

## **Gloria Stern: Human Beings, Being Human**

Text by Steve Cox

The work of Gloria Stern crosses easily between figuration and abstraction, depending upon her preoccupation at the time of its making. Sometimes abstraction and figuration are brought together within a single work, as in a series of pictures she made using a combination of painted areas and collaged elements.

I shall focus here on six of Stern's earlier works, in which she interposes figures within charged abstracted scenarios that emphasise the humanness of the subject. Many of these pictures seem to portray the isolation of the human being within the wider world. In 'Dance Hall' 2006, four couples, expressionistically painted, dance together in an ambiguous space. This space is composed of torn sections of older paintings, now repurposed as the 'floor' and the 'walls' that enclose the dancers. All the plains in this cave-like room veer wildly from any expected angle, so that one can feel the frenetic energy of the careening dancers as their legs and arms lurch. The effect is giddy and unexpected. The very atmosphere shimmers in tune with the painterly surfaces, giving us a visceral sense of the action.



Dance Hall, mixed media, 2006

In 'Righteous Kill' 2016, two urban teenage boys in hoodies are depicted sitting on a stylised city pavement, dwarfed against a wall of torn movie posters. The teenagers' isolation is compounded by the fact that they alone have volume and solidity in this flattened out world. Their 'reality' is at odds with the artificial fragments of authoritative printed messages which seem to define the world which they inhabit.



Righteous Kill, collage, 2016

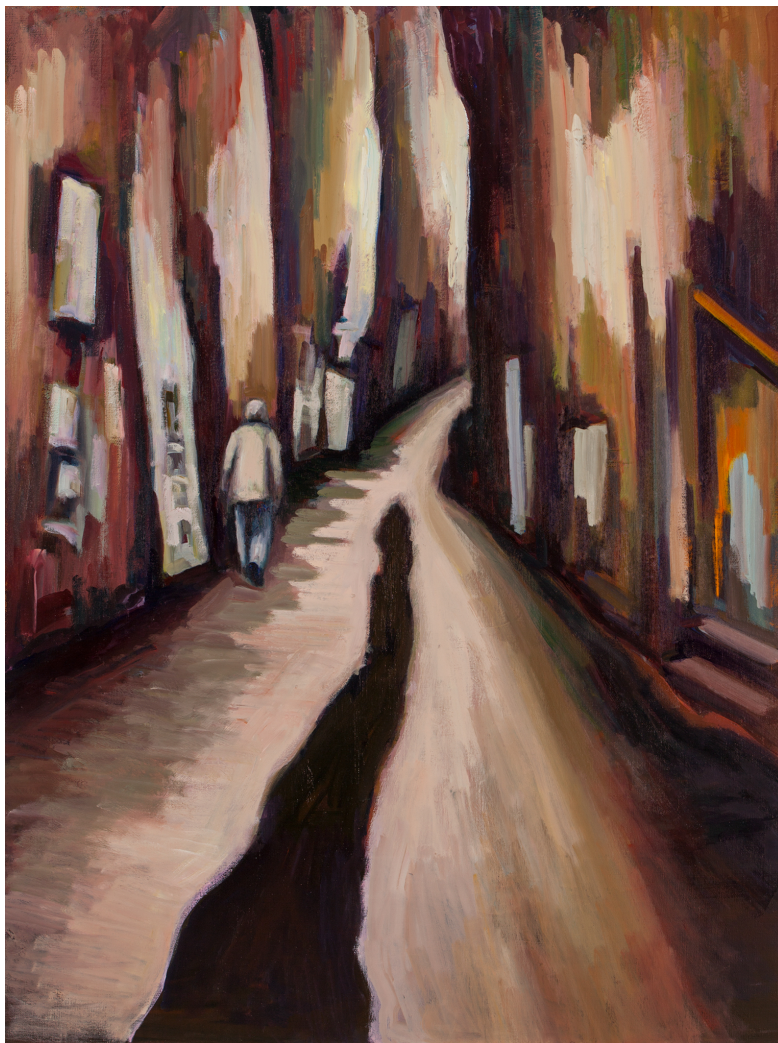
A similar effect can be seen in 'Newsreader' 2015, in which a man reads a newspaper in front of a massive abstract painting. It is unclear whether the painting is a work of art or the result of months of posters being torn from a hoarding. It is not clear whether the action takes place on a city street or in an art gallery. What is clear is that the man seems ambivalent to the situation in which we observe him. Once again, the narrative that Stern sets up is subverted by the 'unknowingness' of the protagonist, who is an indisposed participant.



Newsreader, oil on canvas, 2015



In 'Bleak Day' 2015, a man walks down a road or lane that twists around a corner before him. The entirety of his surroundings has been abstracted so that we are afforded only a suggestion of the town 'furniture': doorways; windows; posters; signage etc. have been rendered as stylised slabs of paint, and are reminiscent of the forbidding, artificial streetscapes in the German Expressionist film, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920). An ominous shadow slides into view and bisects the road like a fissure – it seems to point the way towards the bend in the road, which suggests that the man's fate is inevitable and irrefutable. As in the previous works, it is the human being, alone, who possesses 'reality' in this artificial, monochrome world.



Bleak Day, oil on canvas, 2015

'Foreigner' 2015, features another isolated human in unnatural surroundings. In this case, it is a young woman, or perhaps a young girl. She stands hesitantly on a kind of floating platform. She gazes with some degree of trepidation through a square doorway, beyond which yawns an indigo void. The title of the painting tells us that the girl is alien to this environment – we know it, and she seems to know it as well. But there are no easy answers here. The task for every stranger in a strange land is to make the decision: will she walk willingly into the dark space? And will the void be fertile, or hostile?



Foreigner, oil on canvas, 2015

In 'Living Room', 2015, we are afforded a view into a suburban room, in which a man and a dog are engaged in the process of observation. Once again, the figure is isolated and oblivious to the wider possibilities of his situation – the fact that he himself is also being observed. They are unaware of us, the viewer. We seem to be peeping around a red door, into the room. We gaze at the gazer, taking pleasure in being a silent participant. We can take our time, knowing that we will never be discovered by the man. But, as to what the man and his alert little dog are contemplating, we will never know - the narrative concludes off 'stage', the possibilities of which are completed in our imagination.



Living Room, oil on canvas, 2015

In these works, to varying degrees, Stern deals with notions of sentience; isolation; and human sovereignty. She also implicates the viewer as a silent witness to others' aloneness. And isn't that, after all, what we do on a daily basis?