Susan Lichtman

"Autofiction"

To look at a painting by Susan Lichtman is to be drawn into a world that might seem familiar but evokes a paradoxical terrain where a ray of sun can be dark or a figure in the background disconcertingly peers out to capture your attention and engages with you in an intimate way. An open dishwasher ("Large Table with Corn") can invite the viewer into an abstract terrain where the everyday clashes with the mysterious. Lichtman's palette indirectly energizes our capacity for compassion, while at the same time radiating with broad, initially unnerving swaths of color—greens, oranges, grays, whites. These large canvases, amazingly, spring out from small details. She tells us that "In 2000 I developed a personal method for arriving at large-scale paintings. Rather than starting with a general pictorial design, I begin my work by painting a small detail and then proceed to the next detail." Which detail inaugurated that red "At the Back Door," with its gathered figures in their various companionable or uncompanionable solitudes? Where did the corn painting begin? What is the signifying detail of "Drawing Room" and its shadows?

Lichtman, when pressed, has commented that she "introduces elements through improvisation." This improvisation "allows [her] to break habits of composition" and to discover "territory where the familiar becomes strange." Making the familiar both recognizable but deeply strange seems to be a trademark of Lichtman's oeuvre, and she finds ways to inculcate her viewers with that capacity as well as with an appreciation of its value.

The familiar. What is more familiar than our domestic space? Lichtman comments, "I have been both challenged and inspired by the risks inherent in being a woman artist and feminist who paints home and family, since domestic subject-matter has been associated too easily with conventional 'women's art.' I have asserted that the domestic realm could provide – as it does in literature – territory where the familiar becomes strange, and formal alterations enhance the perception of common things." Her work resonates in an uncanny way with the creative processes of both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, two other practitioners of recreating domestic life through art. Tolstoy cited the painter Bruyllov's words to describe the creative process: "Art begins where the tiny bit begins." And the opening pages of the notebooks for Dostoevsky's big novels, those supposed novels of ideas, all begin with utter uncertainty as to plot or character, but with weird fragments which may or may not appear in the novel. For The Brothers Karamazov: "Find out whether it is possible to lie between the rails under a railway car when it passes over you at full speed."

How many of Lichtman's initial details have vanished, leaving only traces on her canvas? She too begins with the small detail: "I paint a specific observed 'thing': a vase of flowers, a shadow, an arm. I then imagine what might be, or should be, above, below, to the right and left of that 'thing'. I develop the painting slowly. . . as if I am making up a story with no preconceived idea of how the narrative will end." She gives herself over to the mystery of the creative process. The crooked shades of "Blue Windows," the white winter

interior pitted clumsily against the frosted blues outside spell confinement, disengagement. Where was the beginning of this painting; what detail gave way to its completion?

Lichtman's paintings often call attention to green. One recalls Andrew Marvell's "green thought in a green shade." And here is her "Green Thought," one of her very few outdoor paintings, with a literal green shade. The figures, perhaps from "Drawing Room," are outside now, some are under the green shade, some not, but all are deep in thought—shared or solitary—existing in that burgeoning garden alone yet together. Lichtman offers us green thoughts, red thoughts, gray thoughts—all blending the familiar with the strange, the finely observed and rendered detail laced with bold, nervy strokes of intuition. All beginning, in a secret place, with a detail.

The Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky maintained that art enables us to see anew when, through an unconscious, continuous process of automatic looking, we have become almost blind: "The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception, because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. . . . After we see an object several times, we begin to recognize it. The object is in front of us, and we know about it, but we do not see it—hence we cannot say anything significant about it. Art removes objects from the automatism of perception." Lichtman's renderings of domestic spaces make us pause; the pause lengthens; we see a cat's tail, a body in a chair, a spindly plant. We begin to see what we have long automatically recognized in a different way.

Van Gogh tells us that people stay in one place because of "the feeling of being at home, the reassuring and familiar look of things." (407) But Lichtman renders that dear familiarity jarring and unsettled, even as it remains cherished. Van Gogh goes on, "If we study Japanese art, we discover a man who is undeniably wise. . .who spends his time doing what? Studying the distance from the earth to the moon?. . .No! He studies [. . .] a single blade of grass. But this blade of grass leads him to draw all the plants. . .animals, then the human figure." (410). There is something of this inscrutable process occurring on Lichtman's canvases. She begins with something as small as a blade of grass and ends with depictions of the very nature of things; she restores the commonplace, that which is automatically seen, to life.

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