrated, by the magnetic, or shall I say hypnotic, effect of many of her paintings.

The narratives of these visual artworks— for they tell a story to the eye — turn the interrelations between 'Mother and Daughter' into something eminently suggestive. In Helga Michie's case, her lines as the most prominent features of these etchings and drawings, seem to emerge from nowhere, or rather, they delineate the Unknown and point towards the Beyond. Ruth Rix's canvasses outstretch our imagination providing us with challenges rich in the mystery of colour, shape and design.

As strange as it seems but I had to think of Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons* when looking at the pictorial story of Mother and Daughter that unfolds before us in this exhibition, so thoughtfully composed by Hugh Rix with the curators at Magdalene College. *Fathers and Sons* confronted us, in 1862, with the concept of nihilism. The story of these paintings here invites us to contemplate what I would term 'visual substantialism', that is to say: a reinforced existence through seeing and thus resisting the impression of mere nothingness, even though these works work with aspects of the void and the suggestiveness of signal colours, black included. Or should I rather have thought of Mary and Anna Mary Howitt, the mother-daughter authors of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, remarkable representatives of Anglo-German literary relations, Anna Mary, who studied with Wilhelm Kaulbach, the then director of the Munich Academy of Fine Arts and who wrote a remarkable account of that time called *An Art-Student in Munich* (1853), celebrating the

more liberal atmosphere in the German lands for women then compared with the restrictive English society in mid-Victorianism. At any rate, before us, in the Cripps Gallery, unfolds a pictorial dialogue across two generations with their respective styles being in visual conversation, rich in colour and shaped imagination.

So, let me ask: Is there a ‘mythology of colours’, that originates for instance in a *Green Thought*, or in the shades of blue and green in a late memory of the Attersee, part of what we might term the *Urlandschaften* in Helga Michie’s and Ruth Rix’s artistic repertoires? There are colours that emerge from what Rix refers to in the title of two of her paintings as “Secret Ground”, arguably in artistic terms a more appropriate expression for the much-overused ‘subconscious’. Some of these paintings look like stills but without standing still, owing to the dynamics of the dominant colour schemes. The movement in Rix’s paintings generated by stark contrasts as much as in some of Michie’s etchings go beyond the edges of the canvass or paper. Rix leaves her paintings unframed that is to say unrestricted and open for the eye’s imagination to continue the voyage of shape and colour. Imagination is as ever in transit and Rix’s dominant colours, variations of blue green, red and amber emerge, disappear and reappear before the eye of the viewer and thus testify to a transition in perpetuity.

## II

“Cross-Connections” is a fine title for this exhibition as these works curiously connect with each other and, stranger still, these connections go right across our respective fields of vision. As for our reflections on these two gripping pictorial œuvres – extraordinary in their evocative intensity – one feels lost for appropriate perspectives, or takes, to describe the correspondences and tensions between them. Their visual conceptuality speaks to us and since being asked to say a few words on these artworks I have contemplated various approaches which I would like to share with you on almost experimental grounds. We could consider their

- soundscape of shapes
- harmonious dissonances
  - perfection of the incomplete
  - legacy of memory
  - plentifulness of the void
  - precision of vagueness in what they delineate

Although figures and figurations feature in these works, they also signify the disappearance of human subjects. In Helga Michie's works the line dominates instead. It obtains a particular expressiveness and seems ever expansive and, at the same time, insists on being a demarcation, more of a defining than a dividing line. In Ruth Rix's paintings colour dissolves the lines or rather they transform them into a particular spatiality of colour. For colours create spaces of their own, merge as it were with our field of vision, and turn their corpuscles into seeds for our eyes to be harvested one day. Goethe spoke of the "colourful shadows" but perhaps with Rix we encounter their complement: visually tangible shadows of colour.

If there is a language of lines with Michie, Rix's paintings offer a transfiguration of lines and an abstraction from immediacy. When looking at them one feels the unknowable invading what we have visually taken for granted. The personae disappear in the hatching or colour-rich mist.

When hearing with our eyes, in line with Nietzsche's sensual mode of reflection, the musicality of these works become transparent – with Michie's lithographs resembling a score perhaps by Webern and Rix's paintings one by Messiaen. This is not to claim a distinct spirituality in their art, an assumption that Helga Michie would have - probably vehemently - rejected. Rather, I would suggest a certain 'translucidity' that these works have in common with pointers towards a 'Beyond'. It is therefore that I suggest a poem by Ilse Aichinger (in my translation) to introduce a poetic common denominator should we be in search for one:

Ilse Aichinger

**Beyond**

*für Clemens Podewils*

Bewahren,  
 wie die Linien  
 zwischen Gras  
 und grasbedecktem Stein  
 verlaufen,  
 den Astsprüngen  
 und den Sprüngen der Verzweigung,  
 Licht- und Schattenlauten.  
 Den Trauer und Freude festen  
 auf der Spur bleiben,  
 den Firsten  
 und den Rauchzeichen darüber,  
 solange bis sie,  
 eins geworden,  
 sich im Flug entdecken,  
 kein Untergang.

Ilse Aichinger

**Beyond**

*for Clemens Podewils*

Preserving  
 how the lines  
 between grass  
 and the grass-covered stone  
 run,  
 between the gaps of branches,  
 and those of the forkings off,  
 between the sounds of light and shade.  
 Tracing the celebrations  
 of mourning and joyfulness,

the ridges  
 and the signs of smoke above,  
 until they have  
 become but one,  
 discovering themselves,  
 no downfall.

As so often with the poetry of Ilse Aichinger, this poem, too, takes us to the edges, or at least margins of language; so do her twin-sister's and niece's visual works with their pictorial manifestations. Perceiving both is a challenging experience. Cognition, the process of thinking, Aichinger once stated, is an 'emotion'. And with reference to Kafka she spoke of the "Zumutung des Atmens", the tall order of breathing, against which she saw his work unfolding. In analogy we might concede that perceiving visual and poetic objects at the edge of their actual medium amounts to a borderline experience.

### III

Colour can be a matter of discretion. In Helga Michie's Mixed Media Prints and rather tentative approaches to – mostly southern landscapes – her use of colour is deliberately understated. Layers, or the principle of layering, dominates the technique. In these works, figures emerge as shadows of themselves, remain hazy but, ever so occasionally, are granted with a title, such as "Orpheus", a mixed media composition of 1974, or "Aquarium" of 1976; or there are remnants of human life like the collagraphs "Shoe" of 1989. There can also be two figures visibly willing but unable to communicate with each other in an untitled and dateless silkscreen. Often, the dates of Michie's work are unknown suggesting a certain timelessness or notionalty beyond time. When colours are used, for instance in some of her lithographs or prints, they complement each other discreetly. Her equally discreet figures often are queuing. What we are observing when

looking at these drawings and prints is a sequentialization of human, or even post-human, shapes as if they were embarrassed by their own identity.

Whilst colours find themselves mainly understated in Helga Michie's pictures Ruth Rix reinstates their evocativeness. In her work colours find, or create their own shapes and through them their very own pronouncements. Colour, even in its darkest mode, comes to its own in Rix's paintings and acquire a specific dimensionality. On Rix's canvasses, colours and their shapes grow visibly, meaning that in our perception they keep growing to the point that they outgrow their physical borderlines. It is as if they contain dynamics of their own even when they seem static or self-contained. For there is such a thing as 'movement in the stationary'.

Any visit to any exhibition requires a new way of seeing. But we should not rely on our eyes alone but mobilize other ways of sensual perception. Let us bear in mind what occurred in the dialogue between Lear and Gloucester in the Sixth Scene of the Forth Act of Shakespeare's drama: the suggestion that we might see the world anew through our ears. In the very moment of visual perception, we should pretend to be blind and let the ears tell us what we see. Lear's madness is in this respect but a new sense of complementariness within his senses.

#### IV

At this point I should like to revisit but a few of my initial suggestions for approaching this art and the composition of its presentation here at the Robert Cripps Gallery: To paraphrase Rilke's Malte figure, after all, the epitome of a literary character whose development is intricately linked with the process of learning how to see in the fullest meaning of the word. Likewise, it was Oskar Kokoschka who founded what he called 'eine Schule des Sehens', interestingly towards the end of his career.



In their spirit we can argue: It is possible to hear shapes and identify their soundscape. It is possible to detect harmonious dissonances within them. It is possible to show how the fragmentary plays with perfection. It is possible in these paintings and etchings to witness the disappearance of the Self and its re-emergence. It is possible to be drawn into the plentifulness of the void. And it is possible to be precise about vagueness as a haze in colour.

The figures in Rix's paintings are figurations of lost identities. They resemble ghostlike apparitions. It is not a Poe-like 'man in the crowd' but a Being in the Unknown – with one exception that is: the wolf-like dog. It resembles a quotation from nature and signifies a recapturing of figurative reality in otherwise opaque surroundings. This dog generates a specific sense of natural movement that focuses the viewer's eye. This square segment offers a perspective within the perspective of the larger painting, stroke charcoal sketching. Together they constitute an optical deception or *tromp l'œil* that reflect our uncertainty of locating ourselves.

If we look for a common denominator in terms of motives in the works of both artists – incidentally, Helga Michie only ever referred to herself as a 'printmaker' – it is the staircase that connects barely visible levels of uninhabited spaces. The Austrian word for it seems crucial here: Stiegen. The suggestive German expression 'Ich habe mich verstiegen' is of significance. It means that, in my ambition, I have gone above my limit and purpose. The stairs in these paintings and etchings have indeed lost their function and are void of any ornamentation. They are perhaps derivations of Doderer's Studelhofstiege stripped of their decorativeness as they connect "nothing with nothing", to quote T.S. Eliot. Stairs deprived of their context may symbolize the potentiality of climbing up and descending. It is an object in space that suggests movement and frustrates it at the same time when put next to the colourfulness of the void.

## V

The problem of adequacy in our reflections on art of any kind does not go away. If we want to avoid an alienating over-analytical approach to art, we cannot but speak in analogies. This can

also apply to the register or genre we employ to express what we connect with such works. For this final part of our reflections over in the Robert Cripps Gallery, this will happen by way of experimentally alternating musical interludes and shorter poems in prose to which you are now cordially invited.

*(to be performed in the Robert Cripps Gallery in the Exhibition “Cross-Connections”)*

Music (I)

(1) Formation of birds ornament the greyness of the sky. Eyes screen the rising smoke.

Where to take colour from in this opaque timelessness? For suddenly, the greyness is in flames. But the fire has unlearnt to burn. Shadows assemble, tumble, drown in their own silence. And yet, the silence resonates, full of ballades of the unsaid, the echo of the unspoken word. Or is it that we have learnt to let colours resonate in us?

Music (II)

(2) Strangers assemble to hum along the lines of uncertainty. Then, they merge into but one shadow of self-doubt. Ruptures to follow. Torn up dreams even though a flight of stairs remains unharmed.

Segments of thought, particles, coal dust – words, once again, get ready for the unspeakable and the canvasses for the unseen-of. Unexpectedly, notes gather on a merry-go-round, lost chimes from a belltower. The brush, too, the pallet-knife are searching for red and black and yellow paint and find it in the fireplace. Cuts in the lithograph hurt.

## Music (III)

- (3) A plaster sculpture rests on cobalt blue. It captures youthful pensiveness, half-coated by thick, shoulder-length hair; the brow pronounced; the lips closed and parted at once with a face that radiates: the composition in porous plaster of a young female whose facial expression looks like an open invitation and, at the same time, sealed. Thus saw and recreated Anna Mahler, her sisterly friend in exile, Helga Michie. Strangely, it seems that chords surround this sculpture, vibrations that make the hair move, hair that contains static motion as if it contained the wavelength of thought.

## Music (IV)

- (4) Amid conversations falls the shadow of silence. It divides and binds; it dissolves and reconfigures as a haze. I look at drawings as if they were phonographies, at colours as if they were clusters of voices. A room of one's own is meaningless without a voice of one's own, a voice in search of the one and only sentence as a configuration of words dipped in colours lined up until the lines become part of a score, strings of instruments thereafter. Strange that galleries are silent. Should there not be a constant humming of viewers translating what they see into muted sounds, transforming themselves into hummingbirds before paintings, extracting their colours thus enriching their plumages further and further. As we can no longer afford not to hear what we see.

## Music (V)

- (5) In the days before yesterday a house was built of colours. They darkened deceptively when drying. It looked like a crater surrounded by natural waste. But in the crater dissonances were resolved by magic. Who can tell the artist from the art? Who the loving

gesture from the soul? Who the bang from the whisper? I return to where I wanted to live and if I ever walk, I collect traces and square my memories of landscapes. I know that my blackbird will sing when nightfall occurs at noon.