

HEAD ON

Ann Cremin, 2010

Béatrice Englert paints heads – they are brooding presences in her studio, hieratic, almost expressionless. Or, perhaps, highly expressionistic...

The figures surrounding her are motionless but not lifeless – there is an intensity about their fixed poses – her masterly techniques of swift, assured, strong strokes are indications of her early training as a sculptor. Indeed she does still make sculptures, in stone, granite and other hard materials – again the faceless heads. Strangely enough, the overwhelming impression is not of foreboding but rather of a timeless reflection of the passage of ages, or events, which do not impinge directly on these forms.

She particularly enjoys painting or sketching figures in enclosed spaces, where life is suspended for a brief moment. Recently she has added to this repertoire a very large and ambitious series of bespectacled figures, almost shrouded, some of them adorned with over size spectacles or even divers' masks.

It is a curiously self-contained world, yet not totally removed from reality. Englert has, quite literally, cast such glimpses in stone or, mostly, in heavy paint, almost in relief on the canvas. The dark, powerful impastos the artist uses provide depth and feeling to these abstract feelings. Recently, she has been making very large diptychs, even triptychs that fill up the high room and make one almost want to join them and engage in conversation. They look as if they would have a lot to say if given the opportunity, that they in fact quite literally petrified or ecstatic and cannot cross beyond a certain threshold that would allow them to accede to reality, enclosed as they are in a contemplation that enfolds them.

The paintings mostly represent faces, worked over endlessly, furrowed, hacked out, in dark colors: mostly blacks, grays, with flashes of crimson or at times, an electrifying yellow. Occasionally one catches a glimpse of hands, folded, gnarled, well worn, hard working hands. Even in the full length "Woman with a dog" the face is masked by round dark glasses, completely obliterating the woman's features, her legs are tangled up together, and the dog is barely glimpsed in the folds of her lap. Here again, the colors are muted, with a wash of vivid yellow alongside, redolent of summer days in a garden, emphasized by the woman's hat overshadowing her features. Similarly the man seated at a table, his hands folded before him, is depicted in grays and flashes of blue, with the merest touch of red and yellow to animate the stillness. There is a feeling of a quiet power, but not menacing: a business man at his desk in other words. The tie, overflowing, contributes to the reassuring aspect of the painting.

But most works are not so placid. The most powerful are those with the double-eyed masks: workmanlike gas-masks or those worn by miners or other underground workers. The brush strokes are heavily incised, gouged out of the matter, detached from bodies or surroundings: images of a brooding intensity. Is the artist referring to recent history or to a more generalized foreboding?

Béatrice Englert first wanted to be a sculptor and studied at the Beaux-Arts in Paris, but after a while she felt that painting was for her, a more expressive medium. Based on her experiments with direct stone carving, she started to use the canvas like a primary material, from which, once she has applied many layers of strong pigment, she gouges out in a very physical manner, the intensity of her feelings and reactions. Her brush strokes are assured and sweeping, the layers upon layers of paint provide a depth and passion to otherwise abstract figures. She deals with the hidden emotions, the subconscious, the parts of ourselves we do not always allow to appear on the surface, but which are nonetheless constantly within us. The conflicts between within and without, between appearance and reality are in fact her guiding concerns. But instead of choosing to travel the totally abstract, "impressionistic" route in her work, she attempts, and succeeds in uncovering the hidden layers, by dint of an obstinate and endless quest for the inner self.

Another important facet in the artist's life is her strong relationship with authors and their words. She is particularly attracted to those writers who examine the psychological complexity, the hidden aspects of their characters. "I appreciate the various levels of reading facts, of beings, the light and, right alongside, the shadows are revealed by means of a progressive deciphering" she points out, mentioning amongst others Pessoa and his "heteronyms" such as described by Antonio Tabucchi. She also mentions Nabokov and Dostoyevsky, as well as such poets as Paul Eluard, Henri Michaux and Jean Cocteau.

She manages to tap into their inner feelings and she frequently translates their words and thoughts into paintings and drawings, both illustrating and emphasizing their coded messages. Like Giacometti, Englert believes that "drawing is the basis for everything" and when not wielding her brush she is busy drawing after poems, writings that she appreciates particularly. She admits to being fascinated by the works of Octavio Paz – perhaps his Latin-American approach provides her with a different outlook from the traditional Greek and Italian models, which are part and parcel of most Western artists' training.

She intends to continue working with contemporary authors and to enter into an on going relationship with them.

Currently Béatrice Englert is working on a group of very large-scale works, and she is taking a different approach: large canvases that the artist intends to exhibit as free floating, like Japanese kakemono, with simply a rod at top and bottom to position the painting. It intensifies the feeling of freedom and movement. They are almost like banners. The artist finds there a sort of symbiosis with Pessoa's "delirium at the end of his life" as described by Antonio Tabucchi. Still haunted by the "head's archeology" Béatrice Englert has recently been experimenting with sculpted stone heads to be shown alongside the fleshy painted heads. "The human being finds himself in a situation, within a specific universe with various elements or objects, and suddenly for me, there occurs a pictorial situation, the painting imposes itself almost automatically: shapes and colors, afterwards I have to build it up so that it all fits together", adds the artist.

Ann Cremin, 2010