

“Brief Reviews”

The Dance of Geometry

Brian Howell

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by Jeff Bursey

Recently there have been several fictional works dealing with Dutch painting—Tracy Chevalier’s *Girl with a Pearl Earring*, Susan Vreeland’s *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* and Katharine Weber’s *The Music Lesson*—and so it is legitimate to ask whether or not Brian Howell, in a novel dealing with Vermeer, contributes something new. The title indicates *The Dance of Geometry* regards the abstract problems of perspective as more important than fleshing out the figure of Vermeer; this is a novel about ideas, not about characters.

In this speculative work on what Vermeer may have thought about his work, how his methods attracted attention—it is likely these aspects David Hockney refers to in his blurb for the novel—and their immediate impact on other artists of his time, Howell provides readers with a sketch of the painter, an incomplete manual on forgery, and describes a mystery surrounding Vermeer’s paintings. The material is presented through four lenses: a deliberately narrow depiction of Vermeer as an apprentice; the journal of a Frenchman, Balthasar de Monconys; the reminiscences of Maritje, who reflects on her acquaintance with the painter from her position inside *The Music Lesson*; and the narrative of an unnamed forger of that same painting.

Selected events in Vermeer’s life, especially in the first and last sections, are written in cautious prose. But there is an exception, when as a young man he experiences an artistic moment: “Outside, the clouds had aligned themselves to create a strange rhythm of chevroned light leading to the church... Inside, narrow ferruginous sheets of light were thrust into the aisle and intercepted the nave in a storm of chrome violence belied by the surrounding quiet.” The word “chrome” appears anachronistic. There is also a problem with the sentence that ends the same paragraph and the sentence that begins the next:

“[Vermeer] recalled days of hard work with Bramer, when the master had striven to drive home the rules of perspective.

It had been his first afternoon for such instruction.”

It can’t be both days and one day. Such errors pop up throughout the novel—a bedroom is above, then below, the same studio—and indicate a laxity in editing.

Monconys’s journal is the most relaxed in voice, even as it describes an invention ahead of its time and the intrigue surrounding it. Viewed suspiciously by everyone, he cannot figure out what is happening around him. The unnamed narrator hired to copy *The Music Lesson* also presents his dilemma directly to an imagined audience, but his fear about what may come after the execution of his task does not engage the reader’s emotions. Howell does successfully and believably outline what a dedicated forger needs to think about much better than Paul Watkins

did in his novel *The Forger*. The most interesting section is Maritje's elliptical account of her history and the history of *The Music Lesson*. She shares something of the fate of Aristotle in Joseph Heller's *Picture This*, where the philosopher comes alive in Rembrandt's *Aristotle Contemplating the Bust of Homer*, but in that novel the situation is an overplayed joke. Concision and a limited range of expression serve Maritje well. Unfortunately, the four stories do not quite gel as a novel, despite how entertaining or evocative some parts are.

The Dance of Geometry does not contain memorable passages, and the style is functional, not elegant, lyrical or rhythmical. Howell's emphasis on ideas may not create a large audience, but that's unimportant. He writes what he wishes to write, for whatever readers he chooses to please. It may be that with his next novel he will be less tentative in his approach, for he surely has the intelligence to progress as a writer.

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