



POP 1199 Friday 19 April 2013

Today's POP is Marlin, in West London having a look at The Piper Gallery in Fitzrovia...



In the art world it's sometimes easy to see every new artist as a fad - incandescently popular one day and forgotten the next. With hot young artists dominating press pages and garnering public attention, we tend to forget that there are artists who eschew notoriety, favouring to instead simply dedicate themselves to their craft. But not so Megan Piper. Her eponymous Piper Gallery, in Fitzrovia, only displays artists who have been working for upwards of forty years. Piper finds excitement and satisfaction in the 're'discovery of artists who have been quietly and assumedly working away for years. And when she finds them, Megan is faced with an entire oeuvre largely untouched by the pressures of commerce and public opinion. Perfect.

The Piper Gallery's latest installment, *All Things Must Pass*, from Neil Stokoe, practically justifies the exacting standards by which Megan's gallery is run. He is her ethos incarnate - having worked as a part time art teacher for more than thirty years, devoting his free time to his own work. Stokoe was actually the first of Piper's featured artists to seek her out. "I was just blown away when I saw his work," she said, describing the room in which he painted as "having paintings stacked so deep along each of the four walls that they were slowly taking over the space."

It's easy to see why Megan was immediately struck by Stokoe's paintings: they have a force of personality. Individually they can draw one's attention from across the room. En masse they exert an almost overwhelming energy. This potency is largely a result of skillful composition, for Stokoe paints just masterfully. *All Things Must Pass* consists entirely of oil paintings refreshingly free of artistic kitsch and irony. Stokoe trades on skill, not novelty. Which is what we like to hear.

With backgrounds looming in slashes of black and red or stark white, the action in Stokoe's work is drawn from very human sources. Quite often his paintings are centered round pale figures who appear frozen in the moments immediately before or after some terrible event. Ominous. Men shrouded in bedsheets (in the epic-Rothko meets-religion *Renunciation* and *Shrouded Figure*) or layers of plastic wrap (*Tryptich*, *Ritual*), two people locked in an act of either sex or violence behind a spiky wall of foliage, (*Two Figures in a Conservatory*) a crowd in paroxysms of rage or fear or awe (or all three in *Wither from Wither* to). There is a constant sense of foreboding in Stokoe's work, a nod towards the ease with which tragedy can shatter the safety and security we take for granted.

The fragility of the human experience in the face of cosmic inscrutability is a key aspect to Stokoe's work; delicately articulated light configurations contrasted against the monolithic feel of his backgrounds only serve to serve this. In *Presence* we observe a figure veiled in plastic that catches the light like spun silver; framed against the roiled darkness of the background, the shape at the center seems almost to float.

Neil Stokoe himself does not at all reflect the portentous gloom that characterizes his paintings. On the contrary, he is more than affable, and quite willing to entertain even my novice questions about his work. He gesticulates animatedly with hands dappled by black paint as we discuss the paintings around us. When I note the ominous feel of his work, he explains; "I'm not really a gloomy person, but I am very aware of the transience and vulnerability of life." Stokoe believes that, particularly in Western culture, we are insulated from the inherent fragility of day-to-day life. He sees it as part of his duty as an artist to foster awareness of this fragility and of the daily, mundane tragedies that we find it ever easier to ignore.

As befitting an artist on display at the Piper Gallery, Stokoe painted for decades without the twin influences of money and public opinion. And, crucially, sees himself the better for it. "I was my only critic," he explains, "and the harshest I could have had." Approaching art as art for arts sake, rather than as a career path, has allowed him to work so steadily and productively over the years. There is some irony, then, that this approach played a big part in his newfound exposure, irony that he himself is aware of, if not entirely comfortable with. Stokoe sees life as a balance between the cosmic, the weighty topics he addresses in his art and the domestic. "I feel a bit like Lawrence of Arabia," he jokes, "I'm out here in the desert but I just want to be back home."

Where Stokoe goes from here remains to be seen. What is beyond doubt, however, is the integrity of his work. He is a rarity; a man with enormous artistic ability who addresses sobering aspects of the human experience on levels both cosmic and domestic. He brings home the sometimes absurd, sometimes violent nature of our existence in a serious, affecting way. In a time when irony and gloss are so pre-eminent, we need artists like Neil Stokoe - and curators like Megan Piper - more than ever before.