

FOREWORD

Shavrova describes her creative impulse as one of self-expression. Throughout her work on the *Inscriptions* series she has been interested in developing her paintings as documentation of personal memories and experiences of landscape. As Curator, my interest has focussed on the physical tensions visible within the paintings and drawings. This essay is based on our discussions around these themes.

Shavrova wanted to work with a Curator with a personal and subjective approach to the work. In so doing, she was expressing dissatisfaction with contemporary art criticism of the kind that Hans Keller has described in relation to music where the critics' job is "to know better - not better than the reader in the first place, but better than someone else, than whom the reader also knows better as soon as he [or she] has read the critic."⁰ It has been impossible for me "to know better" because of the artist's insistence on the value of my input as observer and, ultimately, selector of the paintings. The objective Curator capable of contemporary authoritative judgement is not present in this exhibition. I have become personally involved through heated discussion, freezing cold studio visits, and late nights warming up in cheap Turkish cafes in East London. I can simply share some of the insights the artist has given me in conversation and describe my thoughts and interests as I look at the paintings.

Such personal responses are intended by the artist who accepts that, once completed, the works no longer belong to her. Above all Shavrova feels "one should be able to respond on an intuitive level... It would be awful if [the work] creates absolutely no spontaneous reaction. I'm not necessarily looking for a positive response. This work is not as easy or as likeable as the previous group of works has been. But I want a response. I want some sort of emotion. I think that's what paintings can do."

Admitting that our own interpretations of the works might differ, we offer only approaches to the works. We leave enjoyment and understanding open to you as viewers.

Reyahn King
Birmingham, December 2000

⁰ Hans Keller, *Criticism*, London, 1987, p.30

INSCRIPTIONS: Painting the Line

Varvara Shavrova's art expresses a personal sense of the possibility of communication between artist and viewer through the shared experience of paintings. Painting the Line implies that we are looking at works by an artist concerned with the formal relationship of paint, usually associated with colour and tone, and line, often associated with drawing. Alongside a formal interest in the tension between the painted and drawn surfaces we encounter an imaginative journey that is in part a strict exercise in painting and in part an unlimited excursion into the realms of memory and fantasy.

Shavrova is interested in discovering landscapes through creative journeys. "The sense of belonging and dispossession associated with travelling, passing, moving is of particular interest to me as an artist living and working in a familiar but foreign ground. I examine and develop these ideas through the medium of painting and drawing . . . I aim to develop the theme of inner discovery in the alien context". She invites us to imagine ourselves into her paintings and feel within them a range of journeys involving paint and line, landscape and memory. Like runes or coded messages, the *Inscriptions* drawings and paintings series intrigue and inspire us. The new emphasis on line in these works suggests the mysteries of foreign calligraphies inviting exploration.

I met Shavrova in 1990 when she had just moved to London and I was struck by her confidence as a young artist embarking on a new venture. Born in 1968 in Moscow, she was taught to paint by her father and Professor Dmitrii Lyon. Subsequently she attended the Moscow Polygraphic Institute, studying painting and book illustration. Now having chosen a new life in England and Ireland, Shavrova is drawn to the notion of journeys that combine physical and emotional upheaval.

Shavrova's experience of totalitarianism means that she tends to avoid 'closed' interpretations of any artistic work. Her training in Moscow was quite different to those of her peers in England. Established movements such as German Expressionism were considered radical. Shavrova remembers that a Francis Bacon exhibition held in Moscow in the 1980s was a shocking challenge to her work. She felt frustrated and limited working and learning within the vacuum of the Soviet art world. On the other hand, she now feels that she may have gained by the rigorous and unquestioning training in painting that she received. Her limited knowledge of the international art scene "put a break, a pause on that sort of fast-forward movement that I think people have to experience now when one has to devise a philosophy in one's work by the

age of 20 . . . Not being acquainted with Duchamp's work until I was 30 was actually quite helpful". This experience has left her with an undaunted sense of the importance of painting as an art form.

Shavrova cites Russian poet Joseph Brodsky to describe her own attitude. In his Nobel Prize Lecture, Brodsky says "Art is a form which does not accept formal repetition and its development is assessed not by the level of individuality of the 'author' but by the dynamics and the logic of the actual material which has to find a qualitatively new aesthetic solution."

Shavrova interprets this as a challenge to search constantly for new problems and new solutions within painting. Her choice of a poet to justify painting as an activity is deliberate. She says "Poetry is allowed to be Romantic, ... whereas painting particularly in the late 20th century is considered to be about something else. It's a tool of cynicism. But I don't embark on that boat."

Since the early 1990s Shavrova's art could be defined as abstract, that is, without recognizable subject matter. Nevertheless she is adamant that her painting retains a basis in the material world of observation. She rejects the kind of abstraction that is solely interested in formal issues within painting and without reference to the world beyond: "[My painting] is a kind of interest in form that stems from the experience of being in the landscape . . . It's not like trying to photograph life . . . It's trying to capture the essence of the moment ."

This determination to capture the essence of the moment has been a consistent thread in Shavrova's work since 1993 when she first began to communicate her experiences of different landscapes through drawings and paintings. She has made paintings in series to investigate this theme, including *Portugese Album* (1994-5), *Porthleven* (1996), and *Passion, Grace and Fire* (1997-8), all of which are characterised by Shavrova's typically expressive, intense and occasionally acidic colours. Shavrova declared in 1998, "I want my paintings to achieve the intensity of emotion and the clarity of expression that is the mark of a great poem. As the words serve to mediate between the poet and the reader who responds in a highly personal way, so I aim to transform the medium of paint into a new reality which the viewer can enter, become personally involved with and respond to, with love or hate, and leave having been affected in the same way that I am as the painter." Yet at the same time, the paintings appeared to be meditations on the ability of paint to depict space and to provide the viewer with a sense of depth and movement.

The *INSCRIPTIONS* series is a group of works in charcoal and graphite on paper which evolved during and after her first two consecutive residencies in Ballycastle, County Mayo, Ireland. Here Shavrova turned her attention to seaweed and other objects found on the beach, and explored the ancient land monuments and cites dating back to Megalithic period of Irish history. The 'fossilised landscape' as Irish poet Seamus Heaney calls this particular part of Ireland, triggered notions of ancient history preserved in stone monuments and inscribed with

ancient alphabets and prehistoric symbols. Shavrova produced sketches and photographs investigating these forms both within the wider landscape and as micro-landscapes of organic and decaying matter.

These preparatory studies led to drawings demonstrating a dramatic new direction and energy. Comparing the process of drawing to archaeological excavation, Shavrova strives to decipher the essence of memories and events through almost obsessional tangling and webbing of lines that unveil the subtly emerging shapes and forms. The *INSCRIPTIONS* are 'close-ups', we cannot see their boundaries. We are almost too close to decipher them yet their textures invite us to step up even closer in an attempt to unravel their mysteries.

Charcoal produces a dark line. Graphite produces a slight reflective sheen. Used in a variety of ways, Shavrova enhanced and contrasted the silvery quality of graphite to make a series of subtle and intimate works the *INSCRIPTIONS 1-7*. Each sheet of paper is completely covered by the drawn surface but the artist has consciously compensated for the loss of white areas of paper through the graphite medium: "the loss of white is recreated by the gains of the graphite reflection". Each work was first painted with thin graphite wash made using water and graphite powder. Graphite powder bound with glue was then applied, producing in, for example, *INSCRIPTIONS 4*, an area of raised marks. Finally Shavrova drew and scratched lines using a combination of compressed charcoal, willow charcoal and graphite pencil.

In Ireland Shavrova also produced a series of large drawings on canvas which she called *Found Objects*, a title inspired by natural objects. For Shavrova the object is a form that is found in her imagination and grows organically in the process of drawing. The *Found Objects* drawings convey a sense of energy and life as if the abstract shapes drawn on these canvases have an inherent, organic growth of their own. The artist's interest centres on the quality of light and dark, substance and transparency that can be achieved by a variety of lines on the canvas. In *Found Objects 3*, for example, a rolling form appears to sink vertiginously away from the viewer at the right hand side whilst a landscape-like ridge unfurls behind it. Part of the mystery of the scene derives from the range of techniques forming the contrasting lines. Heavily drawn charcoal lines comprise the dominant form in the lower half of the canvas and emphasize the impression of a sinkhole to the right. Lines made by rubbing out reveal white under a smudged grey haze to create the wider sense of connected form and movement.

In this series, linear forms appear within shifting depths of space. Shavrova investigates space through colour, complicated by the determination to include drawing within that space. Each of her works, whether painted or drawn, contains an argument between line and colour. Even the large black and white drawings, such as *Found Objects 7*, demonstrate a tension between the use of line to evoke form and the use of colour (white and rubbed grey) to evoke space..

Shavrova's choice of titles for her paintings directs attention to the colours of her emerging forms drawn within the paintings, rather than to the dominant colour of the work.

Shavrova is convinced that the most interesting part of this technical and emotional investigation centres on the confrontation between painting and drawing. Suddenly the use of lines painted by the brush is not enough. Shavrova's drawings include the use of watery graphite applied like paint and a reversed appearance of the line produced by scratching. Shavrova's paintings include scratched lines, lines drawn in oil stick, as well as painted lines. Tension between line as expressed by drawing, and space as expressed by painting is central to the power of these new works, both her drawings and paintings expressing similar emotions and technical interests. Thus *Found: Warm Black* and *Inscriptions 12* and *13* relate to each other. *Inscription 13* seems to describe a further stage of organic growth or unravelling. The same form grows and twists in *Found Objects 7* and *Found: Lime Green*.

This latter painting demonstrates Shavrova's investigation of the relationship between depth and space. The lime green form appears to move gradually forward in space from the upper right to dominate the left side of the canvas. A deep, purple space is implied by the variety of glazes and tones within it. Surprisingly the same diluted lime green exists in this apparent area of space under the dominant paint layer. A close-up look at the surface reveals an extraordinary complexity of technique and a deliberate juxtaposition of line painted with a brush, the grainy texture of oil stick drawn on the canvas, and lines scratched through layers of paint.

In paintings such as *Found: Crimson* the form seems to be clearly moving through space. A vertical form in crimson paint, red paint and scratched lines, looks like an elongated spinning top, dividing the green space of the canvas into two distinct areas. A rough slash of red and yellow paint is revealed under the crimson, while crimson threads trail off the canvas to the left. The essential process in this painting, as in all the paintings in the series, is the building up of layers of paint as well as their removal. To the left in *Found: Crimson*, layers of paint glazes dragged with horizontal brush strokes and by a process of tipping wet paint over dry, produce a fluent sense of space and movement. On the right side, thicker paint and a raised surface create a more static area. The yellow layer of paint underneath is only revealed in the central slash, a hazy line running diagonally at the left side and rows of horizontal dots at the centre.

In the subtlety of its colour and range of technical effects *Found: Dianthus Pink* further demonstrates the 'conversation' between drawing and painting. Grey oil paint and oil stick remind us of the appearance of pencil, the traditional drawing tool. The horizontal form suggested in grey and pink floats in the lower third of the painting to interrupt the sense of light, airy space that supports delicate, gently twisting forms around the darker mass. The darker, horizontal form is drawn in oil stick and painted in lines of purple grey and a variety of pinks. To

the left an overpainted column rises up, causing blurring of the pink paint and grey oil stick. Shavrova has further scratched lightly on the surface with the edge of her brush. The result is a shifting sense of depth and an impression of animal movement akin to the swing of hair. Like the *INSCRIPTIONS* drawings, *Found: Dianthus Pink* invites close examination revealing energies not immediately apparent when the painting is viewed as a whole.

Thinking about the fabrication of these works, the long and changeable nature of their creation becomes apparent. For Shavrova, this process is her artistic discovery - a discovery that continues when the work receives a response. Shavrova intends a variety of emotional, physical and imaginary landscapes to be conjured up when we look at these art works. But whatever our response the importance of the *INSCRIPTIONS* series lies in the relevance of the arguments about the nature of painting and drawing contained within the works themselves. We have to be willing to stare deep into the surfaces of these works - yet equally we need to stand back and allow our imaginations to respond to the forms emerging from within them.

Reyahn King

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