Elizabeth Osborne

September 9–October 10, 1992

Essay by Alexandra Anderson–Spivy

Locks GALLERY
600 Washington Square South
Philadelphia, PA 19106

A RUMPLING OF BLAZONS: ELIZABETH OSBORNE RISKS CONTROL

The commonplace became a rumpling of blazons,
What was real turned into something most unreal.

An Ordinary Evening in New Haven, XXV
Wallace Stevens

Making order is high on the list of strategies we humans use to sort out existence, to edit daily life, to keep despair at bay. Order can transfigure the world and impose management on chaos. Nature is its first practitioner. Art, that individual perceptual struggle to find a form, a structure, some kind of personal and universal meaning forged from evanescent, shifting circumstance, is its second. To put things in order is one way to create -- briefly in life, more permanently in art -- a sense of control. Simplicity, so difficult an achievement in an age of material glut and spriritual poverty, is one of the stringencies order demands. The formality order dictates can be an etiquette to contain, clarify, and sublimate feeling that otherwise overwhelms or destroys.

Elizabeth Osborne is no stranger to such devices and strategies. They've often served her art well. But now her newest work challenges the delicate restraint, the refinement of her earlier still lifes and interiors. For three decades the paintings of this well–known Philadelphia–based artist have been concerned with banishing chaos, conveying a mixture of melancholy and joy, and deploying the painterly resources of both modernism and tradition to rescue meaning from loss and solidity from uncertainty. Over the years still life has served Osborne eloquently as a metaphor for the fragility of life. She says that "the sensuality of the objects themselves and their inherent everyday simplicity have powerful meaning for me." Osborne has also frequently used the isolation and solitude of things (and sometimes single figures) arranged in the studio as an analogy for the disciplined solitude required by the artistic life.

Sculptor Anne Truitt wrote in her journals that "the most demanding part of living a lifetime as an artist is the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one's most intimate sensitivity." Osborne has recently reintensified the struggle to work exactly in that way. This exhibition of recent work, her sixth at the Locks Gallery since 1970, presents the striking results of her resolve to follow where her sensibility leads. She has relinquished the security of familiar dexterities to respond to a visceral need to dig deeper and reexplore the human figure, as well as to push the possibilities of abstraction further. In the process her work has given up some of its decorative politesse for more intimate subjects, richer, more painterly surfaces, and far bolder expanses of color. While her new work sometimes experiments with pastels, she has almost entirely pulled away from the white backgrounds that carved out the outlines of her objects and the pale passages so prevalent in work from the late 1970s and early 1980s. "Moving from the decorative to the gut is never easy." she observes.

Though Osborne is a watercolor virtuoso, after ten years the medium has -- at least for now -- worn out its possibilities for her. And acrylic she found "too much like watercolor." She's gone back to painting in oil. The variety of approach, subject, scale, and color in this most recent body of work (Osborne has made these paintings over the past two years) demonstrates a courageous self–liberation from the restrictions of the past on the one hand and, on the other, a re–examination of some of the ideas she'd bypassed.

Several of these new canvases reconnect with the models and nudes in interiors Osborne painted in the early and mid–1960s, when she had first begun to adapt to her own purpose the painterly ways of Diebenbkorn, Bischoff, Oliveira, and some of the other Bay Area artists who abstracted forms and used color to make space eloquent and pictorial. Diebenkorn would recognize his aura in the acidly

lyrical, highly saturated blues, yellows, and crimsons, the emotionally evocative simplifications of interior space, the abstract windows, and the figures of Osborne's *Golden Wall* (1991, 30 x 32 1/2″) and *The Green Scarf*, (1991–92, 22 1/2 x 26 3/4″). Both paintings play off one compositional theme. Though Osborne changes her viewpoint, her palette, and adds a red amaryllis and a schematic windowsill still–life arrangement to *The Green Scarf*, she's constructed both images with the same elements; she just balances the emphasis differently in each one. In both, contemplation takes the shape of a seated female figure generalized into archetype.

And look at *Patterns of Autumn* (1991–92, 54 x 54″) and *Lemon Hill*, (1991–92, 44 x 50″) for another such pairing. Each of these large paintings is split into three rectangles with the largest, lower horizontal shape bisected by diagonals that economically suggest some sort of Cézannesque tablecloth. In these two pairs of pictures, a governing concern is how to combine abstraction and content without becoming superficial. They go beyond the visual interrogation of objects to create a pervasive mood of contemplation. Osborne's riposte to the lure of the decorative is a denser compostional gravity and the new power of her color. Deep, deep blues, rich reds, vibrant greens and golds are about exuberantly pure painting, not the illustration of an event or arrangement. Her groups of glass vases and lemons, those vestiges of the world, those luminous reminders of her earlier still lifes, glow in these paintings with a poetically transfiguring emotional intensity.

For Osborne, poetry still abounds in the everyday world. But lately she's relaxing into less controlled versification, finding a freer response to things. She swaps translucent purity for looser, larger gestures, more resonant opacities. Shapes move from being defined by crisp, stencil–like precision to more amorphous borders and overlapping layers of brushwork and color. In many of these new paintings, she must have been painting more with the arm and less just with the hand. Her most recent work increasingly relinquishes previously characteristic nacreous hues and thin, blotted, and stained–in washes. In one still life, she experiments with big passages of brushy black. In other pictures her scale has gone beyond easel painting, gotten more ambitious; color and texture are more passionate, more luscious. Osborne has transformed highly saturated color into something with properties that heal as well as celebrate the moment.

Osborne is an artist who directly reacts to the world around her. And her recent travels in Mexico have stoked some of the change in her work. Like Robert Motherwell, who experienced "great exhilaration" from the color, the light, and the culture he found in Taxco, Osborne's indelible impressions of the country and its stark light and intense hues show up in the startlingly hot colors she now very fluidly employs.

One example of this is *Chipotle* (1991, 18 x 18″), a vivid still life of scarlet, yellow, ochre, and green peppers on a sky–blue plate that's a direct visual equivalent for some of the qualities of these Mexican perceptions, as well as a study for part of a larger painting. Combining still life and figure, Osborne has based this unusual, vertically bisected painting on a Cartier–Bresson photograph from *The Decisive Moment*, the black–and–white picture of two prostitutes leaning out of windows cut into a wooden door on the Calle Cuauhtemocztin that he took in Mexico in 1924.

This direct, confrontational mode, this lush, alert sensuality of color and subject, is very far from the cool containment Osborne has utilized in the past. Her new work can be unsettling; Lt has new psychological and emotional energy. It is more personal than ever too. *The Bridge and I*, (60 x 70″) her 1991–92 self–portrait, continues this intensified subjective exploration. The artist presents herself off–center in the middle distance, standing behind the picture plane, behind a table where paintbrushes defy gravity with elegant Matissian aplomb. Behind her, framed by the window, is the arch of the Benjamin Franklin Bridge, a metaphor of Osborne's family heritage. "The self–portrait is how I see myself in mid–life–with the sun still intense but past noon,"

she says, a simultaneous participant in and observer of the world.

Osborne, who was born in Philadelphia, also was raised and educated in Philadelphia, first at Friends Central School and then at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the Universith of Pennsylvania. Her early artistic legacy, as Judity Stein has pointed out, is one of representational still life, figure and landscape painting, which has come down directly from Charles Willson Peale and his remarkable children, from William Michael Harnett's observations of objects, and is one which includes the inquiring spirit of the giant Eakins. In the twentieth century this legacy incorporates the precise, inherent purity and tough vision of that Lancaster Edwardian, Charles Demuth, and resonates with the formative influences of Hobson Pittman and Franklin Watkins, faculty whom Osborne knew and was influenced by at the Academy.

Her reputation as one of Philadelphia's most respected contemporary painters is now well established. The city has remained Osborne's base for her artistic career and for her life. It is where she was orphaned by the age of twelve, where she raised her daughter, and where she has taught subsequent generations of art students. Her ties to the city and its specific artistic heritage run deep; acknowledging that continuity of her local experience is necessary for understanding her work. Though her work has earned her a distinguished place in the galaxy of contemporary realist painters, she never elected a life in the Manhattan artistic fast lane. Her notable tenure as the first woman faculty member at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts since Cecilia Beaux taught there in the early part of the century has enriched the very artistic tradition which provided her so many of the bricks in her creative foundation.

As important as this local continuity, is the wider context of Osborne's development as an artist. She came of age artistically at the moment when the enormous impact of Abstract Expressionism was being superseded by the cooler, more ironic sensibilities of Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg and Pop Art. She began her career when American women were shifting their social and professional roles, and women artists -- whether consciously or unconsciously -- were beginning the tremendous job of challenging the sexual discrimination still stubbornly inherent in the art world.

When she was in her late teens and early twenties, Osborne repeatedly won Academy fellowships to study abroad. In 1963 and 1964, a Fulbright took her to Paris for a year. It was where she studied Matisse and Gauguin more closely and formed her deep regard for Matisse's work. But by the time she was living in Paris, America was where the innovations in contemporary art were percolating. "I found myself in Paris looking back at American art magazines and being more excited by what was happening here than over there," she said in a 1991 interview for the Archives of American Art.

In Europe, Elizabeth Osborne experimented freely with abstraction for the first time. Ever since, an awareness of the nature of modernism and its connection to ongoing developments in American art has consistently informed her compositions and her stylized subject matter. Never a strict illusionist, never a traditionally descriptive or represent ational artist, Osborne rapidly consolidated her position as one of the contemporary American painters who found reality an essential component for art. Like Fairfield Porter and Philip Guston, like Philip Pearlstein, Janet Fish, Alex Katz, and Rackstraw Downes, like Neil Welliver, who had been one of her childhood teachers in Saturday morning classes at the Philadelphia College of Art, Osborne decided that the prescribed modernist dichotomy between representation and abstraction was essentially a false limitation.

She is one of the younger postwar American artists who have worked to prove that realism is not an anachronism; that it is possible to infuse representational content with renewed vitality and relevant meaning, to decisively remove from it the musty taint of conservatism and academicism. From

early on, Osborne's paintings have incorporated and reinterpreted modernist issues, from the staining of the canvas to flattening planes, from an elegant, schematic stylization of forms to the pragmatic investigation of the medium of paint. Her earlier still lifes deftly expanded negative space, simplified and manipulated pure form and pattern, to distill the radiance of daily life. Her subsequent interiors and nudes from the 1980s were composed of discrete, flattened shapes she molded with luminous color washes adapted from the kind of transparent staining first utilized by helen Frankenthaler and Morris Louis in the 1960s. Osborne's new work takes up again the affirmative possibilities of allegorical and painterly abstraction applied to subjects selected from the external world. Now she translates that subject matter, not only into pictorial information, but into more emotionally and symbolically resonant evocations of the energy of life.

Recently Osborne marked for me a passage in a 1983 essay Linda Cathcart wrote on postwar American still–life painting. Cathcart stressed how American painters have often seen still–life painting as an affirmation of life in opposition to the rather narcissistic emotionalism of pure abstraction. In Osborne's pictures, "objects imply humanity." Like Diebenkorn and Howard Hodgkin she has learned how to put content at the service of painting to better express the moods and marvels of the world.

Motherwell said, "In the end, everything has to be made out of what moves you." At a time when so much American contemporary art does little more than rearrange strident cliches of intellectualized political correctness, when irony is a safety device replacing authentic response, Elizabeth Osborne's art isn't playing it safe. More boldly than ever, her new work continues to demonstrate her trust in painting's expressive power to make some affirmative sense out of the world.

Alexandra Anderson–Spivy