

Lily of the Lower East Side (For Philip Evergood with Love) 2024

oil on canvas 79 ½ x 68 inches



Lily of the Lower East Side is the second painting to be completed in a new body of work begun earlier this year. Through this new work I am exploring an approach to realist painting which draws upon my earlier urban landscapes and more recent developments into visionary figuration and cubism.

A realist painting, by its nature, must convince the viewer of its believability; that the world which exists within the frame could be entered, its spaces explored, its surfaces touched, and the air breathed. This is so much more than a configuration of symbols to be read. Its space is real and in

parallel with our own reality. It operates and reassures the viewer on degrees of likeness, and conversely, can arrest the viewer on degrees of unlikeness.

This is the terrain of realisms that have been variously described as magical, metaphysical or hyper and where I would cite this new body of work. The line between recognition and divergence, certainty and uncertainty, the actual and the fictive.

The full title of this painting is *Lily of the Lower East Side, (For Philip Evergood with Love)*. I have made a number of paintings that have been overtly dedicated to artists who have been important in their creation. Complex figurative and realist painting cannot happen in a vacuum. It is always a consequence of art history as much as my own invention. But I have come to think of certain, particular works as “postcards” offered with love and thanks to the remarkable creative spirit of others. There may be a thread of style, philosophy or narrative that ties the painting to another point in art history. Thoughts of Evergood’s painting *Lily and the Sparrows* gained momentum as I began to introduce the birds in the latter stages of a preparatory drawing.

Philip Evergood was an extraordinary painter of the American scene during the interwar period. He was so much more than the social realist that he is typically labelled as. Fiercely independent, he rejected the conventions of academic figuration (and the illustrational realism so ubiquitous amongst his fellow painters), to find a compelling naivety that is both haunting and funny. To me, his humanism is touching without being sentimental.



Philip Evergood *Lily and the Sparrows* 1939

Evergood wrote about the conception of this painting,

I was walking along (that section under the old El, between Sixth Street and West Broadway) in a sort of dream, thinking of something else....and I happened to stop at the curb, just dreaming....and I looked up, and here was an amazing sight. A little, bald-headed, white, beautiful white little face was in a window with her little bits of crumbs - alone. She could have fallen out and been killed – leaning out of the window there with her little crumbs, looking up, and there were a couple of little sparrows flying around in the air. I thought to myself, my God, this is a chance in a life time... This tells the story and I've been given this just for standing here.

My interpretation of Evergood's painting appears on the back wall of the sparsely furnished room in a modernised New York tenement building on the Lower East Side. Although my scene is an invention, as indeed is Evergood's composition, it recalls my memory of being in New York back in 2017 when I was staying in an apartment in Chinatown with my wife and daughter. One beautiful sunny morning I recall photographing my wife standing in the light of the window. I then stuck my head out of the window and photographed the fire escapes and street below. Looking to the right, and at the far end of the street, I could see one of the few remnants of the El railway still on Manhattan. In the other direction I could see City Hall.

Seven years later I had reason to browse through these photographs. I was working on the first painting in this new series *Over Night Stop* which shows my wife sleeping in a hotel room. Through the window, London stretches out beyond the railway platforms of Vauxhall Station. On the wall behind her is an image of Rousseau's *The Dream*. I wanted to counter this night painting with its opposite, a scene full of daylight and a figure rising to embrace the city. *Lily of the Lower East Side* began as a pendant to *Over Night Stop*.



The photographs are a beginning. They are just some random snaps. Nothing suggests a composition, as they are just bits of information; a car in one, perhaps, some iron work in another. The arrangement and juxtaposition of spaces happens only through the process of drawing. Over several days of working on paper (the original sheet was extended on both sides), I decided upon the central division of the composition into exterior and interior worlds, and a seated figure on a tiny bed sited in front of an invisible window. The El at the top of the street was replaced with the towers of City Hall. The elaborate iron work of the fire escape stripped right back to a minimal structure. What emerged was a construct to allow the viewer to navigate a space of morning rising and the interaction between city, animal and human life.



Lily of the LES, (for Evergood with Love) 2024 graphite on paper 28 x 24 inches

This drawing helped to determine the proportions of the final canvas. Further drawings of the figure, drawn freely and intuitively on larger sheets of paper (without a model) helped to find its final size. This new series has returned my painting to a larger format but also one that is very human. There is a fine line between that which we can mentally occupy and the enlarged or overblown which alienates us. So, I am making decisions about scale on what strikes me as right as I respond to all that is unfolding in front of me. This is also the case when I am judging perspectives. My earlier realist work employed overly complex mathematical calculations to find a perspective that appeared more authentic than the limited geometry of Renaissance doctrine. 10 years on and I am superseding this mathematics with an instinctive and intuitive process. There are no horizon lines, vanishing and

station points. I have honed my abilities and learnt to trust my judgement and facility to draw. I am sure this is a consequence of working for so many years on visionary paintings as well as the discipline of drawing in the life room which I have maintained throughout.

The painting is first laid out thinly in umber and then developed quite extensively as a grisaille in umber and lead white. The colour is then brought in, first as a colour underpainting which is then varnished and subsequently developed through an overpainting which heightens both tonal depth and colour vibrancy. Using both intermediary varnishes, glazes, scumbles and impasto, the final surface is rich and varied.

I am, foremostly, a painter. I want to *paint* space, light, texture, air, movement. I could represent these things in other ways, for example through using a lens-based medium. And even if I didn't use a camera to these ends, I could imitate the means through which photography represents form. I could copy its exaggerated perspectives, its homogenous pixelation and its frozen moment in time. Perhaps this is what photorealism has become, but this is surely antithetical to painting. For me, the painted mark is the essential building block. The detail of painting is to be concerned with the mark's material property, its colour, density, transparency, shape and edge. From this, everything is born.

Combine this with a realist concern for the particular; the desire to pin down the form of a distant building or a bird in flight and it is inevitable that those building blocks can become fairly small. There are passages in this painting reminiscent of a Divisionist painting, though not a consistency of uniform marks across the entire surface. This is varied in accord with the needs of what is being described and the flow and rhythm of brush marks around the painting.

There is a further tie to Divisionism (and the theory behind Pointillism), in the use of colour. I was trained by a superb colourist, the abstract expressionist David Tinker, but even with this astonishing foundation it has taken me decades to understand how to use pure colour in realist painting. Although built over an umber underpainting, the painting displaces earth colours and black and white greys for enriched neutrals of juxtaposed primaries, often using primary purples, greens and oranges to simulate secondary blues, reds and yellows. In an era where so many realist painters, such as the acolytes of Nerdrum, are rejecting colour, I want a realist painting that advances and celebrates the possibilities of colour, using colour to create light, space and movement.

Although I began with drawings of my wife, Gaynor, in the interior, it seemed incongruous to have her play the role of Lily in the emerging drama. Lily would always be Gaynor. So, I invented a figure based on studies made from a professional life model who I had worked with back in 2016. My memory of her actual appearance has now faded. My Lily has her own identity, but her physiognomy also connects the painting to English magic realism of the 1920s and 1930s, such as those wonderful women conjured by Frampton and Brockhurst. It is interesting to consider how Evergood rejected the conventions of classicism to forge an idiosyncratic figuration more suited to his depictions of the American working class, whereas I find myself questioning the commonplace conventions of photorealism for a more rarefied approach. I don't want the mundane renditions of photorealism. It has, after all, become the folk art of the modern world practised to varying degrees by almost every Sunday painter and a great many art stars alike. Without recourse to historic pastiche, I want to assert a particular connection to Western art history, its depth, beauty and sophistication, the grace of which has been under pressure in our pervading culture of socio/political concerns. It's the right time to be making these paintings.

The visionary series of paintings, which I concluded earlier this year, were built upon organic frameworks. Each painting emerged from a drawing typically made in the garden or life room of natural form. Back in the studio, the complex network of lines found in nature suggested an array of motifs, figures and all manner of creatures, and the morphic transition of one form into another.



Flight at Lockdown 2020-2023 oil on canvas 30 x 40 inches

Although aesthetically quite different, it is now possible to see *Flight at Lockdown*, a work from this series, as a manifestation of some of the themes in *Lily of the Lower East Side*. But this painting, in so many ways, is much darker. All those figures teeter precariously on the edge, sharing the window ledge with several birds. Below, there are more birds in flight. They have the freedom to escape to a landscape of hills and rolling fields inferred through the central section of the painting. But our Lily is not incarcerated in the city in the way that these figures appear. The darkness has lifted. She looks at the flock of birds in the sky in a spirit of sharing their freedom and optimism. The pigeon on the window ledge is content to share her space.

The visionary works are full of subtle shifts in imagery. Each element of the painting services to create a multitude of different forms; the more we look, the more we see. In comparison, although *Lily of the Lower East Side* has a seemingly more advanced mode of representation (cubist figuration has been replaced with a deft realism), it is also a much simpler vista apparently free of ambiguity.

However, it has inherited some of that spirit of metamorphosis.



Consider, for example the large flying bird and how it has a second and third head that takes it off into different directions, or how, when we look again, within its wings, we can see a head of a figure looking to the left, another echo perhaps of Evergood's Lily. These transitions not only extend the narrative but create a flux, animating the image and breaking the stillness.

There are other examples. Look at Lily's head and how her dark hair cuts a new profile on the right side. The figure is orientated both into the room and out of the window, one bathed in light, the other a

dark silhouette. And, again, there is another figure, male this time, contained within Lily's features. (See how Lily's ear becomes a man's nose in profile, and we find his mouth in the edge of her neck).



In truth, whatever I am painting, I always have the full drama in mind and all the constituent parts that have created it. Inevitably then, there is a multitude of half-formed figures, and formal echoes of the architecture. The dark shadow cast by Lily suggests her bending to the right; the strip of light and shade on the building façade on the far left is repeated as a mirror on the right, reinforcing a symmetry and a balance of opposites.

More significant to me, is the curving line which contains the sunlit illumination of the street in the centre of the painting. This line also demarcates the profile of Evergood's Lily, with her high forehead, leaning out of the window, (the street furniture and cars also double as her eye and mouth). I stumbled into this when making the drawing and knew that I had found something worthy of a large painting. That profile of Lily may now be buried into the fabric of the work. It may go unnoticed, but it remains the bedrock of this piece, as it unifies my indebtedness to art history (with all that that entails) with memories of my existential being in the world. Special events both within the cultural lexicon and my own history.



Clive Head 17/11/2024