

June 27, 2017

A Clean Sweep



Messy Studio, Le Chalard, June 2017

It seems to me that since I wrote my last blog in central London, and since I landed here in the middle of nowhere in rural France, I have done nothing but "*ranger*" - a great word in French that connotes more than sorting, more than organising, and more than tidying.

My French studio was full of dead flies, wasp nests and spider webs. Half-squeezed tubes of paint and half-finished paintings cluttered the surfaces and floor. My country house was silted up with things that I had meant to recycle or give away or take to the dump for the last ten years. Clothes that I wore last in the late 80's

when we bought the house, and I was a mere sylph, were clogging up my cupboards. My garden, a very colourful painter's garden with asymmetrical plantings -- and which is known as a "jardin de curé" here in France (a polite euphemism for a messy English garden) was attacked with a mad, inexhaustible energy. It seemed imperative to go into every nook and cranny, both inside and outside, and once I got started I couldn't stop. I swept, I hoovered, I climbed ladders, I pruned, I clipped. A crazy woman. All in 35°C heat.

It did not escape me that for all its visible benefits (a clearer, cleaner, lighter environment) it was a very good excuse not to attack my work. Ideas that had been cooking silently in the studio for the last six months and had called out to me "come and rescue me" were studiously ignored. Guilt stalked me (I sometimes think it is one of the prime forces that propel me to work) but I thought I would experiment with embracing denial - not something I am very good at practicing.

Then yesterday it occurred to me that doing this kind of manic housekeeping, what they call "life laundry" in women's magazines, and what I call "ranging" in Franglais, is actually not very different from making a painting, which is for me a way of finding out what I am thinking, and organising my thoughts into a coherent language, with beginnings, middles and ends. The outside world, and the inside world collide.

I can see, now that it is all done, that there is method in my madness.

Sweeping the studio is something I do every day of my working life. It's a mystical sweeping away of dusty old thoughts, and an essential part of my day. What I have been doing here is sweeping on a grand scale.

Now - back to work.