



JANET STAYTON
PICTURES WITHIN PICTURES

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Reframing the Classical: The Art of Janet Stayton

Tom Flynn



Few things are more exhilarating for an artist than discovering a fresh source of inspiration or stumbling upon a new way of working that promises to sustain the creative imagination over an indefinite period into the future. Such moments tend to arrive unbidden and can emerge from simple accident or happenstance. For Janet Stayton, it was nothing more complicated than moving into a spacious new studio in her adopted home town of Pietrasanta in Tuscany, Italy that triggered her most recent surge of creativity. The fruit of that happy occurrence is the significant new group of 15 paintings known as the Classic Series and an associated body of works on paper mined from her own archive of drawings and sketches, cut up, re-worked, and reconfigured.

Looking at the Classic Series, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a lot more going on than the relatively straightforward application of oil paint to a flat surface (although as any serious painter will tell you there is nothing straightforward about putting oil on canvas).

In the first instance, the surface of these paintings is not uniform or flat, but rather composed of applied layers, square or rectangular in shape on a canvas ground. On closer inspection, some of the layers turn out to be separate pieces of canvas, each individually painted and enclosed within a painted representation of its own decorative frame. Others seem to be made from a different material altogether - an artist's plaster or stucco, applied to the canvas and then painted or inscribed while still wet, not unlike a fresco technique. In many cases, the applied sections are very pronounced - such as the grey-green stucco frame in the work entitled *Impressionist* where it stands slightly proud of the surface of the canvas, lending a tough materiality to the picture plane.

The result of this innovative compositional approach - an assemblage of sorts - is a picture surface comprised of discrete compartments that create a sense of pictures within pictures.

There is more than a slight sculptural element to these new paintings - something approaching low relief. The surfaces are alive, not only with the vigorous impasto of oil paint and the traces of brushwork, but also with the deeply incised *sgraffito*-like pattern-making of a tool worked into the wet stucco, which often leaves a channel deep enough to capture light and cast shadow, adding another dimension to the surface of the canvas.

The patterns and rhythmical flourishes that decorate the internal frames are drawn from the familiar stock of historical ornament - 'S' scrolls, volutes, arabesques - that one sees in decorative mouldings in classical buildings and interiors. To these Stayton adds her own idiosyncratic vocabulary of ornamental forms - stylized fish motifs, human profiles, repeating friezes of trees and tree-lined avenues. Then there are the small classically-inspired panels, some in incised *grisaille*, others painted in colours, which include temples, boats on water, cypress trees, classical bridges, ruined columns, some shown drenched in Mediterranean sun, others bathed in moonlight.

One or two of the panels are reminiscent of ancient fresco, such as the luscious tazza of ripe oranges in the work entitled *By the River*, which is painted in such a way as to suggest the bleached out quality of Pompeian wall painting.

Some of the panels include a simple textual inventory of Stayton's favourite motifs, such as the inscribed list of words in *By the River*, as if the simple act of naming the visual representations might somehow anchor more firmly their reality in the picture, endorsing their significance as the sources of Stayton's inspiration.

Stayton is a master at referencing our shared imaginative

lower right an oil panel showing a figure in a landscape. Like many of the pictures, *The Lake* seems blithely and endearingly unconcerned with painterly exactitude. Stayton's concerns, like those we ascribe to Matisse and Giorgione, are more poetic, to do with the visual music created by mood, by what remains unspoken rather than by what is specified.

Nor is she afraid of repeating a motif in a single work, knowing that each is subtly different. It is as if the act of painting each one embodies a discrete experience which justifies their inclusion in the same canvas. The visual pleasure we get from this derives from the differences between each detail rather than from their similarity. We see this in the recurrence of drawn profiles of the human head that appear in a number of the Classic works. Stayton sees these as providing a human element to the compositions. "It's that line," she says, "I have to have it." One senses it has become a kind of compulsion to draw these graceful, serpentine profiles over and over again, like a visual mantra, but they also function as a conjoining element that lends continuity to the series.

The interplay between representation and reality is a constant source of pleasure in the Classic Series. The stucco panels - which occasionally suggest ceramic tiles (most notably in *Fishermen*) - draw attention to the slippage between real tiles and their simulated equivalent. Here they seem almost to have renounced their identity as pictorial devices to become, as it were, the 'Ding an sich', the self-affirming reality, of the picture's surface.

Stayton prefers not to plan the disposition of the panels that comprise each picture. "I just go," she says, thereby bringing greater spontaneity and immediacy to her approach, which in turn often results in surprising outcomes.

Stayton rarely paints from the motif, preferring to work from her sketches or from memory or imagination. The long Italianate tradition of the *veduta*, or view, is about the tension between reality, imagination and idealism. The tight specificity of Canaletto's detailed views of Venice, for exam-

ple, might lead us to read them as representations of reality. But in many cases, if one positioned oneself at the spot from which Canaletto seems to have painted the picture, one could not possibly see all the depicted buildings from that vantage point. Canaletto's facility was in making his manipulations seem natural and credible. Stayton's project is more akin to a kind of nostalgia. We do not read her Arcadian coastal scenes as representations of reality; instead they have a dream-like quality, albeit one seemingly grounded in our lived experience or inherited memory of the Mediterranean landscape.

Her interest in experimentation is demonstrated by the



inclusion of silver leaf in the work entitled *Silver* where it forms the background to the temple drawn to occupy the upper left quarter of the canvas. The silver also appears in the trees that sit alongside it and also in the sketchy temple form with profile at the lower half of the canvas. This is also the work that includes an oil panel - rendered with a crayon-like gusto - showing a lonely figure in a hat, carrying a stick and backpack walking along a tree-lined lane. It is an image more than a little reminiscent of Francis Bacon's expressive work known as *Homage to Van Gogh* of 1960 and it is also one of Stayton's most expressive works. Even the internal frames are painted with a refreshingly liberated looseness and yet the whole thing comes together through the underpinning architecture of the painting's geometrical structure.

If we move in and focus closely, we discover passages of thrilling abstraction here, such as the fallen temple pillar fragment in the lower left of *By the River* where the pillar has been laid down as a delicate wash of white over under-painted blues and pinks. It's a delicious moment.

Such is the technical and semantic richness of the Classic compositions, so broad the range of techniques and discrete motifs in each individual painting, that we are prompted into an *ekphrastic* engagement that is as much to do with naming as with looking.

Take, for instance, the canvas entitled *Fishermen*. The painting features two prominent panels in oil - one depicting the eponymous fishermen in a Derain-inspired moonlit landscape made of myriad dashes of turquoise and blue, the other showing a wooden bridge over the water with a temple in the background illuminated against a fiery sky. Elsewhere in the canvas we find a pale, bleached-out temple structure standing alone, almost as a decorative device rather than being pictorial in any conventional landscape sense. Above this is a small rectangular panel of scrolled volutes abutting against another horizontal band of pale, pinky orange tiles made from chalky stucco. Between these is another *grisaille* panel incised with a tree by the water with a

boat afloat beneath the moon drawn with a simple economical line. This is repeated again below in a pinky orange wash, where the tree and boat are rendered in childlike linear strokes. Beneath this is a drawing of fishermen on water in a landscape, also delivered as a spontaneous graphite sketch. At the base is another large grey horizontal stucco band of two fish flanked by two stylized human profiles, a motif repeated in a further vertical panel to the right. One the extreme left, the edge of the canvas is finished with a vertical stucco strip incised with cypress trees, more trees and a temple by the water.

This description is by no means exhaustive. I haven't mentioned the colour charts Stayton likes to include, or the frames around the oil panels which incorporate other ornamental scroll motifs. The whole is brought together by a dominant pinky grey palette punctuated by the two main painted canvases, which assert themselves through their Fauvist colours in contrast to the pale ambience elsewhere.

Stayton's canvases encourage us to engage in this process of description and itemization as the eye travels across the canvas, looking and reading both image and text, comparing and contrasting similar and different patterns and juxtapositions, recognizing and remembering symbolic devices, gauging and measuring real and fictive depth. It is a process that is as enriching across different canvases as within a single work and it is as rewarding in the works on paper as it is in the canvases.

The recent series of works on paper have been composed from elements cut and pasted from Stayton's own extensive archive of drawings and sketches created over many years. The decision to re-make and re-model these sketches into fresh works became an invigorating project for Stayton, allowing her to revisit the traces of previous experiences and breathe new life into them. They highlight Stayton's brilliant draughtsmanship and agile instinct for composition. The *papiers collés* technique she employs here reveals a delicacy and lightness of touch that sets up an interesting counter-

point to the Classic canvases. One senses a process of cross-pollination between the two creative disciplines, the cutting, pasting and re-working of the sketch archive providing a compositional testing-ground for the larger canvases, while standing as self-contained works in their own right.

The works on paper also offer an illuminating path back into earlier moments in Stayton's career. One can see here the progeny of the so-called 'Worksheet' project she initiated in 1975, which occasionally involved the use of string, canvas, etc., laid down alongside watercolour on the paper ground. These in turn seem to derive in part from the quasi-surrealist imagery that preoccupied her earlier in the 1970s, and particularly the so-called 'Desert Dreams' series eventually shown at the David Deitcher Gallery in New York in 1975. These dream-like desert scenes featured large striped stones set in a barren, lunar landscape. Did they perhaps evolve from her Japanese sojourn and her exposure to the formal aesthetic economy of Japanese gardens?

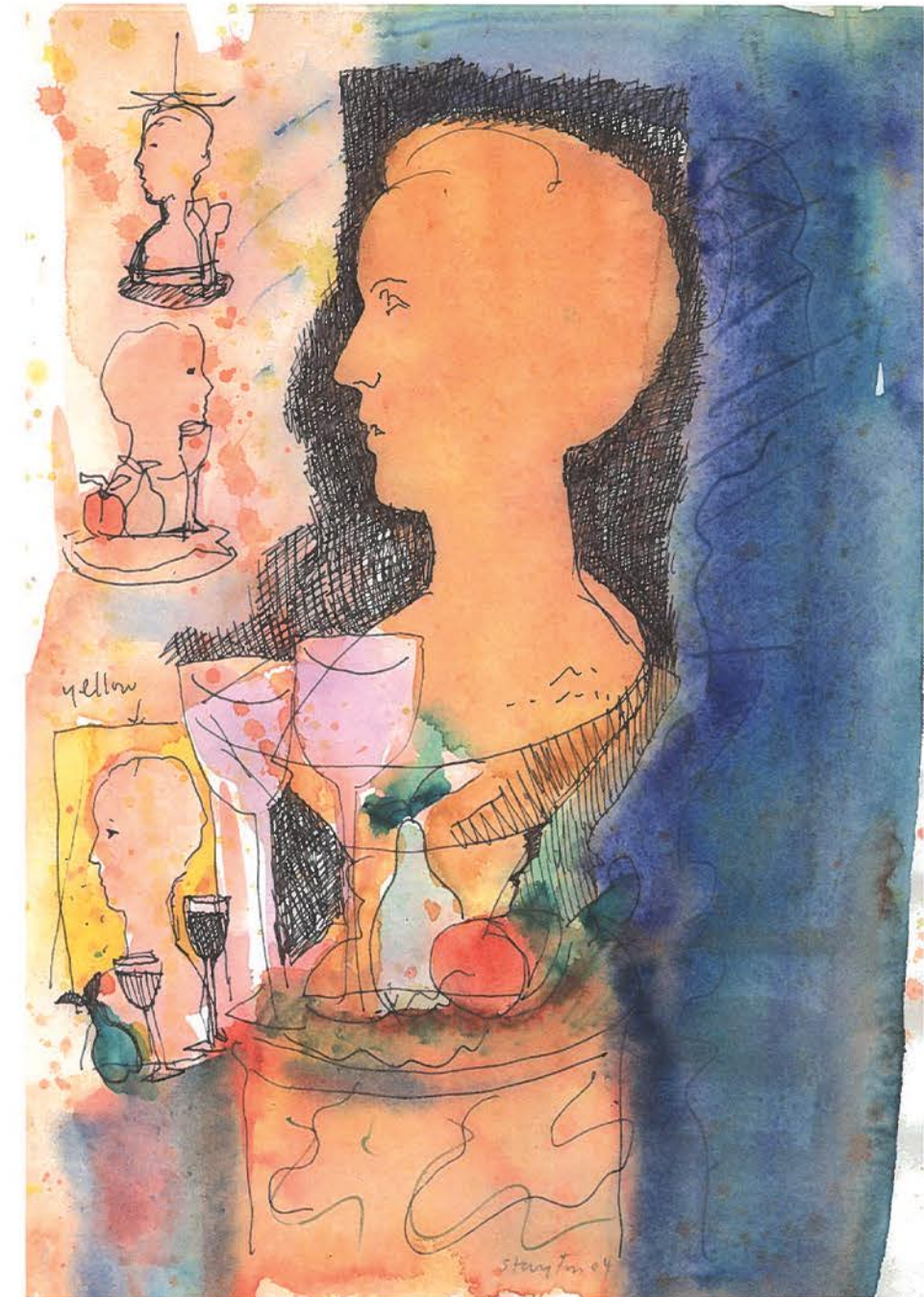
Stayton's graphic work also extends into printmaking. She has engaged with a broad range of print techniques over the years, experimenting with silkscreen, monotypes, etchings, drypoint, etc., each offering new ways of articulating her vision, investigating colour relationships, juxtaposing colour with form, and so on.

It was Maurice Payne, David Hockney's long-time printer and collaborator, who first prompted Janet into still life painting and with whom she produced some of her most successful print series. These include the bold monotype prints of the 1980s, which reveal Stayton drawing with a tool inside the painted surface, prefiguring the *sgraffito* technique she uses to such impressive effect in her recent work. The monotypes positively sing with colour. Through their use of trees, temples, and other ruined and abandoned buildings, the monotypes might be seen as a significant port of call en route to the Classic Series.

When viewed again in the light of the recent canvases, the monotypes and oils on canvas of 1983-86 - such as *Die*

Brücke I & II of 1985, *Veduta Siciliana* of 1983 and *Homage to Claude* of 1984 - emphasize Stayton's commitment both to historical landscape painting and to the early twentieth-century European avant gardes, particularly the French and German Expressionist schools - the Fauves, Die Brücke, and Der Blaue Reiter. She likes to emphasize how those pioneering painters "did all the hard work for us and so now we can just have that for free." But while the stylistic genealogy of these recent canvases may be anchored within the history of Western painting, their iconography unwittingly conjures more recent cultural coordinates as well. Notwithstanding its high-keyed palette, *Mustard Statue* of 1985, for example, rephrases the sense of existential loneliness exploited by French nouvelle vague filmmakers of the 1960s. Something of the *mise en scène* of Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* (1961) springs to mind.

It is always encouraging to encounter artists with a sense of art history, the more so because so many contemporary artists today seem ignorant and dismissive of earlier traditions. Stayton's interest in art history is best expressed through her paintings, which are the product of years of careful looking and a deep respect for the achievements of her art historical forebears. There is nothing *retardataire* in her approach, however. She lives in the present and looks to the future and her ability to synthesize the historical and the contemporary lends her work a particular energy and dynamism. Above all, the Classic Series reveals the enduring relevance of the classical tradition and how in Stayton's hands it has been made to resonate with a new vitality.





Janet Stayton - "Pictures Within Pictures"

Gian Luigi Corinto

"Esamina ora quest'altro punto. A quale di questi due fini è conformata l'arte pittorica per ciascun oggetto? A imitare ciò che è così come è, o a imitare ciò che appare così come appare? È imitazione di apparenza o di verità? - Di apparenza, rispose. - Allora l'arte imitativa è lungi dal vero e, come sembra, per questo eseguisce ogni cosa, per il fatto di cogliere una piccola parte di ciascun oggetto, una parte che è una copia".
Platone, Repubblica, 598 b.

La pinacoteca che Janet Stayton ha accumulato nella propria memoria sta dentro la cornice di ogni suo quadro, e ognuno dei lavori contiene la ricostruzione tenace di un paesaggio interiore. Per trovare il genio del proprio luogo, la Stayton si è spostata dal Mississippi di Natchez, dove è nata, a Pietrasanta, dove può respirare l'aria di cui ha bisogno per dipingere, un'aria che lei stessa ritiene essere il suo aiutante indispensabile e che spira dalle Alpi Apuane, si scalda passando sulla Versilia interna, per correre al mare Tirreno, dove si mescola con l'acqua salata. Ed è forse per questo che la tecnica più congeniale all'artista sia la ricomposizione dentro una cornice dei pezzi di un collage, di un sistema più grande della parti, a ricomporre sentimenti culturali e poetici. Prima di dipingere su tela o su carta, Janet Stayton mette i ricordi, i sentimenti, in appunti diligentemente dipinti nello spazio artificiale del proprio studio.

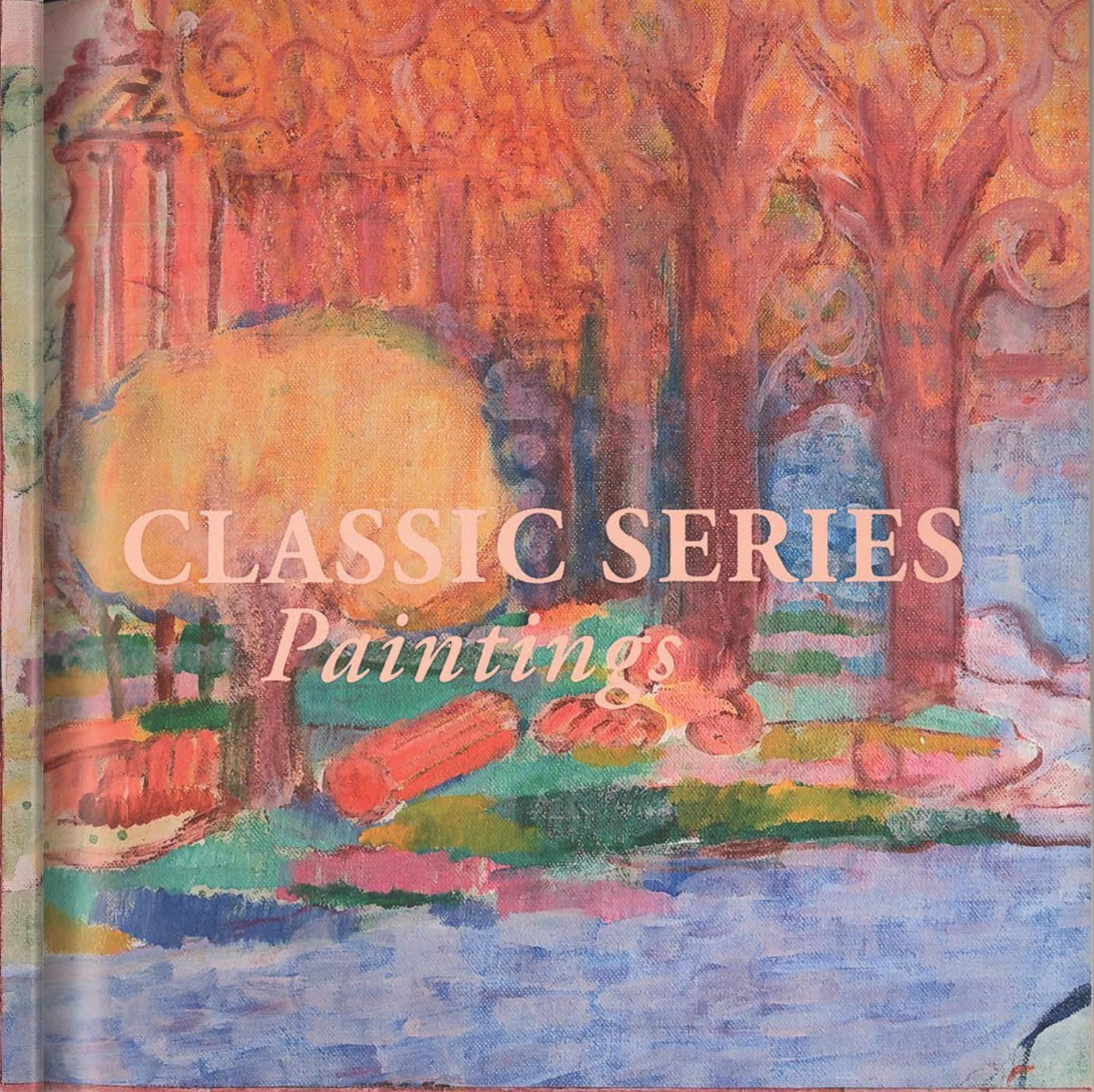
La costruzione sublime di ogni paesaggio dipende dal lavoro instancabile di uomini al lavoro nei campi, di architetti che disegnano giardini, ville, architetture pagane e cristiane che raccontano la storia italiana, dai tempi dell'antica Roma e

dal Rinascimento fino ai giorni nostri. Per vedersi nel paesaggio perfetto occorre sempre ritagliare un punto di vista personale, che consente di selezionare scorci, golfi, colline, alberi, frontoni di templi, tramonti, persone che coltivano i campi, quadri visti in altri momenti, schizzi del proprio taccuino, siepi all'italiana, barche sospese nella laguna e nel mare, che consente di ricomporre la scena di un giovane col liuto, della colazione sull'erba, di un viale sotto il chiaro di luna, di marinai al remo. Insomma, occorre immaginare l'armonia personale rimettendo tutto il mondo insieme.

Generazioni di contadini e di pittori hanno fatto a gara per edificare un paesaggio pubblico ma anche molti paesaggi privati: col risultato che paesaggi reali e paesaggi ritratti oggi dialogano incessantemente. Lo spazio della natura è sempre una quinta scenica che ciascuno può rendere personale, facendo proprie le immagini vere, riproducendone il senso con l'azione pittorica stesa su tela o carta. Il paesaggio umano è dialogo, il paesaggio naturale è habitat, il paesaggio artificiale di Janet Stayton è l'utopia del sublime, sapienza tecnica del racconto, illusione riuscita del senso profondo di identità, materia pittorica che sgorga dalle mani in piena consapevolezza.

La *mimesis* della Stayton si riferisce all'identificazione personale per mezzo dell'abilità di vedersi negli altri e di percepire lo stato di mutua eguaglianza. L'imitazione del paesaggio non è una rappresentazione caricaturale, ma la ricreazione culturale e spirituale, la rappresentazione attiva nell'azione del dipingere. I paesaggi di Janet Stayton sono esclusivi e coinvolgenti come lo sono quelli dei grandi artisti, da Luca Signorelli a Manet e Corot, per i quali la *mimesis* è somiglianza, rappresentazione ma anche simbolismo metaforico che ricorda la trasformazione continua del vero in mito.

L'esplorazione delle relazioni tra arte e realtà è la poetica di Janet Stayton, che trova risoluzione compiuta all'interno del fare manuale nel proprio studio. La tela è il mondo da ricreare, la carta è il luogo dove ricomporre collage di immagini e dove sovrapporre colori e segni, spesso con la mano dell'ar-



CLASSIC SERIES
Paintings



Silver
mixed media and silver gilt on linen
110 x 120 cm.
2008 - 2010





The Violinist



Five Vases



Sleeping Figure



Staircase



With Guitar



Song



Two Fountains

Archive Series

Drawing, watercolor and collage on paper:
Fabriano Artistico Satinato/HP g/m2 640
57.5 x 49 cm. paper size
47 x 40 cm. image size



Yellow Table



Champagne and a Fish



Artist Sketching I



The Moon



Green Statue



The Temple

Archive Series
Drawing, watercolor and collage on paper:
Fabriano Artistico Satinato/HP g/m2 640
51 x 40.5 cm. paper size
43 x 34 cm. image size



The Tree



Artist Sketching II



Chairs



Villa



In the Garden



Arcadia



Garden



Temple



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