ART AND OCCUPATION

Lindsay Crooks

Women Bootmakers 1991

Light streams into a drab grey room where three older women are hard at work making boots. This ‘chiaroscuro’ effect gives the scene an almost spiritual quality, as the women, their faces suffused with light, busy themselves on individual tasks, singing as they work. On the left, a red-headed, bespectacled lady in blue leans heavily on her elbows; her hands (lit by an angle-poise lamp) tightly grip a leather piece, which she pushes through a sewing machine head. On the right, another lady in blue (with a distinct ‘dowager’s hump’) hunches over an ‘upper’, checking the toe stitching she has just completed. In the centre, a lady in pink, glue gun resting by her right hand, tries hard to avoid getting adhesive on her fingers (is she wearing gloves?). She leans forward, delicately lifting an insole destined for one of the four boots lined up on the ergonomically challenged workbench in front of her. Empty black ‘tote bins’ on either side frame the composition and help to draw the eye into the scene. Movement, rhythm and a sense of camaraderie follow the production process round the room. There is no hidden agenda. No metaphors or symbolism. What you see is what you get—a positive endorsement of honest labour. The artist’s signature and the date are seen in the bottom right-hand corner.

This painting by the New Zealand artist Lindsay Crooks is one of a series of 12 commissioned in 1990 by Professor Bill Glass [1], intended to be reproduced.
as postcards and exchanged with colleagues overseas. Eventually, Crooks completed nearly 40 paintings [2]. All the paintings are in watercolour and pastel on paper (600 × 400 mm) and include scenes of fishing, housework, office work, carpentry, forestry, farm work, process work, schools, horticulture, hospitals, bakeries and factories. Crooks made preparatory sketches ‘on site’ in pencil and pastel and completed the paintings in his studio. His portrayal of workers reflects his own approach to life—cheerful, positive and perhaps a little romantic. He rejoices in simple pleasures and ordinary everyday things while conveying a deep sense of humanity and respect, celebrating his bootmakers as ‘working-class heroes of provincial life’ [3]. Crooks was a consummate draftsman with wonderful life-drawing skills. His simple yet beautifully conceived figures move ‘in a cinematic slow-dissolve’ with ‘zones of colour from which, energy seems to squeeze and pulsate’ [4]. Their form and perspective are reminiscent of Croatian naïve folk art [5]; their composition suggestive of Léger [6]; and their colours evocative of Dufy or Chagall [1].

Lindsay Crooks was born in 1957 at Timaru (160 km southwest of Christchurch, New Zealand). His father was a builder/carpenter and his mother a Latin teacher. He went to the local primary school, then Timaru Boy’s High, before attending Dunedin Polytechnic School of Fine Arts, from where he graduated in 1978. He spent the next 2 years travelling the world before returning to Dunedin. A trade union-funded trip to Russia in 1985 had considerable influence on him and one of his paintings still hangs in Moscow’s Pushkin Museum [7]. Afterwards, he went back to teaching life drawing at Dunedin Polytechnic (1988). In 1999, the New Zealand Department of Labour used his ‘Mahuhuia—Carey’s Bay’ (1991), an image of boat-building (also commissioned by Bill Glass), as the cover for an occupational health report [8]. Sadly, Lindsay’s painting career was cruelly cut short. He developed a brain tumour and died 8 months later in 2005.

The hazards of footwear manufacture are well known [9] and have migrated ‘en masse’ to evolving economies, where the risks have often been poorly managed [10], sometimes drawing unfavourable press attention [11]. As a consequence, some major corporations have joined the International Labour Organization (ILO) has issued many declarations on labour standards [12]; the World Health Organization (WHO) has provided practical health and safety forums [13]; and the Health & Safety Executive Guidance. Part 13 – How to control process risks which apply largely to the footwear industry. http://www.hse.gov.uk/textiles/audit/part13.htm (17 January 2012, date last accessed).

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Bill Glass, who suggested this painting and supplied me with references, textbooks and numerous examples of the artist’s work; and to Lindsay’s widow and fellow artist Janet Weir, who continues to run the South Seas Gallery (on the ocean road at Brighton near Dunedin [15]) where she and her husband lived and worked together for many years.

References