

ARTS

FILM - *Good Night, and Good Luck*
George Clooney goes black and white

INTERVIEW - *The Kooks*
The Kooks are coming to town

The intangible made physical

Katherine Lubar, rising star of the London art scene, talks to Agnieszka Mlicka about her paintings

Only in London can you arrive one and a half hours late to a meeting. When it turned out to be already dark outside, I arrived at an obscure underground station where it seemed the order of the day to jump over the fence without a ticket. To enter the building where I was going to interview the London-based artist Katherine Lubar, one has to walk through mud, between railway and bus depot. The building is a redundant railway warehouse converted into 70 studios, accommodating almost twice as many artists, called The Great Western Studios. Once inside, you immediately forget the obscure surroundings and a compact art world opens its many doors. Katherine welcomes me with tea and soya milk and an empty studio. Almost all her paintings are hanging in the Square One Gallery, which I visited earlier that day. Katherine's hope is that the unveiling of the walls will be a motivation to produce new work.

The exhibition that has recently opened, called *Positive/Negative*, proves that Katherine deserves a break instead of starting new work already. Her paintings speak of the highest level of perfection. Not only is the boundary between two colour fields straighter than the ruler, but when one approaches the canvas, one sees that all the

brushstrokes are perfectly and smoothly directed into one direction. Her choice for this faultless quality lies not only in her personality, but most of all in her love for the power of the straight line. Her approach to painting is purely a formal one. Found and photographed spaces are broken down into simplified planes in which light and shadow create a semi-abstract space. Katherine is aware of the balance between the abstract and the figurative, which might be the reason her works in particular are so engaging for me. The paintings depict architectural settings, which are illuminated by light coming in through windows that are outside of the frame. It is often just this light and shadow that indicate where the walls and corners are. The light is translated into a contrasting colour, set against the other colours. Her artist's statement explains: "If we are looking around us, our eyes cannot feel the difference between what is physical and what is intangible. It is only because we have been trained all our lives to know that we can put our hand through a shadow but not a wall that we ascribe a certain importance to the wall and not the shadow. In a painting, a shadow has the same tangibility as a wall." This confident play with reality, where shadow, light and wall exist on an equal reality plane, can cause surprise to the artist herself. What is

obviously a chair in the work *Light* (2002) has been interpreted as a naked woman's leg by a gallery visitor - obviously a male visitor.

The paintings lack a human figure, which leaves the focus purely on the depicted space. The few lines, when connected by our eyes in perspective, create different kinds of interiors. In this process of decoding Katherine's paintings, one has to interpret not only lines, but also different tones of colours and any other elements to find meaning in what is shown. Furthermore, it also becomes a kind of psychological space, because to interpret the image the viewer adds his or her own expectations and knowledge to the painting. We give the frozen image a little narrative in our minds. This is where the artist's control over her own work ends.

Yet, Katherine is aware that the paintings from her prison series - works inspired by light and shadow in prison interiors - can be read as an internal landscape. She sees that the depicted cells and corridors, in which the bars and colours create such a strong effect of repetition and separation, are a reflection of society's control of our minds. This metaphorical character is supported by the semi-abstract quality of the work; compared to a realistic photograph it is much more easily associated with

an abstract, external idea. However, it's interesting that such a straight and edgy composition can tell us something about the state of the human being. I can find this attempt back in Sun in an Empty Room (1952) by Edward Hopper. It is one of his few paintings of an interior without a figure. The sunlight coming through the window illuminates one side of an empty room. Although there is no face or eyes to provide us with a narrative, you can say that the space talks of loneliness with its uninhab-

"In a painting, a shadow has the same tangibility as a wall"

ited corners. Perhaps it's this incompleteness of a space and the way it is represented that tells more than a full image. It definitely allows for more interpretations, depending on the individual character of the viewer. Katherine has used his work as inspiration for *Homage to Hopper* (2004), one of her better works. Using just four colours she has indicated the same side of the room with a very strong result.

The ambiguity of empty architectural structures can be traced back to the notion of the grid. It is a form that has often been used in 20th century art, for example by

Piet Mondriaan. In the 60s, minimalism used the grid form as actual work itself, without any other pictorial layers on it. These bare structures weren't always received with enthusiasm, but criticised as cold and impersonal, and by some even as the end of art. The emphasis was therefore not on the works themselves, but on the relationship between the viewer and the work. It is interesting to see Katherine's work in this context. Her paintings consist of a structure that is found in architecture. The buildings we live and work in are a kind of lattice that provides the fundamentals for our built environment. We try to fill this in, to adapt it to our needs and personal taste by buying furniture and adding our personal belongings. For Katherine, the rhythm and repetition of shapes and lines also descends from her passion for music, when she studied the Classical Guitar and gained a BA degree in Music Theory. In this sense, the static end product has come out of a vibrant working method. Katherine tells me how her stereo had to compete with the music of her neighbour, as the walls are very thin. However rhythmic though, the music actually helps her to concentrate on the painting and that is quite necessary regarding the precision of the line.

The noise outside the studio window, resembling a land-

ing aeroplane, woke me out of all these art theories. Being an artist in London most of the time simply comes down to earthly practices. How to make a living as an artist? How to deal with wrong colours of reproduced works in the gallery catalogue? Where to find the balance between making art in your own way and still selling it? I am myself aware of the many complications and frustrations. The hope lies mostly in getting noticed, because, concerning the high quality of Katherine's works, they are ready for the market. Nevertheless, it always takes a while. To be in art education is like being in a restaurant, where all courses are served. You only make sure you empty your plate and pay the bill. Being thrown into the art world on the other hand, means to stand in the kitchen and make sure the right ingredients are bought, the taste will convince your guests and, most importantly, that your menu looks more exciting than that of others. One has to be very determined to continue a practice in the surrounding of 140 other ambitious artists. Nonetheless, Katherine's excellent show and the natural confidence I encountered at our meeting, made me believe London will soon see more of her.

Lubar's current exhibit is showing until 25 February (see www.katlubar.com). Picture: *Light*, (2002) acrylic on panel