

# Memory and Grace

BY TERRINGTON CALAS

NICOLE CHARBONNET  
Paintings  
Galerie Simone Stern  
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MEMORY. DESIRE AND LONGING. Dreams. The themes of Nicole Charbonnet's new work have a longer, more pervasive tradition in literature and music than they do in painting. She centers on the primacy of subjective experience, something that modernism has always handled gingerly — with some fear, perhaps, of a terminal life-world taint. Even in our ostensibly pluralist times, "subjective" tends to have circumscribed connotations; with few exceptions, it signifies social or political concerns. Topics geared to gender, class and identity are embraced today as they were in the militant 1990s. Politically Correct art is still sanctioned; but, in fact, it must take a backseat to work that has little or no serious emotional engagement. I am thinking here of the *merely* technological, the ironic, the giddily clever — all of these recently witnessed, incidentally, in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. No surprise. The art world hierarchy persists in its fascination with surface effects and "the new."

So, Charbonnet's declaration of a deeply personal aesthetic is certainly of interest. Memory. Desire and longing. Dreams. Her professed themes, as I say, are widely understood in other art forms. Her challenge — and it is both delicate and complex — is to convey such enigmatic, internal events not with the nuanced sounds of music or the poetized text of literature, but with tangible materials. Before remarking on the paintings, we might underline what she has taken on by evoking some parallel expressions.

MEMORY: LITERATURE. Narrative fiction is decidedly the most capacious source. There is, above all, Marcel Proust. His idea regarding our perception of time — his idea of "involuntary" memory, when fitted into prose — actually intimates visual phrases in Charbonnet's work. In the famous passage about the narrator's attempt to revive, by way of memory, the the inexplicably "all-powerful joy" of a tea-soaked madeleine, he confronts the difficulty:

*"What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. Seek? More than that: create."*

And he perseveres:

*"I ask my mind to make one further effort, to bring back once more the fleeting sensation. And so that nothing may interrupt it in its course I shut out every obstacle, every extraneous idea."*

Finally, the beginnings of the desired memory:

*". . . I feel something start within me . . . Undoubtedly what is thus palpating in the depths of my being must be the image, the visual memory which, being linked to that taste, is trying to follow it into my conscious mind. But its struggles are too far off, too confused and chaotic; scarcely can I perceive the neutral glow into which the elusive whirling medley of stirred-up colours is fused, and I cannot distinguish its form . . ."*

*"Will it ultimately reach the clear surface of my consciousness, this memory, this old, dead moment which the magnetism of an identical moment has travelled so far to importune, to disturb, to raise up out of the very depths of my being? I cannot tell. Now I feel nothing; it has stopped, has perhaps sunk back into its darkness, from which who can say whether it will ever rise again?"*

DESIRE AND LONGING, DREAMS: MUSIC. For many of us, nothing suggests these experiences more surely than music. Consider perhaps those dark, moody stretches in Kodaly's *Sonata for Solo Cello*; or when Jimmy Scott, in his eerie tenor, sings a Jazz standard like *Solitude* ("In my solitude, you haunt me / with reveries . . .") or when he does his startlingly raw version of the tired *Unchained Melody*. For once, "hunger for your touch" does not sound laughable.

And, further, consider examples in basic, so-called "Roots" music. In one of those rustic-yet-elegant, simple-yet-poignant ballads from the Bluegrass canon, Lester Flatt sings

*Please, don't wake me tonight  
While I'm sleeping  
For I might have the same dream again  
Let me own the whole world  
For just a moment  
While I hold her in my arms once again.*

The extraordinary force of this is hardly in the lyric; it's in the "high lonesome" voice; it's in the odd, undulating melody with crucial notes hanging, almost awkwardly, in the air. It's in the overall plaintive beauty.

From the same genre, there is the Louvin Brothers' classic "When I Stop Dreaming." Again, the



Nicole Charbonnet: Climb Ev'ry Mountain, 2002. M/M, 60" high.

scape, with its attendant legend, supplies all the *suggestion* we need. Even without *Idaho*, we are squarely in the harsh domain of drifters, the domain of a sub-culture. Nor do we need the film in order to perceive here the same numbing hopelessness that Van Sant expressed.

But ultimately this method of pictorial suggestion is not Charbonnet's end, but rather a vehicle. She uses it to translate salient images from memory — from her own, as well as our entire cultural memory. What we see, then, is a personal index of icons. And she offers them, it would seem, as a kind of meditation on the dreams, sentiments and myths that connect us. Some of the images came originally from art; others, from popular culture. Her charge is to render the look they might have in reverie — layered and blurred, mutable and, perhaps, more compelling than they actually were.

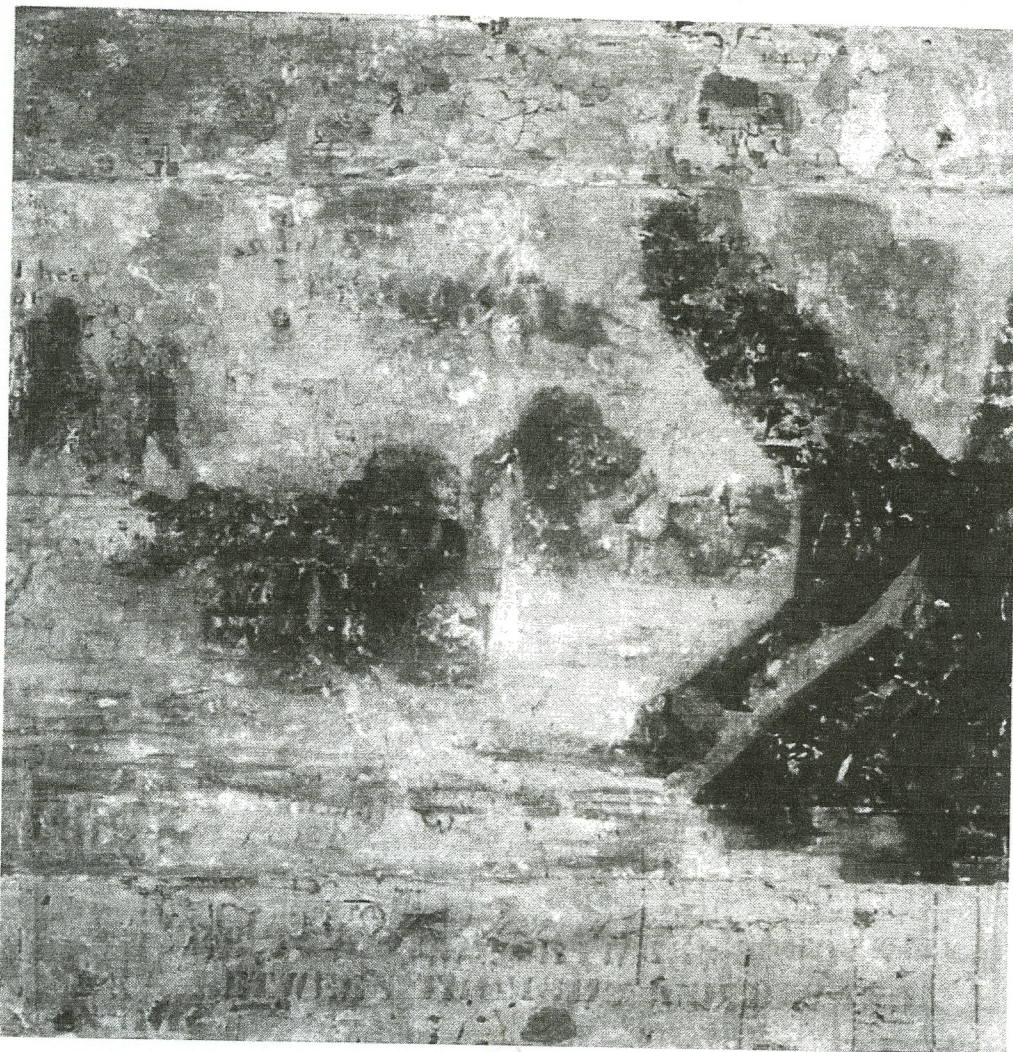
*A War Between*, an almost abstract piece, soundly confirms this. It, too, originates in the cinema, Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*. The film itself may be of dubious artistic value, but it is taken here and made noble. Charbonnet wields the most familiar scene, the Normandy landing, re-working it as a "fleeting sensation" (in Proust's expression). With piles of collage and restless manipulation of pigment — mostly cinematic grey-blues — she coaxes the image into a stirring new symbol of heroism.

*A WAR BETWEEN* is the one is the one work in this exhibition that strides onto grand dramatic terrain. And it

somewhat protracts Charbonnet's ambition. With a single painterly motif, she delivers the force of great tragedy: the human suffering, the resolve, the triumph, the pathos. And yet, like all these paintings, it is conveyed through the mitigating presence of an established image. And, more, through the mitigating haze of the artist's own memory. This produces a certain lyricism, a pictorial grace, that sets Charbonnet apart. It is there in *Climb Ev'ry Mountain*, a pearly, ominous landscape with a vague Dorothy and suitcase at center. To be sure, it is there in *This Road*, the despairing essence of the work notwithstanding.

This grace also sets her apart from antecedents, the most notable among them being the German Anselm Kiefer. Obviously, there are technical similarities: the vast fields of collaged and punished surface; the muted, broken, unnamable colors; even the written text. And, to a degree, the cultural reach.

But to what degree? For Kiefer, culture and history are there to be questioned; they are the stuff of commentary. As I say, Charbonnet appears to be about meditation — summoning iconic markers, uttering their significance for us all, re-envisioning their very presence, but also remaining quietly close to them. When her work is unconvincing it is because the closeness can easily lead to bathos or obscurity. In most instances, however, it renders a rare and moving poetry. □



Nicole Charbonnet: *A War Between*, 2002. M/M, 60" high.

lyric is utterly simple, even quaint, the vocals achingly pure. The song is not about sleep; it's about longing, interminable longing.

In works like these, emotion is not merely heard or read; it is profoundly felt. And it is conveyed by artistry, discretion, taste, sincerity. The same would be true in painting.

IN PROBABLY HER most ambitious maneuver to date, Charbonnet has produced an exhibition that could be taken, on the one hand, as a lovely catalog of the ambiguous or, on the other, as a Proust-like savoring of our richest poetry cache: memory. Arguably, what we see in her "Landscapes and Heroes" (recently at Galerie Simonne Stern), is both.

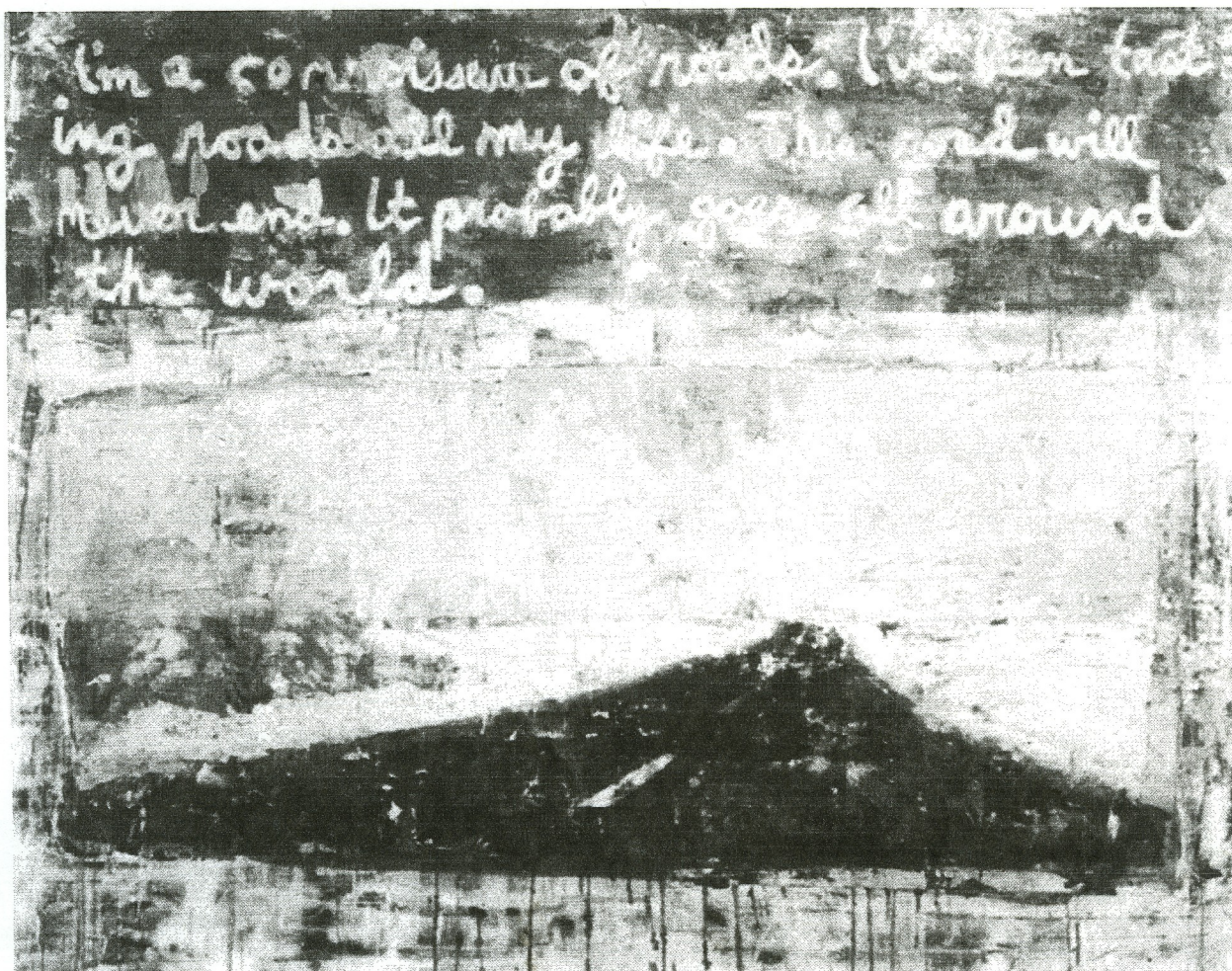
This, of course, is partly because great ambition entails great risk. But it is also because Charbonnet's stated intent fairly dictates a certain vagueness — both of content and form. Key words in her artist's statement: "palimpsests," "the phenomenon of recollection," "change and time," "longing." Thus she is asserting the cogency of sinuous thought processes. She is asserting their significance in life and, as a painter, their possibilities in art.

"Palimpsests," "the phenomenon of recollection." Indeed. What we infer from this is a lyrical

but daunting aesthetic, one that calls for oblique signals to experience, not patent descriptions of it. We should *sense* more and see less. The subjects, after all, are memories, reveries. As the Symbolist poet Mallarmé said, in his most telling aphorism, "To *name* an object is to *suppress* . . . *Suggestion*, that is the dream."

In Charbonnet's new works, this sort of suggestion is the initial point of interest. And, at several moments, it leads to splendid effect. *This Road* features a black highway shown in deep perspective but articulated as a fiercely muddled image — edges unclear, close-valued colors deadened by an apparent ritual of paint and collage, paint and collage. This section of the composition looks as if it came via Robert Motherwell from Vincent van Gogh; somehow it manages to be both crude and elegantly simple.

The top third of the piece bears the hand-written quote, in part, "I'm a connoisseur of roads. I've been tasting roads all my life . . ." from Gus Van Sant's *My Own Private Idaho*. Does it matter whether or not we have seen the film? Does it matter that the film is itself a notable work of art (despite its philosophical myopia and extreme indulgence)? Does it matter that, by adopting and interpreting this image, the painting willy-nilly basks in the film's glory? Mostly no. The enormous bleak land-



Nicole Charbonnet: *This Road*, 2001. M/M, 62" high.