

parents sent her the *Beano* and the *Dandy*. She was always fascinated more by the artwork than the storyline. 'I was making up strip cartoons by the time I was eight or nine. What bored me was the business of having to tell the story, but I loved the composition and the way so much trouble and care was taken over every little square in *Tintin* and *Asterix* – sometimes *just* to show that it was the next morning.'

What makes Raphael's new paintings stand out is that she has turned the medium of comic art on its head by denuding the strips of any meaning. In narrative terms, her pictures go nowhere. 'In a way that is the point. The pictures say: "Read me. I am a strip cartoon with speech bubbles". I paint them with the assumption that the viewer will have read comic books. It will muck about with what they are conditioned to assume.'

Yet subversion and radical confrontation of traditional assumptions are not normally associated with Raphael, who has been, perhaps unfairly, viewed as an extremely accomplished but traditional artist from Agnew's. Her early CV includes a solid, establishment commission from the MCC to paint Sir Garfield Sobers for Lords; the *Guardian*, in collaboration with the National Portrait Gallery, chose her to paint the five founding contributors and editors of its Women's Pages: Jill Tweedie, Liz Forgan, Posy Simmonds, Mary Stoot and Polly Toynbee. In 1996 she won the Nat West prize, for her powerful depiction of the searing, harsh Australian outback. It was all marvellous stuff, but it did not buck any trends. What she is now doing is to turn 180 degrees and veer away from figurative and landscape art to provocative abstraction. The change in direction is reflected in her decision to move galleries, leaving fusty Agnews to join Marlborough Fine Art, the blue-chip stable for many of the most celebrated modern twentieth-century artists.

Raphael believes in constant exploration and stretching towards new ideas. 'I grew up loving figurative painting and wanting to do it because it is what I am best at. I came to abstraction reluctantly. It was never my intention. The point was that I had run out of the desire to paint narrative pictures. I meant them at the time, but basically I realised, if I was honest, I did not really have a narrative in my mind that I urgently wanted to do.'

She hoped to challenge the idea of conceptualism in contemporary art. 'I wanted to paint and make things in reaction to the kind of art that was exciting everybody in which things aren't made any more by the artist; they are *found* or *borrowed*, and are given or *endowed with* a meaning. That has become the job of the artist: to give meaning to meaningless things. It's not that I don't like that or find it interesting, but because I am so attached to painting I thought: what is it that painting alone can do? That is what I want to do.'

The new pictures contain hundreds of tiny boxes, each filled with stripped-down forms, objects with just a hint of familiarity but from which any immediate identity has been pared away. A giant multi-coloured crossword comes to mind, or even the electronic insides of a radio. There is a hint of Egyptian hieroglyphics.



Sarah Raphael, *Edward Chad Varab*, 1993, 346 × 286 cm. Permanent collection National Portrait Gallery



Sarah Raphael, *Sometimes a River*, 1995, oil and raw pigment on paper laid on canvas, 152.4 × 121.9 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)



Sarah Raphael, *Strip Page 6*, 1998, acrylic on canvas with papier mâché collage, 183 × 183 cm. Marlborough Fine Art (London)

They cry out to be read, but provide no message. The eye hovers and seeks a story which is not there. The form is suggestively narrative, while the content is stubbornly abstract. There is joyful spontaneity as well as rigid control. There are speech bubbles but no words. They appear to be a liberation of the subconscious rather than a layered series of meanings. We recognise forms – lemons, bulbs, trees, cones – but are left doubting if that is what we have seen, or even are supposed to have seen.

This all brings us back to her migraine. There is a blurring, a dizziness, an intensity, but no one single focus. As Andrew Motion writes in his introduction,

The yellowish [shapes] are still there (now strangely shaped into Martian nipples), and so are the empty thoughts; but they are dominated by boxes full of other, smaller, differently coloured boxes. Everything is flat, clear-cut and yet at the same time woozy – like the shapes which appear when you rub your eyes too hard. Or maybe like the start of a headache...

Raphael produced most of her new work in a glass conservatory attached to her house in Camberwell, which now doubles as a second studio. Her children feel it is their space too, and freely wander in and out. Her old studio, down the road, remains empty. Raphael welcomes the necessary interplay between working and looking after her family. It has been how her life was always run. Her father, the novelist and Oscar-winning screenwriter, Frederic Raphael, and her mother, a respected editor, always took their children's artistic endeavours seriously. Her mother collected and kept every drawing her daughter made. 'They always took what I did seriously. They encouraged. Drawing was never seen as just a childish distraction, even when I was very young. It always seemed normal to be an artist and to earn a living by doing that.'

Raphael is happy to have been able to find a way to return to work after her illness in a manner which stretches and stimulates her. She feels her comic-strip abstraction is the start of an area of work in which she has far from finished exploration. 'I would hope to keep things which I like about figurative painting – a sense of form, sense of light, line and order – and to make something that appears to be meaningful, but ultimately does not mean anything other than that it is a picture. That is its meaning.'

Raphael was very aware that her reputation rested on her previous figurative work and that a new departure into abstraction was a risk. 'I would lie in bed and worry that it was not serious, not heroic, not romantic – all the things I get attached to in painting. Comic strips were definitely not a heroic idea. It's really quite playful. I felt my reputation as a painter was a lot to do with feelings and symbols behind the work. My desert paintings were dignified and serious. They felt serious. It was a serious matter, but this was, at least superficially, a frivolous idea; but of course, it is all really the same thing. It is hopefully not any different, but just a progression.'

'Comic books were the key to unlock my abstraction because they declared meaning,