

ELAINE DESPINS

*The Sound of One Hand Clapping*

By Dorota Kozinska

As enigmatic as a *koan*, Elaine Despins' latest works present a poignant visual dilemma. A series of drawings and paintings of her mother's hands - a mother she lost recently - they are at once instantly recognizable and utterly mysterious, excised from the body and space. Simply titled "Holding On", they offer as much as they demand of the viewer, with no sentimentality to blur the image, yet invested with powerful emotion. They are born, literally and figuratively, from a large portrait of her mother nearing death, her long-fingered hands clasped to her chest in final supplication, eyes tightly shut like flower buds that will never blossom. "Inward Gaze" is homage, a panacea, and a stunning visual testament to love and to art, which shirks from nothing. "If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life - and only then will I be free to become myself," wrote the great German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Despins, familiar with his writings, must have been in the process of such a wrenching release, while in the face of encroaching grief. A highly accomplished artist, she has translated the unbearable into the beautiful, substituting the language of pain with the lexicon of purely visual expression. The hands in her works, with their blotches and parchment-thin, stretched skin, seem to metamorphose on canvas, imperceptibly shape shifting, becoming a composition, removed

from the real world and placed in a painterly universe of other dimension.

Despins is a master at subverting reality, transforming it into a pictorial subject matter and thus diverting the straightforward reading into a meditative, contemplative experience.

Ostensibly a figurative painter, she has found a way of using the human form to speak of time and space, of the nuance between, what Heidegger called Being and beings. These are no longer hands, the Being is no longer there, but they do 'exist' nevertheless, and suddenly we are in the realm of the metaphysical and the mysterious.

The artist's profound relationship with her mother, her visceral knowledge of her form and spirit, has found its way into every piece in this humbling exhibition; without fanfare, silently, persistently, it breathes through each stroke, and dissipates as quickly as the blink of an eye. All this is told in Despins' signature, fluid style; her palette subdued, luminous while infused with darkness rather than light, tinted with mossy green at times, shimmering against ebony black in most pieces.

This economy of colour places the focus on the composition, which in turn leads to a quasi-spiritual deliverance, as unexpected as it is disquieting, and transformative.

This transcendental aspect is also found in Despins' videos accompanying the exhibition. Done before she embarked on the "Holding On" series, they offer a perfect backdrop to the works on display, echoing the nocturnal feel and drawing the viewer into a magical space where the sound of breathing *paints* the image. Barely a

few minutes long, these short films are a moving - both in terms of motion, and emotion - escape from reality into a lyrical, shadowy world of abstraction. Barely discernible forms appear and disappear, ripples dissipate into fog, hushed by a passing breeze. Ungraspable and irresistible, they are simply mesmerizing. Visions created almost intuitively, born as if of a singularity - the sound of one hand clapping - they soon fade, all is quiet and one is left alone, yet embraced...

Dorota Kozinska is an international writer and art critic based in Montreal, Canada.

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