

1985/86



Gretchen Albrecht  
*Seasonal/Four Paintings*

## ALBRECHT'S SEASONAL

### I

In Albrecht's project *Seasonal*, two elements long used in her work, one apparently of "form", the other of "subject", come clearly together. These two elements: first, a persistent use of the hemispheric, or lunette form, which connotes, as well as the modernist shaped canvas, a vast classic tradition of architectural painting; and second, a persistent reference to the traditional subject of Nature.

Nature, of course, is not truly an object observable in the world; it is a cultural construct, it is the long history – it is the endless, eddying trace – of a human idea. And the Four Seasons is one of the most abiding forms of that old idea.

Albrecht's four paintings, *Blossom*, *Arbour*, *Orchard* (for Keats), and *Exile*, are concerned with the rich connotatory realms of the idea of the Four Seasons. They dwell at once in those realms, and on them; they are at once formed by them, and re-form them; they are both their issue, and their re-issue. So, coming out to meet the forms of the Four Seasons as they exist too in the spectator's mind, Albrecht's four paintings make their play.

For the idea of the Four Seasons is already speaking in us – leaning out of our eyes, as out of a window, to speak Nature in its own works, colours, sounds. For speech, not silence sounds in the head, our culture speaks us there; nor are we ever alone; the figures of culture, such figures as those of the Four Seasons, are already moving about, through, and within us – or rather, we are constituted by such figures of culture's speech.

Of course, Albrecht's paintings have always encouraged the spectator's participation in a level of connotation, through their



February (detail), *Calendar landscape, Les Grandes Heures de Jean Duc de Berry*, 1409. A derivative of Pucelle's *Belleville Breviary Calendar*.

words which announce, or even dictate, a layer of connotation – with titles like *Fuchsia* or *Garden*, or *Day and Night*. Though she is what is called an abstract painter, her titles have never been assertively formalist: no *Painting no. 12*, or *Red Painting*, for her, no proclamation of painting's autonomy from the world, such as we have seen, say, in the paintings of Mrkusich or Peebles. Rather, they have sounded like this: *Lunette (Silken)*; *Nature Study*; *Florabunda*; *Spring Painting*; *Blue/Green (Lagoon)*.

If Albrecht's titles have sometimes seemed in part the assertion of a modernist literalism about painting's own maternity – as, for instance, in the part-title *Blue/Green* – everywhere in her work there is asserted too the possibility of the lift, the surge, the uncontrollable carrying away of the mind to regions more verbal – to regions outside the material facts of colour and form, to the diffuse and sumptuous realms of connotation.

So, to the part-title *Blue/Green*, Albrecht will append a connotational possibility of those colours, and of the chromatic depth and the curve in which they find themselves – she appends the word *Lagoon*.

If what the modernist title had attempted was the closure of the painting to verbal meaning, a repression, a castration of meaning, what Albrecht's titles have always asserted is, on the contrary – in their own words – the surge, the irruption, the plume, the carrying away on the wing of meaning.

A carrying away to what? Here, to the Four Seasons. To all the prospects they open out.

## II

**Seasonal** (a) Pertaining to or characteristic of the seasons of year, or to some of them.

(b) Pertaining to the seasons or periods of human life.  
*(Shorter Oxford Dictionary)*

This double meaning of the seasons, in which Albrecht's four paintings too find their place, is an old, old idea.

Of the medieval concept of the seasons, for instance, Pearsall and Salter have written: "Nothing except his personal narrative of birth and death more urgently signalled to medieval man of mutability than the changing aspect of landscape and weather."<sup>1</sup>

Death was seen then even in summer ripeness.

Lo, Lo, lordes, lo! and ladys, taketh hede,  
Hit lasteth nat longe that is lycour swete,  
As pees-coddes and pere-Ionettes, plomes and chiries.  
That lyghtiche launceth up litel while dureth  
And that that rathest rypeth roteth most saunest.

Earlier still, in classical writing and painting:

Young Spring was there, wreathed with floral crown;  
Summer, all unclad, with garlands of ripe grain; Autumn was  
there, stained with trodden grape; and icy Winter, with white  
and bristly locks.

(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book II)

Already, much as it is in Albrecht's *Seasonal*, Nature was personified, made metaphor for human states, for blisses, or agonies, or desolations. To take but one of Albrecht's Four Seasons for instance, her Winter, called *Exile*, might be traced right back to Ovid, to his exile in bleak Pontus, a "country gripped by stiffening cold".

Later, medieval poetry was to see the passing of the seasons as a text upon a vaster loss, and in the Fall from the garden of paradise, an exile from grace.

If in this exile there was the consolation of Spring and Summer, Summer too, it was said, must yearly suffer exile:

Summer to a strange land  
Is into exile gone . . .

And silence grieves the air,  
For all the birds are into exile gone.

All the sensuous and appalling fact of the seasons was read as a text, whose message, couched though it might be in terms of beauty, was one of mutability and death.

By this same causes the floury yer yeldeth swote smelles in the first sesoun warminge; and hote somer dryethe the cornes; and autumpne comith ayein hevy of apples; and the fletyng reyn bydweth the wynter. This atempraunce norysscheth and bryngeth forthe alle thynges that brethith lif in this world; and thilke same atempraunce, ravysschng, hideth and bynymeth, and drenceth under the laste deth, alle thinges iborn.

## III

By chance (but what is chance in the meetings of age-old structures of human thought), the two elements which Albrecht's *Seasonal* bring together, the lunette and the seasons, come also together in the first pure landscapes in the history of western art: in Jean

Pucelle's little landscapes of the months in the calendar of the Belleville Breviary (c.1325), and in the calendars of related manuscript books.

From time immemorial the months had been characterised by the labours and pastimes peculiar to each . . . This tradition, one of the most unvarying in the history of art, was abandoned, however, in the Belleville Breviary and its derivatives, in favour of a totally different principle: the character of each month must be inferred, not from human activity, but from the changing aspect of nature . . . no human figure is present. We have before us nothing but landscapes showing bare trees in January, a heavy rain in February, budding branches in March, flowers in May, a ripe cornfield in July, falling leaves in the fall months . . . Diagrammatic though they are, these rudimentary little landscapes – all surmounted by arches on which the sun travels from left to right in the course of the year – announce a truly revolutionary shift of interest from the life of man to the life of nature. They are the humble ancestors of the famous Calendar pictures in the *Tres Riches Heures de Duc de Berry*, and ultimately, of the *Seasons* by Pieter Bruegel.

(Erwin Panofsky, Early Netherlandish Painting)

And they are distant ancestors too, one might say, of Albrecht's *Fours Seasons*, where too no human figure is seen, and the character of each must be inferred not from human activity, but from the changing aspect of nature; and where Summer is characterised by the arboured gold of sun and grain, Spring by the green curve of garland and the pink of blossom, Autumn by the red and orange of fallen leaf, and the purple of grape, and Winter by a white dust as of snow, and the colours of frost and ice, which, as in Langland's

Ysekles in eveses, thorw hete of the sonne  
Melteth in a mynet to myst and to watere

#### IV

Though Albrecht's *Seasonal* brings triumphantly together elements long used in her work, it announces too a major change.

From 1981 to 1985, the visibly curving sweeps of colour through Albrecht's lunettes, while serving also to dramatise the act of painting, have served most especially to illuminate the structure of the lunette form itself; endlessly to trace, and so repeatedly to mark out, the curved grid of its own internal forces. They illuminated the arching spread of that single surface; they marked its real structural division into two; they lit the whole up for our attention.

Now, however, there is a far more assertive painting on: Albrecht assumes the freedom to paint something like a figure, as the lunette's internal structure becomes ground for an asserted figure made over it. It is as if over one of her earlier lunettes she has emphatically painted a figure – a difference made clear in the technical facts that over the acrylic ground of the earlier lunettes, the figure is now added in oil, and that the first is a stain, internal to the canvas, while the second is an impasto stroke, standing proud from the weave.

Each canvas has now, over the curved grid of the ground, a figure: in *Blossom*, the lunette's brow is wreathed with a garland of green and its centre marked with a wisteria-like vertical, and there are green wisps through the pink; in *Arbour*, we have what Pearsall and Salter, speaking of a 15th century illumination, called "the fiery trellis of the sun"; in *Orchard (for Keats)*, there is a pulpy vertical up the centre (ripe, overripe), and a purple hole, like a hole in a cloud; in *Exile*, there is a bough-like *repoussoir* to the left, while a frozen fountain, a cold blue flame, pierces the centre.

Hole, garlands, *repoussoirs*, fountains? Albrecht is now making space. She hovers, now on the edge of the figurative.

Francis Pound

<sup>1</sup> Derek Pearsall and Elizabeth Salter, *Landscapes and Seasons of the Medieval World*. Readers of their book will recognise my debt to them.



*Orchard (for Keats) 1985*

## Biography

Born 1943, Auckland, New Zealand

- 1964 Graduated DFA Hons, in Painting, School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland
- 1972-1973 Teaching Fellow in Painting, School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland
- 1979 Travelled extensively in USA and Europe
- 1981 Frances Hodgkins Fellow, University of Otago Dunedin
- 1983 Visited USA to make prints (2 months)
- 1984 Lived and painted in Melbourne, Australia, for three months
- 1985 Exhibited in NZ/NY painting exhibition, New York, USA, travelled to USA and Europe

## Catalogue

1. **Arbour** 1985  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
1830 x 3660 mm
2. **Blossom** 1985  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
1830 x 3660 mm
3. **Exile** 1985  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
1830 x 3660 mm
4. **Orchard (for Keats)** 1985  
oil and acrylic on canvas  
1830 x 3660 mm

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