

From the Mayor's Doorstep, No. 84 (1 June 2009)
 Supplement to the DeLuxe print edition

Cara London. *Oranges in a Bag*. 2008. Oil on canvas. 16 x 20 in.

The myth regarding Clement Greenberg is that he liked only abstract art, and wouldn't tolerate representational. What he said to me (more than once) was that he preferred looking at representational painting, though I, on the basis of his writing, and other things he said, set this remark into a larger context. What I believe he meant was that — other things being equal — he liked representational painting better than abstract, but that other things never were equal, and that therefore he'd found the best new art he saw to be abstract. Still, as he put it in 1959, in *The Saturday Evening Post* (of all places), "The ratio of bad abstract painting to good is actually much greater than the ratio of bad to good representational painting." I've also read that Dorothy Knowles, the Canadian painter, was encouraged by Greenberg at an Emma Lake workshop in 1962 to paint representationally, despite the prevalence of abstraction. Cara London had much the same experience, more recently and much closer to my own home — in a Triangle Artists' Workshop at the Mashomack Fish and Game Preserve in 1986.

Born in Brooklyn in 1961, daughter of a stockbroker and a homemaker, London grew up on Long Island, and was early known as one of the "artists" in her grade. She had regular art classes in public school, as well as a sculpture class outside of it, but when she went to Brandeis University in Waltham MA, it was more because she had a boyfriend at Boston University. than because of its art program (she expected to major in economics "or something like that"). Then she took Art History 101 with Carl Belz, and loved it. "I can do that," she thought, quoting the song in "A Chorus Line," and wound up majoring in art history. Belz introduced her to the art of Helen Frankenthaler in his course on art since 1945, and she loved that, too, but in terms of her own practice, she was still more interested in sculpture, as well as drawing. After taking her BA from Brandeis in 1983, she began attending the New York Studio School in the summer of 1983, and studying sculpture there with Sidney Geist and Peter Agostini. The Studio School had a joint program with the Parsons School of Design/New School University, and from Parsons she would receive an MFA in sculpture in 1985 (studying sculpture there with Ronald Bladen, Michael Gitlin and George Trakas).

More importantly, though, one of her fellow students, Sasha Silverstein, told her about an informal painting workshop with John Adams Griefen, and she wound up attending it from 1984 to 2001. It turned her interest more in the direction of painting, though as London herself says, "I don't think sculpture has left me — that sense of structure." Certainly, its influence can be seen in paintings like *Oranges in a Bag*, with its muscular three-dimensionality. In Griefen's workshop, London drew and painted from life. There were still lifes, set up in the studio, models, and little studio "scenes" (corners of Griefen's studio, with its studio impedimenta — brushes, paints, etc.). In the summer,

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the group migrated north to Griefen's country home, and painted landscapes *sur le motif*. The group was also exposed to the work of the best abstract painters through talking, looking at reproductions, and occasionally going to a show. They saw Griefen's own abstract paintings, too, but the group did little abstract painting in class themselves, to the best of London's recollection. She's not really sure why they didn't do more large abstract works on the floor. "Perhaps the presence of John's work surrounding us was too great, perhaps it was easier to 'push' the students in a different way," she recalls. "But I wanted to work my way through the drawing, and, as someone who has a great appreciation for art history, through time. Maybe it was easier to do that and you could 'push' your way forward when you were working with something tangible. I have no idea if this makes any sense. But it was in this class that I was introduced to the work of contemporary abstract painters."

In the summer of 1986, she went to Triangle, was given her own stall in one of the painting barns, and encouraged to paint whatever she wanted. She wanted to paint abstract, to "reconnect with that old impulse to push paint around. But for the most part, it fell flat. I was inspired by so many people's work, but I couldn't find my own voice. I also couldn't leave well enough alone. I would do something, and it should have been done, but it seemed so quick. So, I would work it to death until I killed it." Finally, she looked out the window and saw another little barn, set back amidst trees. She decided to make a little landscape of that barn. "It was a complete relief to look at something," she says. "Struggle with it, and somehow use it to paint." Not long afterwards, Greenberg came around, to see what everybody was doing and critique it.. He looked at London's little landscape, *Barn at Mashomack*, and said "That's where your heart is." London has painted representationally ever since.

Today, she lives in Flemington, NJ, with her husband, Eric Sirota, a physicist who works at a nearby Exxon Mobil research lab, and in his spare time writes music. They have two children, Julia, 13, and Craig, 11. London has exhibited a good deal locally, and has also done much teaching. She often brings books about abstract painters in to show her students the elements of good composition and usages of color, and one can see the effects of paying close attention to abstraction in her own paintings as well — whether still lifes, figure studies or landscapes (she continues to do all three). *Oranges in a Bag* is notable on many counts beyond its firm sense of structure. One challenge with representational painting is always to find a subject that hasn't been done to death, yet still has a timeless appeal. It is practically impossible for any painter to depict apples, for example, without summoning up memories of Cézanne, but oranges in a shiny plastic bag is somehow a lot fresher and more timely without being tacky. The way the brilliant orange color dominates the upper regions of the canvas, with the less aggressive whites and pale grays of the embroidered tablecloth below, also recalls abstraction, and contrasts with the familiarity of so many representational paintings, which locate the heavier colors in the lower part of the canvas. Finally, there is the scale of the oranges and the tablecloth — so big in proportion to the size of the canvas that they recall the large, simple and hypnotically holistic images of a Rothko, a Noland, or a Bush... .. (© Copyright 2009 by Piri Halasz)

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