

Christian Malycha
Hard-boiled Painting

*Sad, sad Town, very sad Town
In the burning Desert ...*

Colosseum LOST ANGELES

Far removed from any of the popular culture industry distortions of the sunny, 'happy-go-lucky, joie-de-vivre' dream factory that is Hollywood, Los Angeles has a nightmarish side. Its dark blossoms flourished in the countless hard-boiled detective stories and pulp novels that have emerged since the onset of the Great Depression in 1929. And with the advent of *film noir*, a genre known for its steely coldness, steamy sentimental haze and sizzling semidarkness, it similarly found its way into the major studios. For too great were the ruptures, too delightfully opaque the entanglements between the seemingly perfect world of the chic and sophisticated and the rough and shady reality of everyday life in the recession to pass up the chance for a good novel or film. As the sprawling expanse of Ed Ruscha's *EVERY BUILDING ON THE SUNSET STRIP* reveals, Los Angeles – that ideal of a city wrested from the desert and raised on ideals pushing reality ever closer to oblivion – is first and foremost a façade,¹ a flashy backdrop of a place, or, as Patricia Highsmith called it, "the most soulless city".² Yet it always depends on where you're standing – on the sunny side of the street, or in some run-down back lane.

Either way, gleam and gloom must necessarily go hand in hand, for without the darkness, brightness would no doubt pale, and in the absence of light, darkness would be far less abysmal, less disquieting. Billy Wilder once commented in an interview that this indissoluble Manichaeian 'chiaroscuro' of the imaginary and everyday worlds was able to capture the peculiarity of the Californian atmosphere; aided and abetted by Raymond Chandler's hard-boiled prose, it actually became a genre of literature and film in its own right. In painting there have been far fewer instances of this brand of independent West-Coast art. There have always been outstanding painters based in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, ranging from Clifford Still through to Raymond Pettibon. To date, however, David Hockney, working in the 1960s, has been the only painter to focus extensively on California. In all the hedonistically vain sunshine, he painted the fine cracks and flaws in the façades of the bungalows and faces of the inhabitants; beneath the bluest of skies he let exuberantly stifling streaks smear the wordless, or rather soulless, emptiness of Los Angeles's suburban pools and sexual fantasies trickle onto his pictures like droplets of water. However, Hockney's approach was without the hardened vehemence of Chandler whose "hard-boiled idiom"³, situated between stylised

¹ Edward Ruscha, "Every Building on the Sunset Strip. Los Angeles", New York 1966.

² Patricia Highsmith, "Introduction", in *The World of Raymond Chandler*, ed. Miriam Gross, (New York: A & W Publishers, 1977), p. 2.

³ Miriam Gross, "Preface", *ibid.*, p. IX.

formal language and the crude language of the street, had provided such fertile ground for *film noir*.

Expressionist filmmakers and technicians were not the only ones to emigrate from Germany to America in the 1930s and seamlessly continue their groundbreaking influence on filmmaking in exile. There were also a number of directors, authors, screenwriters and set designers who brought with them to Hollywood the cool sobriety and incisive gaze of *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity). *Film noir* oscillated between these two poles. On the one hand there was the ebulliently expressive lighting with a harsh chiaroscuro of glaring brightness and shadow or the idiosyncratic camera angles and wildly slanted, fragmentary compositions, and on the other hand an unsentimental gaze, an emphatic brutality of portrayal and a hard-hitting realism; in one respect there was formal alienation and on the other the sinister, menacing metropolis, with its rainy streets, squalid hotels and bars, seedy nightclubs, untold secrets, affluent bigotry, bawdy simplicity, a deceptively alluring *femme fatale* and, amid all the shadiness, a disconcerting sense of inescapable unease.⁴ Then to top it all off was the perpetual question of “What happened?”

It is here in the bright halflight cast by the brutal culturedness and opulent harshness of film noir that Anne Hoenig's paintings reside. Indeed, when it comes to her at once 'hard-boiled' and wistful work, we might justifiably speak of a kind of Californian *painting noir*. In myriad variations Hoenig unfolds pictorial situations which can be as disturbing and distant as they are lascivious and sensual. They are strange pictorial interiors in which she typically lays or places solitary female figures either lightly or primly clad. As part of a protracted process of determining her motif she begins by producing drawings and sketches in which she tries out different gestures and postures. These are then reproduced by models whom she photographs, later using these photographic 'fixations' as points of departure for her painterly 'liberations'. Clearly many of the poses are covertly or overtly drawn from cinema. Even though it may be unconscious, her images always stem from other images. The hard cinematic realism is joined by borrowings from and references to Titian and Caravaggio, Rubens, Rembrandt, Velázquez and Vermeer through to Edward Hopper, Christian Schad or Lucian Freud. Hoenig continually combines a plethora of characters, dismantles and fractures well-known poses or cross-fades them to make new ones. In addition to the realistic sharpness of her observation and painterly expression, Hoenig incorporates a good degree of suspense in her work which lends the images a mood less unambiguous than it is apprehensive. What might have happened or be going to happen remains unresolved. Situated somewhere in between an event anticipated and its failure or refusal to be fulfilled, the images remain transfixed in a state of baffling suspense.

⁴ See for example Eva Sattlegger, *Film Noir und Hard-Boiled Fiction: Klassiker des Film Noir und ihre literarischen Vorgänger*, (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008) or Barbara Steinbauer-Grötsch, *Die lange Nacht der Schatten: Film noir und Filmexil*, (Berlin: Bertz + Fischer, 2005).

In the coolly balanced tension between her ruthless gaze and the exaltation of her motifs, Hoenig has spent the past few years creating her own unique 'hard-boiled idiom' in the medium of painting. As with *film noir*, the unease engendered by her 'chiaroscuro' of both painting and motif is inescapable – whichever way we turn, we find ourselves confronted by pictures. The female figures seem to turn up by chance. As though they just happened to be there alone, they act as if no one were looking at them, and, in a delicate kind of way, seem to be completely at one with themselves. Looking at the painting as a whole, however, they very much impose themselves on the viewer, or, rendered as close-up as they are, even expose themselves in their immediacy. Despite all the superficial self-exposure and vulnerability exhibited, the gaze is ever thwarted in its attempts at apprehension. Again and again it eludes us, rebounding off the figures, for in no way do they submit to the voyeuristic gaze. They are exposed, but not naked; individually characterised and strangely familiar, but anonymous; portrayed without compromise, they give nothing away. Thus left to their own devices, each one finds her proper place which is all that the gaze might see.

In *THE WATER'S EDGE*, for example, we see a woman vaguely redolent of Ophelia floating amid the folds of a red ruched dress and her flowing black hair. The 'watershed' can actually be discerned in the lower third of the picture insofar as the unusually positioned figure – depicted headfirst and lying on her back, her neck outstretched – immerses her closed eyes and forehead in the water. Yet the whole of her torso seems as though it has been draped there, much like the rustling folds of her dress and her tangled hair. The whole picture seems to well up here and there, only to recede, to lose itself again at the same time. An irresolvable state of relaxation and tension issues forth from both fabric and body, which, with the bared flesh leading from neck to collarbone as a hidden store of power, ornamentally floods the entire pictorial space, without our being able to tell how the scene actually came about – whether the woman, such a delicate sight with her glistening, open mouth, is offering herself in a sensual sense, or just simply lying there.

Added to that is the consciously raw application of paint which lends the whole painting a warm tonality and is imbued with emotional qualities. In the red, for example, there is a union of urgency and unfulfilled longing, of restraint and a soft but heavy encumbrance. Even the flesh tones are applied layer upon layer like skin, evenly shimmering as undulating colour texture in the same way as the dress. In *RECLINING NUDE* it is similar. The naked torso of the same woman can be seen reclining sideways on a sheet-covered bed; relaxed and calm, though she is tensely gripping the fabric, she lies entwined, so to speak, with the diagonal axis of the painting. Here, too, Hoenig obscures the plot by ornamenting the picture as a whole without paying heed to the distinctions in content between the various motivic elements. In order to keep the constant convolutions, the twisting and turning on the surface, she placed a triangle of parquetry in the upper right corner which, separated from the bed by a harsh line, goes some way towards repressing

the diagonal thrust of the picture. Here, once again, we come across intimate oppositions between hardness and softness, expansion and constraint, sinking and rising.

While we might be directly confronted with the different bodies, the pictures nevertheless keep us at arm's length with their slanted, unfamiliar frames. Indeed, their 'incomplete completeness' precludes us from discerning anything that might be going on beyond what is portrayed in the picture – and yet everything is assembled on the surface all the same. It is attention itself, then, that is framed and left with nothing but the pictorially immanent events to guide it. The women are not portrayed as such by Hoenig. They remain anonymous and apart. Indistinct, they meld with the things or pictorial spaces around them, although each one shows – on the basis of formal composition – her own specific character through her demeanour and pose in a manner perhaps reminiscent of Mallarmé's observation, as recounted by Paul Valéry, that "a dancer is not a woman who dances, because firstly she [is] not a woman and secondly she does not dance"⁵. For a painted woman is never merely a woman painted. If she is to acquire any form of independent existence within the picture, she has to become a pure *pictorial figure*, no less, whose effect draws equally on the interplay of every available pictorial device. In this way, the bodies themselves become ornamental features amid the surrounding undulations and convolutions whereby *THE WATER'S EDGE* and equally *RECLINING NUDE* appear as images at the boundary of solidifying and melting, or of tensing and resting.

It is astonishing the way Hoenig uses the extraordinary realism of her painting as a formal device to unify the pictures. All the precision of observation and modelling, the equally captivating sharpness of object and figure, of space and detail attest to an abstractly ornamental approach which, in spite of the close proximity of the spectator, pushes any form of event or plot towards the periphery of perception. Face to face with Hoenig's pictures, it is impossible to come up with any definite answer to the question of "What happened?". Indeed, her pictures are more inclined to call for a reformulation of the question which might better read "What is going on here and with every fresh glance anew?". At no point does a readable plot emerge. Rather the pictures find their fulfilment in the continual transformation of the seemingly random pictorial events defining their appearance; they expand real time and preclude any form of coherent plot. Their fulfilment lies in their captivatingly unfulfilled inbetweenness.

This being the case, it is impossible to say where the woman smoking in *BACKLIGHT* might be, or what might have led to her frontally depicted introspection. The immutability and resoluteness of her turning away corresponds

⁵ Paul Valéry, *Tanz, Zeichnung und Degas*, (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1996), p. 19. See also Stéphane Mallarmé, "Ballets", in: *Œuvres complètes*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), p. 304: "A savoir que la danseuse n'est pas une femme qui danse, pour ces motifs juxtaposés qu'elle n'est pas une femme, mais une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur etc., et qu'elle ne danse pas, suggérant, par le prodige de raccourcis ou d'élan, avec une écriture corporelle."

to the counter-striving light situation. The picture presents as airy and bright, glistening and enshrouding the body. Yet the face, covered by a cigarette-toting hand, is illuminated and the overcoat shimmers and reflects as though it were permeated by light from the depths of the painting's ground. Here, realism is primarily a formal effect. The dramatic lighting sources from an unnatural, but all the more painterly device whereby the stark chiaroscuro is transformed into an artistic intermediate light that knows neither light nor shadow, neither day nor night, and the coolly painted body dissolves in countless flows of light. Contrasted with the picture as a whole, the hand held in front of the face enacts a kind of sub-scene which draws to it any gaze looking for something to go on and insistently confronts us with the picture's defiance, its refusal to rescind its mysteriousness and aloofness. Similarly, the simple gesture of the woman hiding behind her handbag in *THE ONE IN THE HALLWAY*, as though she were shielding herself from the gaze of the viewer, both awakens and frustrates our desire to be able to look behind these visual façades.

In *ANATOMY LESSON* the objects themselves appear as characters and seem to act without actually being linked together with any narrative coherence. Hoenig's gaze is oppressively realistic, although it does not pass comment. The scene with the woman hunched into an armchair with her face turned away from the viewer seems dramatic and violent yet there is no 'real' drama as such. Everywhere we look we come across isolated 'clues' such as the whisky glass or the tall lamp with its unmistakable symbolism. Yet none of these is granted any further illumination or fulfilment. It is an 'apparent illusionism', a shifting light on the twisted body of her subject, that Hoenig uses in order to draw the woman – pictured turning away – nearer to the grain of the table, the stripes on the chair's upholstery, the spotted curtains and the rolling carpet. While the title of the painting might suggest a possible reading or appear to 'name' the pictorial event, the way the figure delivers herself up while simultaneously huddling up against the chair, withdrawn and introspective, leaves unresolved the question of other potential allusions, such as Rembrandt's *Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, or perhaps a reading of Philip Roth⁶. The way the woman is very much alone with herself, with her pain, exhaustion or some emotional build-up, leaves the image ambivalent; it presents as little more than a hazy notion – irrespective of how sensuously the curves and arches of her body are rendered and how much erotic tension might be manifest between her body and the somewhat obscenely posturing lamp stand.

In regarding the self-sufficient introspection of this figure, we gain an awareness of the extent to which all of Hoenig's figures are shrouded in their own specific secrets – secrets that Hoenig unfolds like opulent fabric in the brightly fanning light of *TRIPTYCH*, *RESTING SLEEPWALKER* or *YELLOW LAMP* while at the same time unequivocally covering them up again with the same. The events in the pictures are *pictorial* events: *TRIPTYCH* comes alive in spite of the green-grey *verdaccio-grisaille* of the skin; the reclining figure in *RESTING SLEEPWALKER* lies outstretched

⁶ Philip Roth „The Anatomy Lesson“, London 1996.

like the light of the comet tail by her side; or the uprising in *YELLOW LAMP* whose plausibility in fact hinges on the violent stylisation and which plunges the whole image into a brutally sensuous frenzy.

The wooden, wallpaper-like fire and its blazing reflections on the door frame in *FIRE* also meld with the fatal composure of the backwards glance cast by the woman in the glimmering leopard print fur coat, as though, much like the casually held cigarette, our memories of our own past were going up in smoke. And once again our gaze is brought to a standstill in the face of an inscrutable 'threshold figure'. Offering little more than an inkling, albeit of the most beautiful kind, the figure causes our imagination to leap back and forth between the fiery light and its reflections. All of this is joined by Hoenig's enthusiasm for the seductiveness of materiality and corporeality – whether it be hair, a thigh or shimmering ankle, a necklace upon a bare neck or a prominently placed pair of stilettos – which she adeptly produces from pure paint matter as can be seen, for example, in *THE TRIUMPH OF TRUTH*. And the same can be said of her assiduous incorporation of art history as is the case with Caravaggio in *ENTOMBMENT OF CHRIST*, though her approach is more gentle and lacks the harshness of Caravaggio's insistent chiaroscuro.

It is the different shades and the resolute half-light which bring Anne Hoenig's paintings to bear. Amid the greatest disconcertions, amid the cosily seamy idyll and criminal inklings we might have it is the harshness, the dramatic stylisations and formal alienations which point to the fact that the scenes we find before us are in no way real. Rather, we must first withstand the opaqueness and diffuseness if we are to arrive at the idiosyncratic pictorial figures, at the essence of painting itself. And as hardened and wistful, as hard-boiled and sumptuous as it might be, suddenly even the unreal 'seems' all the more captivating and, most notably, all the more real: *Hard-boiled Painting*.