

The Company She Keeps

When I came to London after graduating, I was at a party (everyone always is) and not being included in a conversation between two women (another regular feature) when one of them offered an explanation. 'I'm sorry but we have an ex-husband in common.' That, it seemed to me, was the most sophisticated sentence anyone had ever spoken, at any rate in my presence. (I was quite young.) Anne Rothenstein and I also have an ex-husband in common. I wasn't pleased to lose the husband but I've always liked Annie and admired her work and I've always (well, maybe not from day one) bought her paintings when I could. I worked at the LRB then and when sometime later I became its editor Annie's covers were the paper's hallmark.

Annie grew up among the artists in Great Bardfield, in Essex during its post-war heyday. They were members of her family, many of them, and if they shared anything, it would have been a liking for everyday stuff (rooms, gardens, fields, wallpaper, cups, pitchforks, shop-fronts) and everyday people and the colours they adopted. Her father was Michael Rothenstein, the print-maker, and her mother was Duffy Ayres, the painter. Her grandfather was William Rothenstein who ran the Royal College of Art and was as an official British war artist.

Annie had other lives before the life of the artist, which she took up full-time in 1982. Before that she'd been an actress and also a writer. Whichever way you look at her life she is an artist.

There has been a lyrical informality in her paintings from the beginning. The pictures had ideas in them but they didn't come blaring at you. On the contrary they arrived bringing pleasure and recognition. In time that would make her the perfect LRB cover artist, never predictable, always a little off-kilter, using colour and line in ways that make you want to pick up the issue. (There's a special art to producing first-rate covers, to do with space – there may need to be cover-lines – and weather (no ice in summer) and setting the character of the particular issue in visual terms. No matter the content of a magazine, a great cover artist can give a tone to it, and in a manner introduce the sensibility of that week's - or in the case of the LRB that fortnight's enterprise. Annie's first cover for the magazine was in 2012: against a light blue background, a calming, mindful blue, with a few cut-up clouds is a bird with a very orange beak and lush tailfeathers.

Annie's earlier paintings, including some of those I have on my walls, were darker, I think, more traditionally British, growing perhaps out of her family background, but she has moved with delicacy and force into a zone of her own, where the paintings are more ragged, more disheveled (or disassembled) and her people are something else after 2003. Tea-cups can still exist, but there are more reclining figures (not to be confused with declining figures) and more figures-of-colour, if that's an acceptable designation. A tree or a horse-like creature might appear, though there was still time for disembodied shapes, and a few more blokes. Around 2014 she started doing pinkish or yellow landscapes – not quite landscapes, but shape-scapes, with square houses and two suns, one black and one red – and a few combative female figures liable to be facing away from one another. I can't say I know what the paintings are about but that doesn't really concern me: it's their company I like. In *Bus Stop*, a green-ish painting of 2016, I like the skirts the women are wearing, and the coats, and I like the way the sitting woman is sitting, and though the planes of the work are flat and odd, you feel that the houses behind the women make sense in relation to

them, and there's a lightness and interestingness about it all that makes you want to live there.

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January 2021