



Scarlet Sprays for the Winter of Our Discontent

Robert Storr

Memories and metaphors are the essential points of departure for art critics of my stripe, as distinct from those who start with big ideas and only very occasionally follow them all the way to specific works of art. My approach, the *belles lettristic* approach, begins with the impressions that specific works make on me and expands outward to the things I am reminded of by those works, or certain salient aspects of them. Such 'readings', to use a postmodernist term of choice that I have come to regard as an admission of partiality dressed up as social scientific methodology, are not arbitrary insofar as unique objects or images contain only so many vectors of plausible reference. Still, the diverse readings they prompt are decidedly subjective rather than objective, though initial scrutiny of unfamiliar phenomena always benefits from the maximum objectivity; just think of first encounters with wild animals, poisonous plants, and malevolent members of our own kind. Aesthetes, beware: the flowers of evil can precipitate a definitive end to whimsical delectation.

The Symbolist poet and critic Charles Baudelaire knew this, of course, and the admixtures of Eros and Thanatos that suffuse his saturnine musings gave them much of their *fin-de-siècle* allure. However, the blossoms in question here are not Baudelairian in nature, though death and opiate dissipation ineluctably haunt them. And then, of course, there is the spare bloom's status as a symbol of the masses of young men who died in the trenches and on the field of battle in World War I, in which case the scarlet splash they add to the landscape becomes so many wounds, so many 'red badges of courage'. Yet, rather than being intrinsically lugubrious or morbid, 'poppies' are among the most radiant of all flowers, as anyone who has crossed a field of them in late spring and early summer knows. I did just that years ago, walking off-road and overland to the massive granite portals of Stonehenge, back in the day when one could still do that unimpeded. Moving around the ancient barrows in the vicinity of these

massive Neolithic monuments, hikers would constantly rediscover new vistas and unexpected reconfigurations of the horizon line, with undulating mounds of metamorphic green providing a flexing ground for the brilliant spots of red that dotted them. In that context they become the most matter-of-fact emblems of the essential vitality of pure colour, a reminder of its power to entrance.

The graphic idiom to which Brian Clarke makes recourse in these new flower drawings is consistent with that of his *Night Orchids* of 2016, except that there was no colour at all in those drawings, just radiant contrasts of spectral white and fathomless black, the latter being the tonal surround for the former. What the two bodies of work have in common, aside from their floral subject matter, is an unpredictable and frequently surprising liquidity. First and foremost, that liquidity affords the artist an opportunity to display his deft command of gestural brushwork, much as Chinese masters of scroll painting did when given a similar pictorial premise. And, like them, Clarke is able to eke out subtle suggestions of formal flux and volume from the various transparencies and opacities of a single spontaneous stroke such that a broad poppy petal conjured by just one touch of the brush seems to curve when differently diluted amounts of red pigment settle on the blank sheet of absorbent paper, creating exquisitely modulated shadows where the petal warps in or out against the flatness of the sheet.

Similarly, the drizzles and drips of the watery colour assume identities and functions of their own. In abstract painting of the 1950s, such traces of the painterly process were used to draw attention to the dynamic role of the painter obsessed by the urgency of his or her enterprise to the point that they disregarded previous standards of craft, and so left their 'mistakes' in full view as they hastened on to aesthetically more important matters than their work's 'finish'. Inevitably, such overt insouciance or self-dramatising hurry became a

mannerism. But Clarke is far too sophisticated an artist to traffic in clichés of a bygone era. Instead, what such visible side effects of improvisation provide is the opposite of histrionic license. Rather, they elaborate on the primary shapes at play in the structured environments they adumbrate. Thus, vertical drips morph into lily-like stems for the poppies far longer and more elegant than those that real, heath-bound poppies possess – Clarke has contrived to let rivulets of green run from green drops at the base of clustered petals in order that some of these stems retain their natural hue – while the reiteration of such organic linear elements striates the page and forms the basis for a grid as foil for the otherwise rounded or oval flowers. In short, representational figure and non-representational or abstract ground are conflated.

The other abstract elements that animate these drawings are the splatter and splash of liquid reds of various densities and directionalities that issue from Clarke's brush as it hits the paper. Exactly where the drops land is a matter that the artist wisely leaves to chance – to do otherwise would compromise the immediacy of these images for the sake of a patterned decorative effect – but their overall dispersal becomes an aleatory constant of these drawings nonetheless. This facture-derived dispersal is also paradigmatic of the spread of the flowers across a single piece of paper as a circumscribed whole as well as across multiple pieces of paper bound together. At times, moreover, the poppies resemble butterflies swarming, alighting, lifting off again, and wending their own way, lending each sheet a unique kinetic effect.

This fluttering, spitting, chromatically vibrating kinesis is amplified by looking at these drawings-that-are-really-paintings as an ensemble composed of the surprise encounters of living graphic organisms belonging to the same delicate but declarative species. Gathered into book form, they are an explosive bouquet of natural beauty at its most ephemeral, given that all truly natural things are inherently

ephemeral and that beauty assumes its greatest pitch and poignancy when, according to Gerhard Richter, it has been wounded. All of which brings us back to the poppy as a symbol of youth cut down in its prime and of the impossible, evanescent loveliness of a pipe dream. We do not need to look to the past to verify these associations, and neither does Brian Clarke have to self-consciously evoke or footnote their iconographic or stylistic precedents. They are implicit in his subject and rendered explicit by his treatment of it, as indeed is the case with all real and imagined entities brought to life in the shadow of a plague.

Brooklyn, March 2020

