

Sue Kennington

Sue Hubbard

The sun beating down on earth and stone, bleaching the lines of washing strung out to dry across narrow mediaeval streets, creating deep shadows on a lime-washed wall - the intensity and clarity of Italian light is woven into our understanding of Western visual culture. From Cimabue and Duccio to Giotto a handful of painters from Tuscany were to change the way we understand and respond to light and colour. That Sue Kennington, despite an MA from that most conceptual of art schools, Goldsmiths, has made a remote part of rural Tuscany her permanent home, is evidence of how deeply rooted her art is in this Italian sensibility. The views around Siena, near where she lives, still look much like the rural scenes in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's quattrocento fresco, *The Allegory of Good and Bad Government*, with its soft blue and pink hues, to be found in Siena Town Hall. Unlike the later, more naturalistic art of Florence, there's a mystical streak to much Siennese art. Duccio – the Siennese master - created tender, often dreamlike paintings that explore depth, space and a sense of the divine through colour.

Sue Kennington's work is an investigation into what light and colour can do within contemporary painting. Although she comes from a family of painters – she is the great niece of Eric Kennington (1888-1960), known for his portraits and First World War pictures – she is a late-comer to the practice, having previously worked in theatre design. There light was an essential part of her vocabulary. The move to Italy, after the conceptual rigours of Goldsmiths, allowed her to put a distance between herself and the hard-boiled irony that prevailed during her time as a student. Moving away from her earlier gestural paintings that flirted with bravura, celebratory mark-making in the vein of Bert Irving and Gillian Ayres, her surfaces have flattened and simplified to create veils and skins of subtle fresco-like colour. Touch, geometry and self-devised systems are combined with the random to create an essentially romantic and expressive language. In her recent painting *Rough Cut*, diamond forms created from thin veils of gold over black paint hover above a grid of soft earthy pinks and browns. There is

something of Sean Scully's sensibility here, where the ragged edges of the rectangles reveal the layer of under painting like a glimpse of a hidden domain. This gives a sense of space and distance, as if a curtain is being lifted to reveal a limitless void. The Renaissance view that a painting was a window onto the world is suggested by implication.

This sense of something 'beyond' is there even more strongly in *Paradiso*, where two blue arches seem to draw apart to lead through to a space in another dimension. While not a direct reference, there is an implicit nod to Piero della Francesca's 1445 *Madonna della Misericordia* with her embracing outstretched cloak, and to the open blue dress of his 1459 *Madonna del Parto*. While Kennington is not making religious paintings, as such, this oblique reference to the blue of the Virgin suggests the struggle, within a postmodern vocabulary, to find ways of expressing what cannot easily be expressed and of reaching towards what is, ultimately, unreachable.

By immersing herself in the light and solitude of rural Italy, Sue Kennington has been able to distance herself from the brittle vocabulary of Goldsmiths, whilst still having a keen awareness of contemporary debates about the nature of painting. This has resulted in a body of work that is entirely her own - full of a subtle insight and authenticity.

Sue Hubbard is an award-winning poet, novelist and freelance art critic living in London.