

## AMBASSADRICE OF THE SILENT WORLD

Text by Adrian Dannatt

*'I have not yet lost a feeling of wonder, and of delight, that the delicate motion should reside in all the things around us, revealing itself only to him who looks for it.'*

Edmund Burke

Sacha Floch Poliakoff in one of those contemporary artists who could be characterised as an optimistic romantic rather than pessimistic realist, which in the current cultural climate is a genuinely radical stance in itself. Yes, Sacha may paint romantically and optimistically but that does not inherently diminish the intellectual or aesthetic integrity of her creative project; the aim might be pleasure but such a reward does not necessarily have to come at the expense of sophistication or honesty.

Sacha's works may be irresistibly attractive (not the easiest thing to achieve even if one wants to) but that does not mean they are without deeper meaning, substance and significance, 'aesthetic morality' I guess is what we are talking about. Indeed their overt representative task belies a richer and more ambiguous agenda.

For these objects are also not objects, being instead just watercolour, gouache, acrylic or oil on canvas, paper or wood, '*ceci n'est pas un cassoulet*'; they are representations of a quotidian reality which challenge the base physical world by their ambivalent position as both signifiers and signified, symbolic objects chosen for their histories and internal-narratives now rendered, with great skill, as beautiful signage.

Our initial impression may be of desire, we *want* these things. We want both the things represented and these representations *of* them; we want the physical pleasure of actually smoking the cigarettes, we want the visual pleasure of the design of the cigarette packet (which reminds us in a Pavlovian manner of the act of smoking) and we want, ultimately, the picture that here portrays them. When we have this picture hanging on our wall we will not need any of the other things, our needs perversely cured by their visual embodiment, entombment.

With art, every sort of art, it is always a question of what to 'put in' and what to leave out, where to start. The initial most important decision Sacha has to make is what to include, to choose, which of the billion things burning so brightly in this world of ours to decide to portray, why *this* and not *that*. Thus it must be understood that though Sacha loves the way certain things look (and dare we whisper of her exquisite and rigorous taste) she is never choosing for the sake of mere mimetic homage; these things have *meaning*, whether symbolic or historic, personally privileged or universally understood, and as such approach the status of the 'archetype' as beloved by Jung or the more practical 'objet-type' as theorised by Le Corbusier.

These objects may have a personal resonance for Sacha but it is by *recreating* them, shifting their scale, deciding on the medium and support, ink on paper or acrylic on canvas, intensifying their colours and contours, presenting them in a different context, that she transforms them into her own heritage; here she makes them anew as self-conscious totems, hand-crafted fetishes, in her own personal religion. (In so much as the *oeuvre* of every artist is a sort of religious cult of one, a system of worship with its own paraphernalia and rituals unique to the practice of that singular artist.)

It is significant, revelatory, that Sacha's graduation thesis at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in Paris was on the Tartan. For the tartan is something dear to Sacha, as worn by many immediate members of her family, used in the decoration of the various houses in which she grew up, and a style of clothing she has long favoured herself. Thus there exists a direct familial connection between the artist and the tartan; but there is also a delicious visual library of its deployment in every sort of historic context, including some of her favourite period films, antique posters, old fashioned publications, and vintage interior design both *recherché* and *outré*.

But of course the tartan is also much more than that, her family have worn it because they are allowed to, it is 'their' Scottish family tartan which they are traditionally authorised to sport. There are strict rules to the official wearing of tartan on which a vast literature already exists, all of which emphasise that far from merely being an attractive or decorative pattern it is a highly codified, symbolic and practical *system* as highly calibrated and nuanced as language or mathematics.

Tartan is gorgeous, beautiful, it is a decorative delight, but also so much more, a hierarchical and legal code with highly formalised rules, written in colour and stripe, which can be 'read' immediately. The fact that the origins and obligations of this tartan-system may be wholly spurious, an invention of modern Scottish nationalism, only makes it more interesting; the sheer complexity and cunning of human invention in devising such different forms of symbolic representation for the sake of political or social division and regulation.

Thus tartan is a striking abstract pattern whilst also the official aesthetic DNA of a specific Scottish clan; likewise Sacha's depicted objects function simultaneously as attractive things ('art works' they are called) and totemic prizes of great personal significance. For example, two ashtrays may be depicted; they are themselves pleasing in their colours, shapes, their redolent old-fashioned glamour, but they also represent for Sacha her immediate family, one is her mother, the other her father. It is not just that they belonged to them, came down through their side of the family, even carry their names on their surfaces. No, for Sacha they actually 'are' her parents as well as being ashtrays; or rather that by the act of *painting* them, making the likeness of these chosen ashtrays, Sacha turns them into her parents, the quotidian magic of the painter now extended into the larger voodoo of some veritable family-cult.

And obviously in the case of this particular artist her family tree is of no small interest; there is her famous great-grandfather the groundbreaking abstract painter Serge Poliakoff, her grandfather Alexis Poliakoff, a painter and animator as well as creator of the 'Pixi' figurine sculptures and her own father the illustrator-artist Jean-Claude Floch, known as Floch'h, whose elder brother Jean-Louis Floch was also a cartoonist.

Not wanting to delve into what Harold Bloom termed 'the anxiety of influence' there is even so an obvious connection between the pattern-planes of Serge Poliakoff and the deployment of colour-washes by his descendant Sacha. Even more clear is the 'lineage' - quite literally in terms of their 'line'- from father to daughter between Floch'h and Sacha in their adoption and extension of what is called the '*ligne claire*.'

Although mostly deployed as a technical term within '*bande dessinée*' graphic novels, the larger history of such a 'ligne claire' within painting is another version of that well-known battle between the 'classicists' and the 'romantics'. As a lover of 'ligne claire' one would prefer Poussin to Rubens, Claude Lorraine rather than Rembrandt, and in a famous example of such oppositions choose Ingres instead of Delacroix, or for example Vallotton instead of Monet; one's favourite Picasso period would be the neo-classical 'return to order' of the 1920s rather than any *Rose* or *Bleu*.

For this 'ligne claire' is in many ways the bastard offspring of Parisian Atticism - a movement from 1640 to 1660 when painters in Paris elaborated a rigorous neo-classical style, seeking sobriety, luminosity and harmony, referring to the Greco-Roman world. How pleasing in the young Sacha's work to find a bridge between such neo-classicism and a French sort of 'Pop'. This mixed heritage might stretch from, say, Poussin (whose bust stands guard at the gate of her famous art school in Paris) to Martial Raysse, happily ignoring, or colliding, the distinctions between 'history painting' and graphic design, mashing up the court tapestries of Versailles with the charms of commercial retail signage.

Some artists who come from such artistic families are slightly touchy about any perceived influence or transmitted talent, which is strange considering those very many famous artistic families throughout history, with skills usually handed down from father to son and grandson, in which a recognisable stylistic similarity was actively sought after and desired. Of course the difference is that modernism judges the success of an artist by how *different* their work is from anyone else, whilst previously the aim was to be as *similar* as possible to the preceding greats.

Yes, Sacha's work is entirely her own and yet at the same time one can see a clear line (*ligne claire*) linking it to both Floch and Poliakoff, Serge and Alexis, which is just as one would want it to be, which is appropriate and harmonious. For the notion of 'family memory' is central to her work and she deploys these inherited, genetic stylistics to 'paint a portrait', as it were, of her own life and those around her. Here she uses this familial aesthetic heritage to depict that very same family but through selected objects rather than formal portraiture; as such this recalls how Lucian Freud once described his work as a 'continuous group portrait'.

Sacha's interest in memory, in family, and in 'family-memory', imbued and transmitted by the most humble of objects, also seems identifiably French. As such it is part of an intellectual and poetic tradition anchored by such classics as, most obviously, Proust's *Recherche du Temps Perdu* as well as key texts like Georges Perec's minimalist masterpiece simply entitled *Les Choses* which came out in 1965 and Foucault's *Les Mots et les Choses* (translated as *The Order of Things*) published one year later in 1966. This notion of memory as the fundamental building-block

of identity, that one's character is dependent upon one's own memory and those of others, can already be found in Diderot, who wrote, 'Ce n'est que par la mémoire que nous sommes un même individu pour les autres et pour nous-mêmes.'

That this fundamental memory-identity can be conjured, made concrete, through certain totemic objects is a theme beloved of artists and thinkers, perhaps especially in the Francophone world. Thus Michel Leiris contemplates a Chinese-inspired knickknack once owned by his mother which immediately reminds him, and leads him to reminisce, of a drunken night of Raymond Roussel in New York's Chinatown.

For Leiris who was an expert on African cultural customs, on cargo cults and wooden fetishes, it would seem obvious that an object, however humble, small, nondescript can contain a myriad of memories and even actually *embody* such intangibles. Likewise Braque explained that, 'Objects don't exist for me except in so far as a rapport exists between them or between them and myself. Life then becomes a perpetual revelation. That is true poetry.'

Such object-based aesthetics, the 'memory-theatre' of associative imagery, the presentation of ephemeral evidence, has become a favoured trope for international exhibitions, whether the Venice Biennale or the Bienal de São Paulo whose 2021 iteration was deployed around just such a structure.

As the curator Jacopo Crivelli Visconti explained, 'We proposed some objects, coupled with their stories, as statements: a bell that was rung at different moments of a story that is repeated; the embroideries...letters... a set of objects that survived the same fire in different way. In this sense, they operate like the tuning fork that helps to tune a musical instrument, or the beginning of a song.'

These 'tuning-forks of memory' find their echo, their resonant timbre, their concluding vibration, in the theories of Francis Ponge, perhaps the premier poet of the 'object' itself. As he proclaimed in his *Mute Objects of Expression*, his aim was 'To accept the challenge that objects offer to language.' These objects were often chosen by Ponge for being as anti-poetic, as ordinary as possible, excluding the obviously pretty or poetic and then rendered into glimmering still lives. According to

Ponge the poets are 'les ambassadeurs du monde muet' and I would like to conjure Sacha Floch Poliakoff as just such an ambassador, regally bringing the silent, the mute world of her distinctive object-landscape into life. Ponge, who even went so far as to speak of a 'tentative d'assassinat du poème par son objet' would surely relish Sacha's redemptive plot to save her own very personal world, her intimate familial history, from the assassinate drive of time and entropy.