

Anna Keen

Edward Lucie-Smith

Views of Rome, specifically of Roman ruins and classical buildings within the city, first established themselves as a separate artistic category towards the end of the 17th century, though it is possible to point to examples that occurred long before that. In painting subjects of this kind Anna Keen is reviving a tradition that never quite died out, though it did become somewhat attenuated when the Modern Movement was at its most triumphant.



Yet these paintings – both seductive and witty in their approach to familiar subject matter – are clearly not pastiches of a way of looking at things that has had its moment. The Italian and foreign painters who specialized in this category of subject-matter during the 18th century shared with their patrons an enthusiasm for the Roman imperial past that now seems a little naïve. There was no doubt about the meanings their images were meant to convey – not only nostalgia for the grandeurs of an epoch that seemed the direct ancestor of their own culture, but an affirmation of the supreme value of a classical education. Appreciation of paintings of this sort marked the spectator off as a man of knowledge and sophistication, a cut above the rest.

Anna Keen offers an oblique view. She portrays the ruins of Rome, and paints some relatively modern monuments as well, chief among them the white wedding cake of the Vittoriano, which honors the first king of a united Italy. This was conceived in 1895. Construction began in 1911 and not completed until 1925. Some people still regard it as the greatest desecration ever visited on the delicate architectural fabric of Rome. Keen, however, portrays it as a cozily familiar presence – not ruined as yet, but with ambitions to share the fate of the Colosseum or the Baths of Diocletian.

These carefully selected architectural images – ancient and less so – she presents as paintings that are really little shrines, often taking the form of miniature altarpieces. The conceit opens up a whole series of intellectual and emotional perspectives, as well as purely physical ones. Because the altarpieces open and shut, we actually do see what is depicted from different points of view.

Meanwhile the sacred associations of the form requires us to consider both our own cult of ideas inherited from the past, and also the difference between our own contemporary approach to these concepts and the approach that might have prevailed in the heyday of the 18th century grand Tour.

Tourism – traveling to see, traveling to learn – is in fact an important, though half-hidden aspect of the subject-matter of this exhibition. The pictures put the monuments of Rome into quotation marks. They remind us that we can never see them naively, on their own and for their own sake. We bring to them complex preconceptions, and equally complex expectations, though we are often not fully conscious of this.

Anna Keen's charming, deliciously elegant pictures carry within themselves a surprisingly complex weight of cultural commentary. They ask us questions about how we really regard the past. And sometimes the answers can be just a little disturbing. Not that this makes them less enjoyable. Oddly enough, disturbance adds a pleasurable edge to what we are looking at – the real view, and the painted one.

Consolations and Desolations of Rome

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