

Nelly Hanson director of the French Jewish foundation presentation France Lerner “*light and skin*” exhibition

In discerning the Julien and Stella Rozan award this year to France Lerner, the jury did not choose the easy answer. For, aside from the undeniable aesthetical qualities of her sculptures and drawings, hers is a difficult work, neither complacent nor comfortable. For the moment, in any case it is not a work, which can leave anyone indifferent. And yet, despite the discomfort it provokes, despite the anxiety, which emanates from certain piece, France Lerner’s works touch us, not with a simple emotional reaction, but at the deepest level. Because it is beautiful, beyond easy seduction, because it remains in our visual memory a long time after the exhibit, because, perhaps paradoxically, any expression of the artist’s deepest sensitivity is also, and perhaps especially, dialogue, a message to the viewer.

Let us not deceive ourselves: France Lerner can be disquieting. First of all, what a gap between France Lerner’s youth and apparent fragility as a person, and the sense of determination, often of brutality, of completeness that transpires from her work. Yes there may be misunderstandings, but that is not necessary a problem, and perhaps just the opposite.

To give you an example, allow me to tell you how I met France Lerner, and you will see how superficial misunderstandings can transform themselves onto a highly fecund encounter. It was Annie Rapaport who, having contacted France Lerner under one of those circumstances which one will later view as part of destiny, mentioned her to me; at that time, the French Judaism Foundation, taking advantage of its vast premises place St Georges, organises small exhibits for little known young artists. Annie showed me a few slides. What did I see, Heads that seemed made of stones, and which I imagined –to each his own fantasies as monumental, midway between the Easter Islands statues and Breton megaliths. I sensed something of an ancient art- no one says primitive anymore- something whose vigour made me want to open the doors of the Foundation to this artist.

I was not wrong in judging her work vigorous. Primitive and monumental beautiful certainly, even it that’s not bad, I was completely mistaken! Once set up, as some of you saw it, the heads were the size of a man; Modest, you might say, all the more so that they were in a circle, on the ground. As for the material, which was coal, it was totally refined, precisely chiselled, tender, as each of these heads came alive, became the portrait of a living, unique person; Alive? How can I say that when it evokes the Shoah, man’s inhumanity? Yes, I say these men and women who symbolise victims were alive, alive because France is alive, because she has extracted from the anonymity of the night and the fog living beings who have distinctive features, who are not a conglomeration of six million victims, but identifiable individuals. They were alive by the tender lights that lit certain of them from inside. They were alive through the almost inaudible murmur of the tape France had made, a whisper which softly provided an eternal dialogue among the inanimate statuettes. I know well that for some of those who came to see this exhibit entitled “*Coal*”, the shock was rude, often intolerable. As for myself, after I wondered about my ability to live daily in contact with the installation, I finally became calm. Not from the nonsensical idea of a

reconciliation with history of course, but no doubt from a feeling, however illusory, of having been able to express, that is release a lament which until then had remained silent because words seemed to betray it. Where the reason of language had failed, the reasoned insanity of art had succeeded: the concept had become flesh.

Perhaps I have lingered too long on this experience with *“Coal”*. But it was at the origin of a double encounter: first with my myself and my memory, which is also our memory, and I hope, that of part of humanity; and secondly, with a person and a work that deserve to be seen as more than misleading roughness.

We are lucky to have them in this installation at Espace Rachi, these pencil drawings and oily medium that change with the light. In them you see the talent of course, the delicate drawings, but also movement, that elusive strangeness that art’s fugitiveness gives us, but of which it forbids us to take permanent possession. The image is not an icon, the representation is not stiff, set, rigid, it could never become an idol because an idol ties us down, while France Lerner’s work, because it moves, is a constant call to take up the nomadic challenge.

What the limits of an exhibit do not show, I wish to evoke now in a few words. I don’t know whether the adjective multiform is ideal when referring to work of art. But what other word would you suggest, given the diversity of forms, especially the diversity of materials which are at time tamed and others subdued, by France Lerner, even if at times they cause wounds which are not only intellectual, but physical: coal brushes with silk, paper with glass, here engraved, there sculpted, bronze is laid delicately on the white sand of dreams...

With France Lerner, you, members of the Jury of Julien and Stella Rozan award, have distinguished intelligence, talent, great sensitivity, but also intransigence, not the caricature one usually makes of youth, but a basic intransigence that is part of France’s person, and which we truly need for two reasons: because it refuses any compromise in the face of the perversions of the world, and for its creative impulse which goes all the way, which, France Lerner, although it is sometimes difficult to bear, is part of your work’s value. Keep that intransigence, even if it is often difficult to bear, for it is what makes life rise from the depths of evil, it is what causes the light to shine through the skin, to quote the beautiful title you have given the exhibit that presently inhabits the Espace Rachi.