

Twilight and Idols

On Gareth Lloyd

“And time and the world are ever in flight
And love is less kind than the grey twilight”

The world, as Gareth Lloyd captures it, is steeped in a grey twilight, hovering uncertainly, with a tremulous gravity, on the cusp of night and day. Kindness though does not have its place here. Darkness is always falling, never quite fallen, on a world that betrays itself in shifting lights as vast and austere, elemental and unyielding. Greyness is revealed not as an achromatic emptiness, but immensity, a sliding spectrum, mercurial and metallic at times, great washes of blankness scratched and striated, intersected by emergent figurations and imbricated by painstakingly affixed swatches of colour. These colours are close, perhaps, to the love Yeats delineates in his poem, unable to alleviate the magnitude of a world that is without relief. In “Massive Thaw”, it is the traces of teal and green that gather at the base of the shadowy mountain, which flash with an electric brightness, as though the cold, still verdant earth beneath the ice might offer benevolence, momentarily muting the catastrophe of climate change. Momentarily. In “Sea and Sulpher”, it is the uneven bloc of chalky limestone, a creamy yellowed shore that barely keeps breaking waves at bay.

Yet, it is in the colour grey that the gravity of the world is carried. In Lloyd’s thoughtful palette, it is infinitely expressive, variously signaling duress and patience, heaviness and blankness, suggesting stone and chalk, mercury and miasma, air and element, a subdued power and a stilled anger incapable of containment. In grey there is ascending beauty and mounting disaster in equal measure. This is exemplified in “Area”, where a pool of inscrutable charcoal darkness gathers and laps at the snow amassed landscape behind it, punctured only by the sequences of fiercely scored lines, a scrubland of white stars become cracked ice – crystalline structures, once strong, breaking with weakness. Human presence is neither wanted nor needed here. This is a world that does not wait on our apprehension nor exults in the life we might give to it, as though it were capable of a beauty long before our unwanted incursions and spoilt by our presence. The greyed skies and snows possess their own dignity, luminous and tender, carrying lightly their mystery. If we see this world, it is through a glass darkly, behind a miasmatic fog of our own making, marred, scored, scratched and distorted.

More hopeful, though, perhaps is the patiently worked through DMZ (demilitarized zone) series. Scrublands sprout resolutely in the deserted terrains of “Violet DMZ”, like the wildlife that grows recklessly in abandoned no-mans-lands, springing from the ground upon which it is barely safe to tread and where life nonetheless rudely flourishes. The shadow-lands of striated firs are seen almost as though through the smeared glass of a passing vehicle in “DMZ Sepia”. Appended to the top right hand corner of both landscapes are images in miniature of their former plenitude, sketches traced in crude lines, lavender and terracotta respectively. The sketches seem in their very sparseness somehow to speak of a lost abundance, of what were once sloping hills and carefully tended arable lands, perhaps still recuperable, like a memory hovering on a horizon not yet gone. This possibility of recuperation is most beautifully figured in “Accidental Paradise of DMZ” where a grey foreground is marked by the tracks and prints of a presence not long gone, and a band of brilliant emerald green flashes across the middle of the canvas like a promise, sheltered under a sandy sky. The shadowy grey-black firs in the foreground seem almost to ripple and eddy. By “DMZ”, the accrued glaciers, fogs and grey mountains are recognizable tropes, but now layered behind the phantom of a deer-like creature, trusting and tentative, stepping vulnerably into the foreground of the image, the faintest trace of something childlike, unwounded, still wondering.

Infancy acquires a different accent in “Points and Lines in an Age of Terror” when the regal frame of a sphinx is positioned in opposing direction to the silhouette of a child’s cartoon character: a blurry Oriental mystique facing off an indistinct Disney. Impishness sits alongside innocence, as does menace with mystery, but in Lloyd’s cunning construction the crosscurrents surface, become apparent, beguiling and bewildering. Ancient Egyptian riddles reveal themselves as childish as Disney characters are sinister. This commercialized childhood, Lloyd suggests, offers new auguring mysteries and monstrous deities of its own kind. The menace of modernity preoccupies Lloyd, and is replayed in his repeated figurations of the Paramount insignia, the star-circled mountain so familiar that the big screen simulacra seems almost to have eclipsed and occluded any real sense we might have of melted ice caps and eroded mountainsides. For Lloyd, the intrusion of simulacra is metaphorised/realized in the form of an actual intruder, a shadowy figure, variously luminously green and blue, looming in a doorway, a silently present danger but also the vaguest indication of a human sensibility capable of acknowledging the derelictions for which it is responsible. In all of these works, there is muted jeopardy and ungentle beauty, and by Lloyd’s insistence, they are uncoupled and inseparable in the grey twilight.