

Dangerous Beauties: the figure painting of Graham Ovenden

by Joanne Harris (March, 2007)

No-one who has encountered the serene and luminous landscapes of Graham Ovenden, with their extraordinary quality of light, can doubt this artist's mastery in aspects of colour, texture and form. Pure colours applied in brush-strokes so small as to appear almost airbrushed onto the canvas bring to life extravagant trees, mysterious obelisks, wild, apocalyptic skies. But it is with his figure painting – which consists almost exclusively of young girls - that Graham Ovenden truly astonishes, presenting us with a series of unique and challenging portraits that manage at the same time to awe, to intrigue and in some cases, even to shock with their depiction of the pre-adolescent girl in her truest, most touching and sometimes, her most troubling aspects.



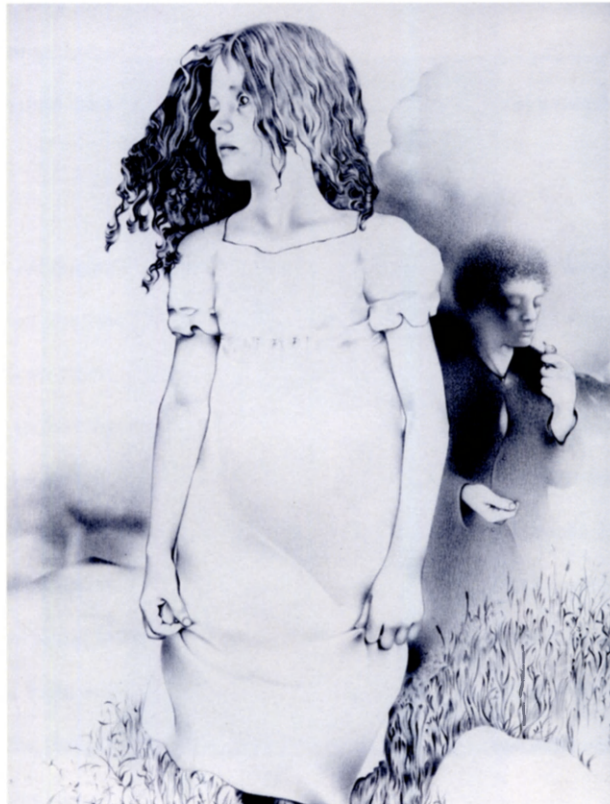
As *Ophelia* (1980/81), she has a peculiarly adolescent look that is half-tragic, half-defiant. I suspect this is what my daughter would call "emo"; reflecting as it does the kind of operatic angst that teenagers manage to do so well. Her head is flung back imperiously as she wades through a river of spring-green, and there is a reddish smear across her mouth, like an unaccustomed trace of lipstick, borrowed for the role and later forgotten. The effect is rather touching; for, as in all adolescents, behind the dramatic pose and the air of defiant assurance, there is a tremendous vulnerability, a need to express individuality as well as the conflicting need to blend in – as indeed, this figure blends quite literally into her background, half emerging from the greenery like Alice through the looking-glass.



Aspects of Alice, the ultimate child-heroine, are one of this artist's perennial subjects. This is not surprising; all of his dream-children have a looking-glass quality; a duality that sets them apart from the everyday world. His own *Alice* (1969/70) manages to combine a sweetly

infantile chubbiness with a smile of tremendous – and possibly sinister – mischief-making potential.

Indeed, there is a keen, but often overlooked sense of humour in many of Ovenden's paintings. His "little maids" are playful, sometimes brooding, sullen, even downright troublesome; not yet adult, though not-quite children, they fix us with the unsettling gaze of visitors from another world. It is a somewhat difficult gaze to meet; part-challenge, part-complicity, it hints at secrets once shared, at half-forgotten memories of a time in our own lives when things were at the same time simpler and immeasurably more complicated than they are today. Innocence is only one part of childhood. There are also darker territories, and through these portraits we are able to glimpse the multiple landscapes of childhood, like fragments of a fairy-tale that unsettles almost as often as it enchants.



For Alice is only one of the many faces of Ovenden's vision of pre-adolescence. The child-heroine re-appears as Cathy in Ovenden's version of *Wuthering Heights*, a scandalously young Cathy to a seemingly much older Heathcliff, with all the implicit connotations of lost childhood, lost innocence, lost love, lost time. Like Keats, Graham Ovenden seeks to depict the ephemeral nature of beauty; the fleeting moment given extra poignancy by virtue of its transience. As a result, many of his portraits have a distinctly haunted look, a fact that the artist, a lover of ghost stories, is himself quick to acknowledge. Part of this is due to the colour schemes favoured by the artist; the flesh tones tinted green or mauve, the brooding shadows, the languid, feline poses of the subjects themselves. Part of it is in the way the girls look out at their audience, their eyes appearing to see much further than the constraints of the picture-frame. Part of it is also perhaps the feeling that somehow the artist has trapped something living within the canvas, some fragment of the subject's soul, like a butterfly under glass.

Many of his portraits are nudes. *Lorraine*, 1964, a portrait of breathtaking beauty and poignancy, depicts a young girl of about nine standing in profile against a dim background into



which her long dark hair merges like a shadowy cloak. Her youthful, slightly S-shaped pose is reminiscent of one of Degas' little dancers, but with her arms almost lost in shadow, and the light reflecting in broad panels onto her skin, giving prominence to her ribs and collarbones, she seems more akin to a tree – a silver birch, perhaps, or a weeping willow – than to a human being at all.



As *Eve*, this identification process emerges even more strongly. The young girl's semi-cruciform pose, one outstretched arm bearing the fruit, serves to identify her with the tree against which she stands, with herself as a tender fruit which, like the apple in her hand, already contains the seeds of its own dissolution. It is an exquisitely beautiful portrait. Though unashamedly sensual, there is nothing lascivious about the girl's pose, and she looks out at us with the forthright gaze of one who is entirely at ease with herself and her world. Her beauty is not quite human; there is something feral in her eyes that suggests a blissful ignorance, not only of sin and corruption, but of the very nature of innocence itself. These things are in the eye of the beholder. In the world of this painting, virtue and vice are irrelevant. The child and the tree are inseparable, like a dryad and its guardian; and as for the apple of knowledge – well. It is up to the spectator himself to take the fruit or to decline it.

This is the artist at his most challenging. For in a world where - deplorably - even to acknowledge the physical beauty of children is to invite suspicion and censure, Ovenden has always refused to conform. The sensuality that permeates his work and that colours his extraordinary landscapes is also apparent in his figure paintings. In spite of his allegiance to such artists as Millais, Hughes and Holman Hunt, his depiction of childhood is the complete antithesis of that comfortable Victorian ideal.

Ovenden's girls are a mystery; a palette of contradictions. They are supremely unselfconscious. They stand, slouch, sprawl, squat in positions that are uniquely childlike; and yet they are aware of their magical, mystical power, a power compounded both of wisdom and of innocence. Nabokov called it "demonic." Freud would have seen it as a natural expression of prepubescent sexuality. Jung would have spoken of archetypes, and of our innate ability to project onto others the darkest aspects of one's own subconscious, allowing them to assume the blame.



Ovenden's portrayal of *Lolita* seems to reflect this point of view. Completed between 1973 and 1975, it takes the form of a series of astonishing pencil drawings (famously reviled by Nabokov), showing Lolita nude, recumbent, seductive, thoughtful, post-coital, and lastly, in *The Final Reproach*, representing both victim and judge, the girl's pointing finger and accusatory stare conveying her contempt and hatred for the one who has seduced her. It is an

uncomfortable topic upon which to dwell, both for the artist and for the audience, and Lolita's gesture condemns not only the fictional Humbert, but anyone who looks at these portraits with the slightest trace of guilt in his heart.

For Ovenden's children are dangerous, for all their apparent vulnerability. Dangerous and powerful, like wild animals in repose that might at any moment, attack. They may be sleeping beauties as yet. But they are on the point of awakening. And when they awaken - to knowledge, to adulthood – Lolita's ambiguously pointing finger becomes not simply as a reproach, but a threat, even a command – *judge ye not, lest ye be judged*.

Some things are just too beautiful to be entirely risk-free. The paintings of Graham Ovenden are among their number.