

## Anna Keen

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For Anna Keen - Roughly ten years ago, before the exhibition with which Anna established her relationship with the Polittico, I went to visit her studio and stuck my nose in among the still fresh paintings, trying to sniff out whatever it was in this work that had seemed to me immediately to be fragrant and strangely perfumed. Of course there was only one real smell: turpentine, which the artist used unsparingly and which had impregnated the room; a smell to which I am so accustomed, being a painter myself, that it makes me feel at home. As an older painter I would have liked to offer Anna some advice, if only to satisfy my amour-propre, but faced with Anna's work the only possible advice would have been to recommend the use of an odourless turps, a discovery which today allows us to paint even in our bedrooms.



To this day, if I think of Anna's work, even if I see it in reproduction or better still directly in an exhibition, I feel that it sets in motion an olfactory perception that I can only describe as unusual. No other painted work stimulates this sort of perception in me; it is a mysterious mental intimation which in my experience is specifically tied to the paintings and subjects which Anna paints.

The urban landscapes which she showed us in that first personal exhibition in Italy answered to a unifying theme: the gates of Rome, collected in a series of views of great visual impact and of great pictorial and poetic maturity.

No legitimate advice can be offered when the works in front of us have that stamp of communicative completeness, which at one time would have been labeled 'intriguing'. Confronted with something that holds the attention, stimulates curiosity, and involves the viewer emotionally, one must enjoy it and show appreciation of it, and try to understand it and render it intelligible, perhaps in order to allow others to participate in one's own cognitive experience.

Among the various sensations which that visit left with me, the most striking was that I had found myself in front of a painter who had discovered the secret of turning smells into visual facts.

Anna paints the sweat of the city on hot, humid and cold days, the sweat of its walls after the rain, or of its asphalt or cobbled streets which smoke in the morning fogs and afternoon mists. She paints the tastes and smells of the architecture, which soften and lose definition in the air, together with the tepid warmth that the surfaces exhale.

Strips of distant lights appear behind the buildings; atmospheres by turns livid red and desolate, from airs swelling with rain, split the scene with a transverse ray of sunlight: backlit transparencies somewhere between haze and smog.

If the wet earth becomes a precise pictorial fact, then also its strong odour seems to become a visual fact: odours and perfumes which are perceived not with the nose but with the eye.

Our Scottish friend spent several years in Italy, exercising her eye in committing monuments, contemporary architecture and landscapes to memory. Gifted with exceptional skills of draughtsmanship, she filled notebooks with quick but highly efficient sketches; she drew also on train journeys and even in cars, catching on the hop a detail of the landscape and buildings which flitted in front of her.

After a long stay in Venice she showed, in another personal exhibition at the Polittico, the works which she had produced living next to and looking at the lagoon. All the dampness of Venice seemed to be painted into those works, together with the vapours of the canals and the wet pavements of the Venetian alleys, the sweat of working people, the moist, cloudy skies in constant struggle with the rays of the sun which open sudden paths through the greyness, feeding the foggy vapours with light.

Following these bracing stays in Italy, Anna returned to her own land and painted other views, with other humidities, other odours and vapours. But, a good while having passed, she has decided to show us more Roman views, painted not, as when she was in Italy, from direct experience, but perhaps using instead her numerous notebooks and her prodigious visual memory.

Having seen some reproductions of these new works, I would venture that something very curious has happened, but I would like to see this notion confirmed by looking at the works in exhibition.

These paintings of Italian subjects set down in Scotland have turned out to be more faithful to our atmosphere than those painted in Italy ten years ago. At that time Anna showed us views of Rome with an entirely northern eye and sensibility: the critic Marco Di Capua, concluding his presentation in the catalogue, wrote: "Anna contemplates this boundless Rome as if she were still looking at the wide open sea beyond the cliffs of her British isle."

Today it seems as if the memory of and perhaps nostalgia for her Italian journey have transformed the eye of the painter who, in the midst of her fogs, has gone back to painting Roman views with Mediterranean sunniness and light and smells, with a more mature and more Mediterranean eye than ten years ago.

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