

Anna Keen

The British have painted Venice almost as often as the Italians, to whom Venice belongs. Turner made some sparkling little masterpieces by Bonington. What can any British painter have to add, at the beginning of a new millennium? Anna Keen is a remarkable individual. Brought up on a remote Scottish island, she studied in Paris (simply because she had heard it was the place to go), lived and worked in Rome, and then decided it would be a good thing to spend some time in Venice. The present exhibition is the result of the period she spent there.

What Anna learned in Rome was how to be a painter of architecture. The great buildings of Rome were her teachers, and she learned how to present them in a new way, how to suffuse their massive forms with atmosphere, and how to keep a balance between the old and the new. This is the exploration she has continued in an entirely different sort of urban environment. Many of her subjects are completely original. She must be the first painter for example, who has chosen to portray the massive multi-storey car-park at Piazzale Roma-a building as typical of our own epoch as Ca' Rezzonico is of the eighteenth century. She finds something interesting in its massive rectangular lines, not to Canaletto, but to another son of Venice, G.B. Piranesi. She has also made a painting of the melancholy isolation hospital at Sacca Sessola, one of the few areas of Venice where no tourist ever sets foot, however she has not been frightened to tackle more traditional themes as well. There is a painting here of one of the most famous of all Venetian churches, Longhena's Salute. It is shown obliquely, its portico towering over the Grand Canal.

"Oblique" is perhaps a key adjective when one is trying to define the particular qualities of this exhibition. This is not the festive Venice of Canaletto and Guardi, nor the dramatically stormy city of Turner, nor the glittering, light-speckled environment we see in a few paintings by Claude Monet. It is melancholic, deserted, seen in fading light. Even where figures are incorporated, as they are in a view of the Zattere, they seem isolated from one another, wrapped up in their own thoughts. Recently Venice has been made the setting for two very popular series of detective stories, both written in English, one by Michael Dibdin and the other by Donna Leon. Both writers are good enough to transcend the limitations of those chosen genre, and it is the picture they give of present-day Venice, inward-looking an occasion slightly sinister which seems to be reflected here.

Many painters have visited Venice, comparatively few have actually participated in its daily life. One feels that these pictures are the product, not simply of choosing a particular scene and then making an image of it, but of many hours spent loitering and looking. It is as if Anna has had to wait for moments when she caught the city off guard, when it was not offering her the smiling face, which it shows to so many visitors.

If one leaves Venice and pushes further north and east, eventually one comes to another city whose history is almost as complicated. Trieste is Italy's gateway not only to Central Europe, but to the Balkans, and there one feels the presence of many influences which are not Italian. Venice herself used, of course, to possess an empire which had scattered outposts and colonies throughout the Eastern Mediterranean. It is some of these influences which now seemed to have permeated Anna's work. The low tones and generally brooding atmosphere of these paintings remind me of the landscape paintings made in the earlier years of the Vienna Secession, notably those of Gustav Klimt. They also-and this is a much more obvious comparison-remind me of the work done in Venice by Whistler.

After winning his libel case against Ruskin, but bankrupting himself in the process, since he received only contemptuous damages, and on contribution to his costs, Whistler moved to Venice in 1879, and lived there for fourteenth months. He did almost no painting but produced a large number of etchings, which show the city in its most informal aspect. Sickert, leader of the Camden Town School, which was the step before full Modernism in Britain, began his career as Whistler's pupil. He, too, spent a lot of time in Venice in the closing years of the nineteenth century. His tenebrous Venetian views also have something in common with what Anna Keen is doing now.

What I am saying, I think, is that her depictions of Venice are vehicles for a sensibility which one might describe as Symbolist.. Nevertheless, she is a Symbolist with her feet rooted firmly in the realities of everyday life. If there is one writer whose reactions to her work I would like to have, it is not a professional art critic, nor even Thomas Mann, but the great Anglo-American novelist Henry James. James set part of one of his great novels, *The Wings of the Dove*, in Venice, and it also provides the setting for his masterly novella, *The Aspern Papers*. James consciously uses the beauty of Venice, but also its melancholy, to reinforce his complex analysis of human nature. I like to think that he had met Anna, and seen her work, he would have found a place for her in one of his fictions. Certainly, since he celebrated independence of spirit in women, he would have been fascinated by what this remarkable nomad has achieved.

Edward Lucie-Smith