

Luminous Darkness: The Paintings of Raquel Rabinovich

by Carter Ratcliff

Raquel Rabinovich begins a painting with streaks of vivid color. Filling the surface of her canvas, their brightness vibrates and disappears, gradually, beneath an overlay of dark, velvety pigments. The painting is done when the artist has inflected it with rows of wiry forms, linear distillates of the fields from which they emerge. Inscribed in black, they have the look of letters from an unknown alphabet. The darkness of Rabinovich's paintings recalls those moments when dusk turns into the night that frees the imagination from daylight's plethora of mundane details.

In her notebooks, the artist invokes Plato's cave, with its wall covered by shadows he describes as delusive simulacra of transcendent realities. In her art, shadowy form is not derivative, it is primary, for she has revised Plato with a thoroughness that dispenses with his disapproval of art and his skeptical view of earthly appearances. Rabinovich offers her paintings as sites where meaning originates or, rather, emerges from the experience of contemplating the inexhaustible subtlety of her imagery. Her challenge to Plato, the founder of Western philosophy, is a quietly audacious revelation of possibilities lurking in his metaphor of the cave.

In Rabinovich's notebooks, the mention of shadows is accompanied by a comment on ruins frequently enough to suggest that, for her, the words are near synonyms—as in John Keats's sonnet, "On Seeing Elgin Marbles," where he calls the ruined statuary "a shadow of a magnitude," not that Rabinovich is echoing Keats. Arriving at the equation of ruins and shadows on her own, she shows a powerful intuition of time and its effects on objects, texts, and alphabets that had a shining lucidity when they were new.

In Rabinovich's paintings, all has evolved into a state of ambiguity. We cannot know, for example, to which alphabet the artist's "letters" once belonged, and it might occur to us to wonder why she doesn't depict them in the clarity of their original state. After all, Western painters have been aiming for representational precision for more than two millennia. Rabinovich breaks with that tradition because she has discovered that ambiguity is richer than clarity; an art that brings us to the threshold of an unknown place delivers a fuller, deeper meaning than an art that locates us at a precisely mapped point in the familiar world. Rabinovich's shadows and ruins live in environments at once lush and severe where darkness is invigorating, even inspiring. It "rouzes the faculties to act," in the words of the poet William Blake. When we are face to face with her paintings, perception can no longer be a passive registration of appearances. It becomes active. To see these works of art is to create them for oneself. Thus, their darkness is never illuminated but always illuminating.

This is not a paradox, for Rabinovich presents darkness and shadow and the ruin of alphabets as occasions to generate the invisible glow of meaning. Finding nuance in surfaces that look at first glance homogeneous, we sense in fragments of form the wholeness of the artist's intention; filling Rabinovich's dark paintings with the light of our understanding, we grasp intuitively the nature of painting, of interpretation, and of ourselves, as creatures who do not merely perceive but create the significance of what we see. Ultimately, Rabinovich's art is about us, the conscious, self-aware beings we become when we allow perception to become speculative. This takes time, and time begins to feel timeless as we enter a realm where meaning is invigorating, elusive, and in its elusiveness endlessly renewable.