

## Inscriptions: Painting the Line

Varvara Shavrova

*I love this turf-face,  
its black incisions,  
the cooped secrets  
of process and ritual.*

Seamus Heaney

These are not auspicious times to be a painter or a romantic; Varvara Shavrova is both. It is a measure of her maturity as an artist, that although still in her early thirties, she has developed a visual language that eschews the easy clichés of postmodernism for a vision that is penetrating, lyrical and serious. Less gorgeously seductive than her early work there is a new muscularity about this series.

Varvara Shavrova's life has been punctuated by journeys. Born in Moscow in 1968 she studied painting at the aesthetically conservative Moscow Polygraphic Institute – German Expressionism was considered radical and she did not discover Duchamp until she was 30 – before coming to the west to settle permanently. Since then there have been working journeys to both Portugal and Cornwall but most frequently to Ireland where during residences at Ballycastle, County Mayo much of this new work evolved.

Shavrova is not afraid of big themes. Through her expressionistic paintings and drawings she attempts to find a visual language that will connect inner and outer, landscape and memory. For her to make a mark is to give voice to that which lies silent just below the level of consciousness, to make visible what has only been half-understood as emotion or a desire. To draw or paint is a temporal act, for a mark creates its own history both as memorial and inscription.

Although her work appears abstract it is deeply rooted in the physical world. The sea, the beach, fossils, traces left by the tide in the sand like nature's hieroglyphs charting the landscape's history, provide the starting points and catalysts for her work. Making her vigorous charcoal and graphite works on paper is a process of discovery akin to archaeological exploration or the psychoanalytic journey into the history of the self where small truths are slowly revealed. Her tangled webs create a Theseus'-like thread that connect the outer world to the shadows of memory.

Throughout this series there is a dialogue between drawing and painting, where the line suggests cerebral form and colour implies less bounded space and emotional intuition. Looking at these intense intelligent works with their complex webs and spirals, their

suggestions of vertebrae, seaweed or shells, is to encounter the natural environment with a new awareness, to understand something not only of the processes of change and transmutation but of the process of making paintings. Their power is that they pin us into the physical world while drawing us deep into labyrinths of the imagination.

*Sue Hubbard is a freelance critic and an award-winning poet. Her novel *Depth of Field* is published by Dewi Lewis.*