

MIRROR MIRROR

Followers of Stephen Chambers and of his painting odyssey over the last forty years will be aware of the ambitious scale of successive projects consisting of groups of paintings organised in terms of theme, genre or the history and geography of specific cultures, real or imagined. With ‘The Court of Redonda’ (2017) Chambers appointed himself the Court Painter for an imaginary society, producing more than 100 portraits of Redondan courtiers representing a range of functions and vocations. With ‘Berlin Flowers’, he has replaced portraits of the friends with whom he kept company during the period after the Covid lockdown with what might be thought of as their avatars in the form of flower vases. Each friend loaned Chambers a vase, which he then stocked with local, seasonal flowers. The resulting installations bear a close formal resemblance to one another, but provide scope for endless variation in the choice of shape and design of the vase, as well as the properties and characteristics of the flowers. Across the whole series, the permutations are virtuosic.

What we are seeing in these paintings are the traces of a gift economy, of a social network that is not regulated by economic exchange, or by any equivalent obligation, but one that is woven together by an exchange of gifts, one that expresses appreciation for the ties of friendship and common endeavour. It offers a contemporary parallel to the informal exchanges of the classical symposium—the drinking party in which the exchange of ideas is valued more highly than the distribution of material benefits. The symposiastic exchange is itself the vehicle of friendship to which no material value can be directly assigned. And the media in which these social values were most commonly and continuously depicted were the painted surfaces of the pitchers, vases and drinking cups that survive in great quantities from the archaic and classical periods of ancient Greece. From the 8th century BC to at least the 4th century BC, tableware was the most important medium for painting. At the beginning of that period, depictions of the human figure were highly stylized; by the end of it, representations of humanity were much more realistic but still flattened and generic in expression. Chambers has painted several portraits of individuals over the years but he is more engaged by representations of humanity as agents and patients of social and cultural formations. His work is stylistically indebted to black- and red-figure vase painting, but conceptually influenced by the great tableaux of public interaction composed during the zenith of Italian city-state life in the Trecento and Quattrocento. (The wall-painting schemes by the Lorenzetti Brothers in the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena spring to mind.)

Chambers’s human figures are unmistakeably social beings, and in several of his large-scale projects they form crowds. But during lockdown, the streets were empty, the crowds simply melted away. Chambers was living in Berlin, where the absence of people from the streets would have been especially striking. During this period of scarce interaction, the exchange of gifts would have had greater meaning and value than ever, especially the gift of a vase. It is not simply that the vase itself has become the medium of a gift economy—because it also brings with it a responsibility: the responsibility of nurture. The exchange is nurturing friendship at a time of precarity, but also encouraging the nurture of flowers, technically dead if their stems have been cut, but managing a kind of afterlife if the stems are in water.

There is something of an art historical parallel to this painterly response to the limbo-like condition of lockdown in the final paintings of Edouard Manet. Manet's slow decline left him more and more isolated and incapacitated, with the result that his final paintings are of the flowers left at his home by well-wishers. These cut flowers are depicted in various stages of deterioration, yet there is a strong sense of life clinging on to the last. Chambers's equivalent works are shadowed by the threat of isolation yet are much more clearly expressive of the resilience generated through friendship.

Nevertheless they are also speculative about the end of life, and the possibility of an afterlife—a significant departure for this most humane and convivial of artists. The series 'Obsidian Mirrors' revisits the Renaissance fascination with necromancy, placing its various bouquets of flowers either in front of, or to one side of, a black mirror, clearly juxtaposing their lingering vitality with this dark vacancy traditionally regarded as an important means of communicating with the spirits of the dead. In each painting in the series, one or more flower stalk is lying prone, on a shelf or tabletop, as if to emphasise that life has dried up and departed. Meanwhile the 'Black Mirror' portraits surround their subjects with black frames that evoke posthumous commemoration. Several of the portraits are specifically representations of 'reflections' of their subjects, as if to emphasize the elaborate indirectness of many communications during this time. It is important to remember how often we were meeting people on screen rather than in the flesh and to consider the effect this had on our sense of the social.

There are also portraits of the dead. Notable among these is the legendary musician Frank Zappa—one of the subjects in Chambers's 'Outliers' series that also includes Iggy Pop and Bonny 'Prince' Billy. All three are musicians who have delivered legendary performances in Berlin. The extension of the portraits to include posthumous subjects underlines the narrow margin between survival and demise during the Covid interval. Nothing could be more vivid and physically present than a Chambers painting, with its characteristically strong palette and emphatically delineated forms. And nothing could be more gregarious than an exhibition of these paintings, where the subjects are more often than not studying the viewers with as much intensity and insight as we the viewers bring to them. If lockdown prescribed survival in a diminished form of existence, Chambers's response was to enhance and expand the salvific power of painting. Berlin was once a divided city. But the Chambers version gives it a community united by art.

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