

FELICITY MARA

Sixteen paintings

Lightness of Being Felicity Mara's Lyrical Abstraction

Helen Dunmore

The B road between Penzance and St Ives is Felicity Mara's daily route from studio to home. The road curves across broad contours of moor, rust-brown with bracken in late autumn and winter.

Granite hedges and ruined engine houses define the landscape. Deserted shafts lead down to hundreds of miles of mineworkings, which run out beneath the sea-bed, and criss-cross under moor and farmland. This is a complicated, long-inhabited landscape, where Bronze Age field patterns survive around Zennor, and fields are set with huge granite standing stones. Somewhere, always, there's a yellow burst of gorse. The West Penwith peninsula is so narrow here that the sea lies visible first on one hand and then on the other. As the road climbs steeply uphill from Penzance, the improbable structure of St Michael's Mount floats in the cup of the bay to the south.

This passage from southern coast to northern is the landscape of Felicity Mara's painting *The Journey Home* (page 33), where winter light pierces through bold curves which echo these distinctive Penwith contours. The painting breathes intimacy; these are places Mara knows at all times and in many weathers. The painting draws the onlooker deep into its generous imaginative space, marked but not confined by characteristic forms of tree, framed views of water, telegraph wires, barns and cottages crouching close to the earth.

Mara's studio is in a former telephone exchange, where the austerity of the space is illuminated by the colour, form and line of her work. Certain notes of colour recur. There are bold punctuations of ultramarine; clear, singing yellow; cello-brown; a wonderfully subtle range of greys and blues; lavender, orange, violet and magenta. Her colouring is exhilarating: she uses acrylics with the opacity of tempera, as well as oils, and allows the luminosity of the ground to glow through the painted surface. Sometimes she sprays an unprimed canvas with water to give fluidity to the paint.

Line is a striking feature of her work. There's strong sense of drawing in these paintings: of a line searched out and followed; of shapes reduced and simplified into potent motifs which grow more and more eloquent as the onlooker's gaze settles. Often the rhythm of the line becomes dance-like. Mara's deep interest in calligraphy is reflected in the subtlety,

sensitivity and fluidity of her line. Certain themes recur and are reworked from painting to painting, as well as within particular paintings. The harmonies of music are evoked by the rich shape of a cello, by a seeding of notes or by a colour allusion to the wood of an instrument. *Cello in Landscape* (page 21) is one of her fullest statements about the power of this instrument, whose echoing curves are as assured as they are emotionally resonant.

Another recurring theme is the sea. Mara's handling of this hugely evocative presence moves effortlessly between the figurative and the abstract without settling on either. Her gift for lyrical abstraction means that certain motifs – a harbour entrance, a blue triangle in a fold of hills, a bay framed by window or curtains – combine a subtle, even symbolic resonance with formal power. The longing and sense of mystery aroused by the sea are very powerful in these paintings. In *Nightscape* (page 35), the little boat seems to be rocked in the cradle of the painting's rich, subtle blues, while at the same time it sets out on a voyage for a hidden country. In other paintings, curtains billow, concealing the sweep of a tide, or water ebbs from pale sand, leaving reflected forms.

Mara works with great economy to reduce her forms to their essence, and liberate their full power. This is very clearly seen in *Summer* (page 5), where the calligraphic purity of line emphasises the radiant energy of colour. For all their rigour, the paintings possess an extraordinary quality of joy, the 'lightness of being' celebrated by Milan Kundera.

Influences as diverse as Miró, Bonnard and Frankenthaler inform the work. Chagall's blend of luminosity and earthiness is another presence, but Mara's poetic quality and depth of colour and line connect very deeply to the place where these paintings were made. Mara infuses her work with the landscape's worn, rounded hills, its sudden, breathtaking transformations of light, and with illuminations from a sea that is never more than a few miles away. Without being a landscape painter in a descriptive sense, she is an artist whose absorption of a unique landscape forms part of an extraordinary and beguiling painterly journey.

March 2008

Summer 2008

Acrylic on unprimed canvas

166 × 240 cm



Summer (study) 2008

Acrylic on unprimed canvas

112 × 132 cm



Night Forms II 2007

Acrylic on canvas

122 × 152 cm



Over the Sands (Lelant) 2008

Mixed media on canvas

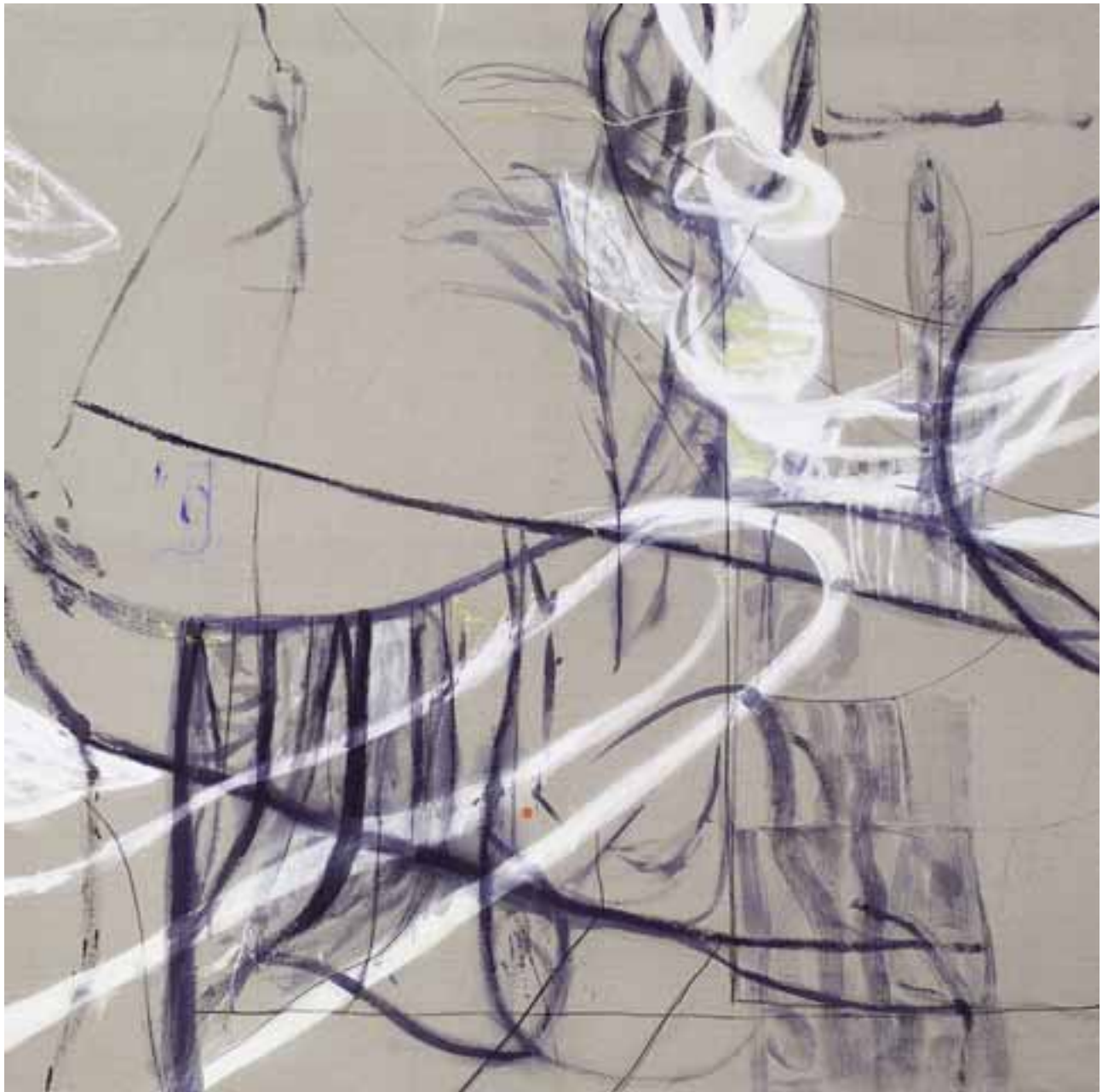
112 × 132 cm



The Bridge (Twilight) 2007

Acrylic and charcoal on raw linen

172 × 172 cm



Centred 2007

Acrylic on unprimed canvas

182 × 166 cm



Fleeting 2007

Acrylic and ink on canvas

132 × 112 cm



Interior into Landscape 2007

Oil on canvas

142 × 152 cm



Cello in Landscape 2006

Oil and charcoal on canvas

180 × 170 cm



Spring – the Lakes 2008

Oil and ink on canvas

122 × 122 cm



Lapis 2006

Mixed media and collage on canvas

132 × 112 cm



Orphée 2007

Oil on canvas

122 × 122 cm



Walking the Path 2007

Ink, charcoal and acrylic on raw linen

132 × 112 cm



Frieze 2007

Acrylic on unprimed canvas

132 × 122 cm



The Journey Home 2007

Oil on canvas

168 × 122 cm



Nightscape 2004

Oil on canvas

152 × 142 cm



Felicity Mara was born in London and studied Fine Art at Camberwell School of Art and Crafts. She had her first exhibition at the New Ashgate Gallery, Farnham. In 1994 she moved to Cornwall, where she continues to live and work. Felicity has exhibited widely, including London, Bath, Bristol, Dublin and Leeds. She shows regularly at Edgar Modern International Art in Bath and at the Belgrave Gallery and the Penwith Society of Arts in St Ives. This book is published to coincide with her exhibition at Chalk Hill Contemporary Art in summer 2008.

www.felicitymara.co.uk

www.chalkhill.co.uk

Helen Dunmore is author of ten novels, including *Zennor in Darkness*, which won the McKitterick Prize, and *A Spell of Winter*, winner of the 1996 Orange Prize. She is also a poet and children's writer. Her recent books include the poetry collection *Glad of these Times* and the novel *Counting the Stars*.

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First published in 2008 by Felicity Mara

St Ives, Cornwall, TR26 1DR

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Images © Felicity Mara

Introduction © Helen Dunmore

ISBN: 978-0-9558947-0-1

Photography of works: Peter Garrett, St Ives

Portrait photography: Michael Bird

Design: Classic Design, St Ives

Print: Rowe the Printers, Hayle