

Opinion

Breaking Up is Hard to Do

By Jennifer Landes

(05/15/2007) An exhibit of Nuala Clarke's "Breakup Paintings," at the Boltax Gallery on Shelter Island is tricky stuff. It's the kind of theme that can send many of us running for the hills (or at least turn back from the ferry), wary of some overblown, sticky emotional retching that erupts from a brush onto canvas, like a Tracey Emin installation in paint.

There is, undoubtedly, some of that in the mix here, but these 13 paintings stand well on their own as accomplished nonobjective abstraction. It's the context that gives the viewer a way in and adds more resonance.



"Breakup 5" by Nuala Clarke

The dissolution of a relationship can be emotionally devastating, like a death where both parties live on. Some, even years afterward, have the power to haunt with some trivial reminder acting as a blunt instrument of momentary relapsed torture. But eventually, and in some cases immediately, the glimmer of new possibilities with freedom emerges.

Here, Ms. Clarke, who suffered the breakup of a 12-year partnership with Jimmie James, lost not only her lover, but her creative partner as well. Mr. James, who is also a painter, and Ms. Clarke spent some of their time together painting on the same canvas, even at the same time for a period. The artists painted and showed their work together until March 2006 when their last exhibit was in a gallery in Chelsea. It was then that they also broke up.

Ms. Clarke tried to paint again, but only came up with false starts. It was not until she realized she had to work through the emotions she was experiencing, addressing them directly in her art, that she could move on.

And here they are, painted between last August and January, a dark night of the soul confronting the recklessness and excitement of liberation. Painted at some remove from the rawer emotions at the beginning of the process, the colors are deep, but in the flatness of acrylic. This was a good choice. Oil's depth and glossy prettiness would have been too much for these works.



"Breakup 4" by Nuala Clarke

In most cases, the gallery has lighted the work intensely, even in an already bright space, but with a satisfying result. The paint, even the greenish blacks and beiges, seems more alive and palpable. The artist often paints in layers that reveal themselves intermittently through the darker or thicker overlays.

Red and hot orange expose themselves consistently through the first eight paintings. Sometimes they are rectangular patches or round blotches the artist refers to as "holes." "Breakup 1" is composed of large swaths of swampy green and black with a crackle of red emerging in patches like an interior wound.

The second work is predominantly taupe painted over orangey red. Just off-center, a precarious stack of black patches stands like a towering Jenga game. The early works vary between vertical and horizontal emphasis, feeling rural and open in some examples and tighter and urban in others. Each is titled Breakup with a corresponding number.

Only two are subtitled. Number 8 is called "dirt on your hands and dirt on my hair" and has a corresponding muddiness in the lower portion and a patchwork of atmosphere in the upper reaches. A dark blue orb or "hole" feels like an homage to Adolph Gottlieb in the top portion, a black sun or soul rising.

The second subtitled painting, "Breakup 9 (nov 22, 2005)" from 2006 has all of the patchwork of paint swatches that the other works display, but seems more familiar as a landscape or allusion to a waterfront. The layers this time are expansive and the overall feeling is more open and inviting even in the overwhelming grayness. It feels like the sea or a scene from memory Ms. Clarke is trying to piece back together.

This painting appears to act as catharsis, allowing new compositions to emerge in its wake. "Breakup 10" has a slightly Rothko-like layering with light breaking in whiteness along the horizon between a smoky atmosphere, giving a sense of possible transcendence.

The next paintings also tend to be more open and "Breakup 12" has a cleansing wash feel to it.

"Breakup 13," the last painting of the series, is ambivalent. Darkness is still prevalent, but it is now tinged with lighter shades of gray. Here there is no Hollywood happy ending where an earnest Luke Wilson shows up and makes everything go away. This denouement is a truer reflection of life where good days can follow average days, but bad days may be just as common.

