Elisabeth Vellacott: "The Expectancy in Your Paintings"

William J. Simmons

A number of sources indicate that Jim Ede – the founder of Kettle's Yard – greatly favoured Elisabeth Vellacott's landscapes, and he maintained a discomfort with her figurative work.[i] Though art historian Michael Harrison claimed that Ede did not much care for the paintings, in a letter to Vellacott, Ede states, "These things I sometimes see in slow motion [in reference to the happenings of his life while in convalescence] are much like the expectancy in your paintings."[ii] While biography can be murky, it is nevertheless true that the only two paintings in the Kettle's Yard collection (of which *Lazarus* is one – the other is her spectacular *Lulu, Jug, and Apple Tree* of 1995) came by way of Vellacott's estate, and not by acquisition on Ede's part.[iii] A variety of issues, therefore, are at stake in presenting an exhibition that focuses on Vellacott's figurative work, not only her figurative paintings. This exhibition is presenting a revisionist look at an already under-appreciated artist, which will, hopefully, allow the expansiveness of her career to shine through.

It makes sense that Ede would perhaps distance his collection from Vellacott's figurative work. A cursory glance confirms that Vellacott's figures are unnerving from visual and thematic perspectives, but also intensely beautiful – a combination that might signal her affiliation with Mannerism (a potential source of Ede's discomfort, to be sure). Mannerism, as the "primitive" backlash against the Renaissance's scientific realism, has often been considered tantamount to provincialism – a moniker that followed Vellacott throughout her life as a result of her gender, age, and relatively local collector base. Reviews like this one in *The Times* fill Vellacott's archive, and it is, to be frank, rather upsetting to read, "Happy and gifted to be sure, but is there not something amateur in both the good and the bad senses of the term about these sack-like figures lolling around in vaguely defined landscape backgrounds?"[iv] Equally apparent is the gender-based provincialism applied by male critics, "Before leaving the issue of that powerful force, feminine sensibility, I think it is fair to point out that in visual art, female artists, however abstract, are in my experience more consistently autobiographical in their references than male artists."[v]

However, there is nothing simplistic or quaint about these compositions. The figures are flattened and distinctly anti-classical. A "correct" relationship to deep space has been forsaken, and figure and ground seem uneasily out-of-sync. Vellacott rarely includes faces in her finished work (though we do see them in studies), and the body parts of her figures seem to float free of the body, as with Lazarus's hand. Indeed, bodies and landscapes seem to be disassembled and operate together but without intersection. We do not know where these scenes take place; they seem to be everywhere and nowhere. This uneasy visual landscape Vellacott augments with a strange combination of historical or religious subject matter with figures in contemporary dress. For example, in *Study for "Christ Driving Photographers from King's College Chapel,"* – a humorous, but biting, update of Biblical material – Christ appears on the Cambridge University campus to get rid of tourists.

There is additionally a marked violence in some of her figurative work – either as an overt reference to war, or a subtler allusion to the destruction of her studio in

the air raids of World War II. This, in the eyes of critics, was likely off-putting for its overt rejection of "feminine" mores in painting. Vellacott, in fact, often tears the interior space open, as in *Study from "The House"* (c. 1990), where a group of static and scrambling bodies are tossed visually into the outside world from the safety of an interior. The visual disjointedness is more than anything Pontormo or Bronzino would attempt, to be sure. Additionally, Vellacott's work is subtler than that of Picasso and Matisse (although she did study Matisse's set designs and Picasso's cubist costumes for the avant-garde dance company, the Ballets Russes), and she always pulls herself back from abstraction. The works in this exhibition – at once domestic and strange, historical and contemporary – seem to be more in line with Surrealism, tricky territory for a female artist working from the mid-century onward.

Considering all this, how could we emerge with a tentative characterization of Vellacott's work in relation to English and Euro-American modernism? Vellacott was working from the mid-century until the new millennium, largely within her local community, so how could we align her with any movement or chronological historical phenomenon? The existing literature is very dated (which is not to discredit its authors, many of whom championed Vellacott's work until her death or theirs). I think it is fair to say that this exhibition is a call to action – to consider how to rework the canon to include, but not limit, women artists, to expand the narrow confines of modernism, to announce to the world the heretofore under-examined importance of British modernism, to examine the archive as a site of activist potential for scholars, artists, and laymen alike, and to dig deeper into the continued relevance of painting in the 21st century. An editor once declined an article on Vellacott because she said, "We've done enough revisionist looks at suburban painters." This is, however, exactly what we must be doing. We must look harder at history and at individual works of art in order to see their paradoxes, nuances, inconsistencies, and revolutionary innovations. If we don't, we have history itself to lose – a condition wherein outsiders of all kinds, including virtuosic artists like Vellacott, might never get their due.

---

[i] Harrison, Michael. *Elisabeth Vellacott*. Cambridge, UK: Kettle's Yard, 1995.
[ii] Ede, Jim. Letter to Elisabeth Vellacott, 11 September 1983.
[iii] Harrison, Michael. Personal Communication by email. 14 August 2012; Letter from Michael Harrison to Elisabeth Vellacott, 18 July 1997.
[iv] John Russell Taylor, "Untitled review," *The Times*, 3 November 1981
[v] Robertson, Bryan. *Elisabeth Vellacott: Paintings and Drawings 1942-1981*. Cambridge, UK: Kettle's Yard, 1981. 41-42

Essay by William J. Simmons, (Ph.D. Program, The Graduate Center of the City University of New York & Lecturer in Art History, The City College of the City University of New York) to accompany

Elisabeth Vellacott: Figures in the Landscape
2 November 2016-15 January 2017 at Murray Edwards College.

Curated Kettle's Yard and New Hall Art Collection as part of Kettles' Yard 'In New Places and Spaces' programme.