



A Painter-Novelist Draws a Line Between Erotic and Obscene

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By: Lorraine Krehling

WHEN Melinda Camber Porter first moved to New York from Paris, where she had been cultural correspondent for The Times of London, she discovered that unlike the French, Americans didn't comprehend the distinction between the pornographic and the erotic, what the dictionary calls the depiction of sex as part of violence and power versus sexual desire in its relationship to love.

"When my paintings came to the French Embassy, no one there asked whether the pictures of naked women embracing were autobiographical," said the London-born, Oxford educated painter and writer in an interview at the Hotel des Artistes where she lives and works when she is not at her Sag Harbor Studio.

"The attitude of the French was, 'This is art. Perhaps it could be lesbianism. Perhaps it could be metaphorical. But who cares?'" Ms. Porter said.

By contrast, Americans are apt to bring a literal interpretation to her paintings. "They ask, 'Is it her?'" nudge, nudge," Ms. Porter said.

"Americans will talk about the body in a clinical and mechanical way," she continued. People are allowed to talk about their prostate operation at the dinner table. They say things about genitalia in medical terms, but they are not allowed to say what feels good."

The frequently nude figures in her oil and watercolor paintings, which hang on Ms. Porter's apartment walls, evoke the luminescent and often floating human forms of both William Blake and Marc Chagall. Feet sometimes leave the earth in a kind of spiritual ecstasy. In light filled outdoor dreamscapes void of the ordinary, solitary souls pose reflectively, while others appear to copulate with eyes fully open.

Fortunately for Ms. Porter, Glenn Thompson, the publisher of the small press Writers and Readers, was not put off by the subject of the sensual – what a human being can experience through the physical self and the senses, and the profound effect of that experience — which is at the heart of Ms. Porter's output as both a graphic artist and writer.

In 1993, Writers and Readers issued "The Art of Love," a collection of Ms. Porter's love poems accompanied by 12 color plates of her paintings. Last month, the same press published Ms. Porter's first novel "Badlands," a narrative with a weighty sensuality that carries the reader forward in a kind of drunken, dreamlike state.



On the surface, “Badlands” is the story of an East Coast lawyer, Adam, who drags his girlfriend, the unnamed, British-born narrator, to the South Dakota Badlands to show her what he calls “the real America.” He plans to spend their vacation preparing a case for a Sioux named Blackfoot, who believes that farmers are defiling the graves of his ancestors.

But the story quickly becomes the story of individuals coming to terms with their past. Not only do these Easterners project their own family dramas on the Indians – both the narrator and Adam turn to Blackfoot as a father figure, desperate for his acceptance — but the charismatic, opinionated Blackfoot is also obsessed with appeasing the voices of his departed family. Blackfoot is constantly plotting media events he hopes will bring publicity to the American Indian cause.

Ms. Porter said that the novel charted the narrator's transformation “from being a tourist” in American Indian culture “to being a person who feels.”

Indeed, when the narrator first enters the local bar, she coolly observes the tangible despair in the twilight surroundings where liquor is served around the clock and morning is marked by the smell of toast. But through her contact with Blackfoot and her immersion in the natural environment — the Sky over the plains, the corn fields and the sandstone tentacles of the Badlands, forever jutting skyward on the horizon — the narrator's sensibility alters.

Much of this shift in perspective emerges from an intense attraction between the narrator and Blackfoot, and the tighter the bond and more potentially erotic their connection, the more “drunken” with Sky, earth, wind, water and wildflowers the narrator and her prose become.

Blackfoot's mystical influence fosters a transcendent vision in which the narrator comes to see how the past, present and physical world are all interconnected.

Ms. Porter said she began omitting quotation marks in the dialogue as the borders between narrator and other characters dissolved; a kind of stream-of-consciousness style ensues.

Her years as a journalist, Ms. Porter said, were good preparation for writing with the empathy she hoped her fiction has.

“I don't think you can say anything of interest about people's lives unless you feel strongly about them,” Ms. Porter said. “In journalism, I really used to try to get into the minds of the people I interviewed before I wrote about them.”

In France, Ms. Porter profiled some of the country's best-known literary artists. “Through Parisian Eyes: Reflections on Contemporary French Arts and Culture,” a collection of her essays published in both



England and the United States, offers an impressive list of her subjects, including the film makers Louis Malle, François Truffaut and Eric Rohmer, and the French writers Jean-Paul Sartre, André Malraux, Marguerite Duras and Eugène Ionesco.

Ms. Porter said the influence of her father, an endocrinologist and research scientist turned psychoanalyst, turned her into "an intellectual polyglot" at an early age and allowed her to feel confident in the heady intellectual circles of Paris following her graduation with a master's in modern languages from Oxford.

"My father was sort of this brilliant man stuffed with ideas," Ms. Porter said. "The values that were communicated to me were spiritual, not materialistic."

But a yearning for feelings not available in the intellectually intense household was in part responsible for Ms. Porter's turning as a child to painting to express her emotions.

"Neither of my parents knew how to love successfully," she said.

Her own difficult path to learning the "art of love" took her through a first marriage in Paris, where she said both partners were committed to their work but not to each other.

Shortly after she divorced and came to live in America, she met her second husband, Joseph Flicek, at Amnesty International, where both volunteered. It was Mr. Flicek who introduced Ms. Porter in 1988 to his home state of South Dakota, including the Badlands where he hunted, and the idea for a novel began to germinate.

"I had ideas and notes and landscapes, but I didn't know where it was going," Ms. Porter said.

Eventually "Badlands" became a document of process of learning to love. Ms. Porter said that in her marriage and in becoming the mother of two children, she discovered what she hadn't been taught in childhood: people learn feelings from other people's feelings more than their words.

"How people stay together wasn't communicated to me in the air that I breathed as a child," she said.

In the novel, Adam puts it this way: "Father tried to lay Judaism on us, without even believing a word of it himself. So all he taught us was his skepticism. Such a brilliant guy didn't realize you teach emotions, not just facts, to a child."

Like a brilliant father, Blackfoot remains aloof from his lawyer, and he also uses the seductive hold he has on the narrator for his own ends. When he decides the dead may wish to speak to him through her, he takes her at midnight to the Badlands, which is the Sioux Land of the Dead. But as the narrator stands



among the cold, eroded sandstone buttes, she has a vision of her own deceased mother rather than Blackfoot's. The emotional clarity from the "encounter" helps her sort through tangled feelings from childhood and edges her toward a loving partnership with Adam.

Ms. Porter said writing "Badlands" was the beginning of a transformation in her own attitude toward death and dying. She picked up the thread of that subject again last fall when she began a new series of pen and ink drawings about a close friend who had died.

Daily work with the memories, she said, resurrected "a sense of the person's presence," which has helped her begin to see how life and death might be a continuum, much as American Indians envision.

Because the drawings in this new series are very erotic, she said, "It will be interesting to see how it plays against American culture, because I know in France the attitude would be so different."

She added that when an exhibition of her paintings opened recently at the Sioux Falls Civic Center in South Dakota, "the people at the museum were thrilled with the show."

"But some people, like my husband's family, asked me why I don't put clothes on my figures," she said.

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