

LETTER FROM NEW YORK: RETURNING HOME

I live on Broome Street, just off the Bowery, at the edge of Chinatown in Manhattan. Across the street, at the corner there is a three story loft building. Three years ago the upper floors held a whore house; after it was raided, two years ago, that loft became a dotcom company, and now it is a space for rent. New York is always shifting. This city exemplifies the American dream of reinvention and that also means a willful lack of memory. To my mind, this is a kind of madness and yet it is also a key feature that separates New York from all the great cities of Europe.

The tug of memory has, however, long been essential to me as a painter. Rather than fleeing from 'the terror of history', I have felt the need to build a personal sense of tradition to serve my temperament. Such a self-defining effort is inevitably a response to living in a truncated world of the 'now'.

By September of last year, I had been at work for about ten months on a large red painting loosely set in my studio. The picture itself is in conversation with rather divergent works by artists like Matisse, Uccello, and the Italian Trecento masters. I was trying to invoke the memories of several people from my past, casting them in a hellish scene. There is a female orphic spirit, anchoring a diagonal movement across the surface and back into space. One can move from interior imaginings to a painted view out my studio window where the twin towers located this painted tableau in the present. In marked contrast to a specific view of the city, a barren seascape erupts into the room on the left, from above a figure falls from a cloud, as others struggle in what feels like a deluge.

When New York was attacked, I was teaching at the University at Albany. Numbed by decades of Hollywood disaster films, my first reaction was a denial of the unfolding events: it must be a hoax. When it sank in, I just wanted to be at home. Donna, my wife, was at her studio in mid-town but I couldn't get through to her phone. Getting home seemed impossible with all the roads into the city closed.

Eventually we spoke and I learned that trains might be running from the state capital into the city. Several hours later, when I reached the street outside Penn Station, I got my first taste and smell of death; looking down Seventh Avenue smoke rose from the gap in the downtown skyline. Although police were stationed on the streets at key intervals downtown to check human traffic, there was nothing like that on the subway route to Chinatown. Returning home, filled with trepidation and wonder, I went to the studio window and looked out at where the towers had been. A thick blanket of luminous smoke rose into the evening sky. Police sirens came from all directions on otherwise deserted streets. Then I turned around and caught sight of the towers glowing against a blue-black sky in my painting. It was changed. What had been personal no longer seemed so, what had been fanciful, now was fact. Life, it seemed, had imitated art.

The next day, a friend called me, trying to get in touch with Marjorie Portnow, a painter we both knew, who had been painting cityscapes from the 92nd floor of the north tower. She and I had been out of touch for some time and it took several days before I finally located her at the apartment of a neighbor who had power and water, a few blocks from her home in Tribeca. On the day before the attacks she had brought her paintings home; for the next morning she would be on a train, going to teach in Philadelphia. She had been in the north tower early every morning for months, painting on various pictures during the course of each day. As we talked, she told me that she had been painting views looking uptown – just as I was looking downtown. She went on to tell me that during the late afternoon, the shadows of the towers would slowly spread across the city and she had painted several versions of this effect. Her pictures had changed too.

David Carbone



David Carbone, *Returning Home*. Oil on canvac. 54" x 64", as it appeared in September 2001

Marjorie Portnow, *Looking Uptown, Late Afternoon, from the World Trade Centre*. Oil on panel. 12" x 12", 2001

