

“WHAT LASKER NEEDS IS A TEN-FOOT BALLPOINT PEN AND A GIANT FELT-TIP MARKER!”

— David Urban

pseudo-humiliating grapplings with the past, the colours she will allow herself (often selected from Margaret Walch's *Color Source Book*, a “decorator’s reduction and codification of the colours used by the great painters”), the number of old-master layers she will permit (three to seven), the size of the brushes she will use, how thick or thin her pigments will be, and so on, (“I don’t want to make aesthetic decisions while I paint”), Tap then goes about painting over her chosen drawings, getting it wrong, flipping the slides, trying again, getting it wrong, until, rubbed into being by these methodological abrasions, her own unstoppable paintings blossom like fruit trees, rise like a Phoenix from the ashes of her avowed intentions. As Robin Laurence put it (in this magazine), with a cool detachment not incongruent with Tap’s methods, “Her adjustments seem to be purely aesthetic, and the aesthetic pleasure of looking at these works poses an intentional contradiction to their conceptual premise.” “Is newness really possible in painting?” Tap asks. “If it is, maybe newness now resides simply in the way things connect or overlap.” Given the controlled uncertainties of her prescribed practice as a painter, Tap is (paradoxically) certain of one thing: “The continuous death of painting doesn’t seem to be much of an issue anymore.”

David Urban would agree with Tap’s conclusion, but emphatically not with her methods. “We’re all trying to find our own tools,” acknowledges Urban, for whom the death of painting is not just a meaningless concept, but rather more like a noxious, self-cancelling trope. “I feel that my task as a painter is to progress into painting,” Urban tells me, “and not so much into myself.” As he remarked to David Moos in a dialogue published in *David Urban: Parts of a World* (Art Gallery of Peel,

1998), “I’ve come to believe that it’s just a really presumptuous attitude to have, to stand at this point in time and to assume that in fact we are posed at the end of time, that we have some kind of definitive knowledge of what has happened with art and what’s happening to it.”

Urban’s paintings of the past few years have carefully evolved from works like *Applewood Hills* (1997)—where the artist’s vagrant conduits and thoroughfares of paint wander, as David Moos put it (in *ART/TEXT*, winter 1998), “Like trackless new roads across land earmarked for a subdivision”—to his current works, which have shown what Mark Cheetham calls (in the *Parts of a World* catalogue) an “increasing concern for a Cézannesque facture as a matrix for his bold linear inscriptions.” Painting, for David Urban, is increasingly an “act of recovery,” in which what is recovered is recovered from the endlessly usable richness of art history.

Urban admires Jonathan Lasker’s paintings—the big brazen ones as well as the chewy, minuscule studies—because he feels Lasker (whom he calls the Clyfford Still of his generation) has invented, as Still did, a meta-language for painting, a new paradigm, a way of expressing “a great idea about painting and an almost obsessive, fetishistic idea about how to carry that idea out, right to the bitter end.” He feels in them a sense of their “deliberate positioning... that they’re meant for the grand statement and are conceptualized that way.” The big Laskers, Urban contends, never embody a sense that this is “merely the private realm writ large. They succeed in that they are all about privateness and how that is made almost cinematic. And the big paintings are a betrayal of the studies on only one level: the mark-making is not as interesting. What Lasker needs, Urban suggests affectionately, “is a ten-foot ballpoint pen and a giant felt-tip marker!”

Unlike many of his contemporaries, Urban is unperturbed by the very idea of the grand statement. For him, a painting is a place to be and to work, rather than a theatre for what he calls, disparagingly, “propositions and strategies” about art-making. “When I go into a painting,” he tells me, “I’m sort of in its *thrall*. And it’s not so much about me—but about what’s happening in that painting.” For a painting to work, Urban contends, you have to believe in it, and in the history of art. And so for Urban, unlike many of his contemporaries—for whom the qualities of belief in painting and its long, private, tattered, tortured, sexist, obscurantist trajectory are sometimes strained, sometimes ironized, often furtive—there is little place in any serious painting practice for anything less than an art that “speaks to fundamental human conditions.”

And how, precisely, do you get to that particular podium? You can step up and adjust the mike, as Urban has, I suppose. Or you can circle it warily, with yellowing eyes, waiting and watching for your main chance. Which is what most of us do. ■