The Life and Work of Sylvia von Hartmann
A Cause for Celebration

…myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me, for that I came[1]

A Boat named Forebearance

There is no part of Sylvia von Hartmann's work, no part of how she is and how she lives her life, not even of the space in which she lives, that is ready-made or borrowed. She lives in a house in a secret courtyard. The house itself has become her work surface. The walls and floors are covered in her images and words; the objects in it are all made or decorated by her. Every surface records her response to her life, her memories, her longings and enthusiasms.

To visit her is to meet someone with a gift for hospitality. On the front door, I found a blackboard welcoming me by name. This is visiting turned into an art form. To be made welcome is to take part in a festival that includes food, conversation, looking at art, and great exuberance.

Sylvia von Hartmann's house contains none of the usual distractions. There is no television, and she does not listen to the radio. Her originality, her inability to speak in clichés or to be predictable, doesn't stem from an affected quirkiness but from cultivating her own way of seeing, her own way of thinking and feeling and therefore her own way of working.

[1] Gerard Manley Hopkins: no. 57 in *Collected Poems* London 1987

Hope is not only a Word

In the Bhagavad-Gita we are told, "You have the right to work but for the work's sake only. You have no rights to the fruits of the work. Desire for the fruits of the work must never be your motive for working. Never give way to laziness."

This attitude, this concentration on the honest process, is her gift. By keeping faith with it, she ensures that all the rewards of her concentration flow quite naturally like the song of a bird. Her paintings are ravishing and she is a success, but her success is a by-product and not her aim. By putting the work and only the work first, she does not lose her sovereignty, nor is she tempted to compete in the hustle-bustle of the art world. In this, she retains a kind of innocence and therefore a kind of freedom.

Sylvia von Hartmann has cultivated and found her way of working in the same way as she cultivated and found herself. Her paintings are only possible because she sought out what she needed to make

them. Using gouache, watercolour and pigmented wax, she perfected a method original to her. This made it possible to achieve the surface for which she was searching. Her colours glow more like the windows of ancient cathedrals than like works on paper. Layers of paint and wax make it possible to cover and reveal, to hide and to disclose. The surfaces made with this mixture of media have a huge vocabulary of mark making, from the finest line to the most transparent tissue of colour. Sometimes she may work on a motif for hours only to realize the whole image does not need it. Using wax the motif may be buried. With these materials, searching, finding and losing repeatedly does not leave the surface tired and overworked. Rather, it enriches it so that it becomes an object we desire. She says it is hard for her to give her pictures away—like having to watch your lover dance with someone else

The subject of Sylvia von Hartmann's work is her inner life, her soul. The images have as their subject her feeling world, her stories and secrets, her joys and her sorrows. They are inhabited by her people and herself, by her interiors and her experiences of nature. They contain stars and moons, birds and flowers, trees, fruits, bridges and hills. They depict her rooms, filled with her things, all gathered together to tell and to celebrate, to tell and endure and to tell and to keep secret.

The German poet Rainer Maria Rilke said that there was a time when people saw in the things around them the places where they could store their humanity. When Sylvia von Hartmann chooses

The Visitor

a motif, it is not arbitrary. It was actually there, sharing her life, so it ceases to be just a rose or a vase. Instead, it becomes the only rose or the only vase. This means that its being there is underpinned with reality. It shares the task of recording her memory.

As the Hassidic Jews believe that in beating the earth, we release the spirit, so it seems that by using things as if they share our lives they are lifted above the realm of the inanimate; they become in some way ensouled. We look at the images filled with Sylvia's people and things, her places and her times. We see the traces of the life they record and they touch us. Her stories, her images, describe her life, giving it significance. Facts cease to be everything and poetry is once again given space.

The names of the pictures are also an important part of the images. Often they are poems in themselves. A Boat called Forbearance, Hope is Not Only a Word, When in Doubt, Abstain? or Softly, You are Touching my Dreams. The images are often so rich and jewel like and the colour so poetic that they are always joyful. This joy, however, has a very different character than happiness. Everything lightweight and glib is excluded from these images. As the surfaces are struggled for, so the stories they tell speak of struggles. The images celebrate not only the wonders of life but also that which must be endured.

The poet Rilke believed that when we try to live life in such a way that we see difficulties as an unhappy accident from which we seek distraction, we fail to understand the element in which we live. If we embrace and endure the hard things as if they were meaningful, willing them not to fade, but to call us forth, we not only come to have insights about our lives and ourselves, we ultimately reach the source of joy. Sylvia von Hartmann's work is joyful but it is not happy. It includes celebration, loss and vulnerability, it is ravishing, but it is also intensely serious.

The writer Christopher Andreae once wrote of Sylvia von Hartmann's work that it is "almost sacred, like a garden of love." The paintings often contain a man and a woman. There are tokens like those given to lovers: a posy or a letter held to the heart, a rose or a tree tied with a ribbon of remembrance. There is love, but it is love that is never spent. It remains charged with warmth and longing, ever about to begin. Rilke speaks of this kind of love, sacred because it is no longer dependent on its object, therefore becoming what he called a source of inexhaustible light. He says

Leader Footbridge

that experiencing this kind of love is the nearest we will ever get to knowing what it is like to be an angel. Sylvia von Hartmann's images seem to be born under this star.

The painter Paula Modersohn-Becker called her pictures runes. Like Sylvia von Hartmann, her work is about herself. Like von Hartmann, she used the things around her as a symbolic language to tell her stories, to write the diary of the pictures' meaning. These stories were real and quite specific so that what Modersohn-Becker called runes are not abstract symbols plucked out of nowhere; neither are Sylvia von Hartmann's symbols. They belong rather to the history of the human heart. They are archetypal and therefore able to communicate both down the ages and now. Because these signs are archetypal, they never lose their resonance though they may gain more and more layers of meaning. A real sign is never hermetically sealed, it only demands sensitivity. It demands quietness and looking. The word 'rune' is derived from an old word for 'to whisper'. In quiet looking, it is possible to gain access to the pictures meanings, to hear the story they whisper. These paintings have their root in human experience and therefore in experiences to which each one of us has access. In this way, although it is true that they are personal and specific, they are also universal.

Sylvia von Hartmann is a person whose life and work are one. This uniting of life and work leads quite naturally to the never-ending conversation between human beings throughout history; the conversation about the meaning of our lives, about what it is that we live for.

I began this piece with a quotation from the untitled poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins whose first line is 'As kingfishers catch fire'. The poem describes how the whole of creation is in a kind of jubilant movement to realize itself, to correspond ever more exactly to what it is in its essential core. The poet says,

Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,
Crying What I do is me: for that I came.

Many poets and artists have described this feeling, "What I do is me, for that I came" These lines also point to a mysterious and alchemical relationship between work and self-realization. This self-realization has nothing to do with self-indulgence; the freedom of the self-realized human being has nothing to do with giving way to every impulse but rather with self-mastery. Goethe clarifies this

The Aritist's House

relationship in his own words, when he says, "The realization of the self is only possible if one is productive, if one gives birth to ones potentialities." Coming into contact with Sylvia von Hartmann is exhilarating on many levels. Her work exhilarates because it is both visually seductive and emotionally satisfying, her way of living because it is so playful and exuberant. However, beneath all that playfulness, beneath all that joy of living lies that which makes everything possible, namely work; work which will brook no obstacles. She says, "Deeds are fruit, words are but leaves" She has put into practice what she has intuited and in the process made both exquisite images and a unique and captivating self.