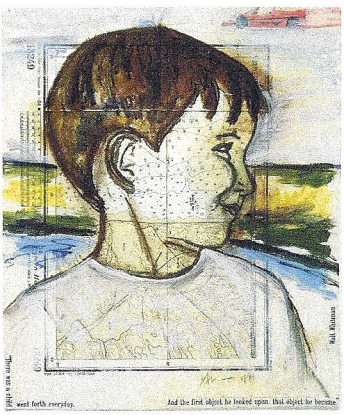
The Chair in the Landscape

Memory is the opponent of time. But memory's duel with time is hampered by its lack of natural structure, its jumble of recorded words, objects, sounds, visual and tactile impressions, and the tendency of later thoughts to insinuate themselves into past events. Absent some sustained effort to give structure to the past, this may be why



Evan From the Side, Acrylic on Paper Collage, 1998

memory defensively and involuntarily tends to congeal around inanimate objects which, while not immortal, at least have the virtue of not living or dying from moment to moment as we do. This may also be why Anne Pundyk's collage-paintings are usually dominated by chairs or urns or vases or cups, domestic stuff which, because they are also meant to contain things, suggest simultaneously a set of human extensions and absences. The tone is one of intimacy, balanced by a matter-of-fact presentation, as in her images of children. This intimate tone, however, is often belied by the sensation that we don't fully recognize what is being said. It is like being lulled by a voice in a broadcast only to realize suddenly that it is in a foreign language. The children depicted seem to grow more private the closer we look, the chairs more peculiar and anthropomorphic. And then there is the intrusion of odd texts that can be anything from zen-like anecdotes to odd banalities to mild sarcasms. It is as if the artist, composing a picture from things outside of her, cannot help sneaking in all sorts of small narratives that lead one to another covert picture underneath.

Sometimes they break through with urgency and comic results. A chair set in the foreground of marshy panorama is aimed, like a seat in a lecture, towards a pair of disembodied hands that appear like portents in the sky, signing an incomprehensible message, while the chair, surrounded by delicately painted blooming grasses, balloons into a weird mask. The map below turns out to be of the Congo and the inscription around the border reads like one of those annoying mantras made up for the self-help, success in business crowd (inscriptions in Pundyk's work often present prickly little surprises). Despite its somewhat giddy humor, the work seems to be not only a study in frustration about the demands of the office and briefcase as against those of contemplation and nature, but of how something that might have begun as an odd marriage of furniture and landscape quickly fills up with all sorts of racing thoughts. This sense of the contest between the interior, subjective world and the objective, outer world is reinforced by Pundyk's brushstroke, where we see her making an end run around most modern art, back to Sargent and Impressionism. While they may lavish beauty on their subjects, brushstrokes like these presuppose observation of an exterior world and, if sometimes expressive, are not wholly made up out of the self.

This shifting back and forth between figments of the world and the interior of the mind is like an alternating current that drives Pundyk's work, producing a quiet hum that may unexpectedly begin crackling and sparking with surprises, thoughts and counter-thoughts, sentimentality and dryness, the attractions of nostalgia and the nagging particulars of existence, the simultaneous wish to make time stand still yet to burst out of the moment, in short, to prolong as long as possible life's satisfying predicaments. Does anyone recognize this woman?

— Robert E. Evren, Los Altos, CA

Chair I, Acrylic on Paper Collage, 1989