

# Sisters under the skin

## Visual Arts

### CHANTAL JOFFE

Victoria Miro Gallery

LONDON ★★★★★

Chantal Joffe mostly paints women. A graduate of the Royal College, she first came to public attention when Saatchi bought her series of pornographic paintings and included them in his ill-judged exhibition *New Neurotic Realism*.

In 2000, she featured in an article on the Brixton Breakers, a group of artists that included the iconoclastic Richard Clegg and Ian Dawson, who followed on the heels of Marcus Harvey and Damien Hirst to colonise the dank studios in Minet Road, a drug- and rat-infested corner of south London. They were a macho bunch for a painter who made small-scale images of women and children to hang out with – even if those images had the uncomfortable insouciance and knowingness of Nabokov's *Lolita*.

The scale of Joffe's work has changed. There are some very large paintings

here. In the past, she was more in-your-face, the content more obviously sexual, for she culled her images from the pages of porn and fashion magazines. Now the emotions are more complex and ambiguous. Among the most powerful are her *Mother and Child* series. In one, a baby sits on its naked mother's lap; there is no eye contact between them, no apparent engagement. The mother looks straight at the viewer, challenging, quizzical, apparently hostile, while the child stares out at something in the distance.

In another painting, a naked woman bends to steady her walking toddler. Again her gaze is suspicious, watchful, protective. This is no sentimental Madonna and Child; if looks could kill, this one would. It is the sort of expression that many a social worker must have encountered. In a third work, a mother stands holding her infant. Her lumpy, apparently post-birth, body is clad in a floral dressing-gown. The scale seems distorted; her head somehow does not quite belong to the body beneath. The result is disqui-

eting and uncanny. There is a desire to impose narrative structures on these works, for they seem to suggest both psychodramas and circumstances beyond the picture frame.

Joffe's paintings of women without children have a slightly different look. There is a vacancy in their large dark eyes, as if the only thing of which they are aware is being observed. The young woman in a bee-patterned skirt stands with her shoulders slightly tilted; her arms hang stiffly, while her tight mouth implies a level of self-consciousness. The colour balances between the yellow skirt and her dark top, her pale skin and black hair and the two-tone backdrop all graphically depict a sense of a self divided.

Joffe's paintwork is deliberately loose, as though to bother with anything so déclassé as skill would be too tame. But this is a deceptive position, for her brushwork is in fact highly considered and seems to have appropriated something from Freud's later work. Her fluid, disinte-



**If looks could kill: Chantal Joffe's 'Mother and Child II' (left), 'Bee Woman in Her Bedroom'**

grating style creates a sense of a body (and a psyche) just off centre, somehow destabilised. It is as if her figures are barely holding themselves together and at any moment might both literally and metaphorically dissolve – as in the painting of a woman in a black sleeveless dress, where the paint has dripped and bled down the picture's surface.

Joffe appears to be work-

ing in a similar vein to artists such as Elizabeth Payton and Sophie von Hellerman, but the likeness is, I think, only superficial. While those two painters seem happy to remain dabbling in the shallows of irony, Joffe appears to be attempting something more insightful.

Having apparently relinquished the desire for the easy sexual shock, she has moved into more complex

emotional territory. Her women seem caught in a perpetual struggle both to keep their own counsel while flirting with the desire to confront and seduce the viewer. The place they inhabit is an uncomfortable psychological limbo. This is strong stuff.

**Sue Hubbard**

To 17 December  
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