



Sarah Raphael, *Strip Page 8*, 1998, acrylic on canvas with papier mâché collage, 183 × 183 cm, Marlborough Fine Art (London)

but I held it back. This is provoking you [the viewer] to try and read meaning into it, and you will try and find that you can't. That will be frustrating and annoying.'

Is there a danger that the viewer is disappointed? 'I hope so. I hope you get crestfallen, and are then forced to look again at the picture. The whole point of a painting is that it's good enough to keep someone looking at it. The intention is that you look for a meaning, are disappointed, and then you're forced to come back to see all it is just a painting.'

Raphael readily admits to having a low boredom threshold, and has always forced herself to experiment to keep her mind stretched. 'Technically I assimilate styles very fast; I am like a sort of mutating virus. Fortunately, I have a very ferocious and ruthless mentor, who taught me at Camberwell, and has been vile about everything I have done, which is really good for me. He is always saying, "What are you doing? You can't keep working within your means. You have the sort of talent which needs to keep developing – lots of people have a facility to paint and draw well, is that the best you can do?" So I think the stylistic changes in my new work are quite superficial. I have always accepted I was likely to be taken less seriously as a painter if I followed my nose and allowed my low boredom threshold to keep me interested and moving. I could not do it if I thought I was just repeating myself. It is a very long day painting. If it is not new and searching, I might as well go for a walk instead.'

Raphael is impatient with security, safety and stability in any artist's career. 'A lot of artists get to a point where they are recognised for some type of art and this is their identity. They think, "I had better keep doing that as otherwise people won't know it's me and won't think I am really serious". At that point, they lose me generally – even really good artists. I can see that technically they are amazing, but come on, guys, it's not that hard to get really good at doing something if you do nothing but that for 70 years. I can't see the point of it. If you look at Picasso, he followed his instinct wherever it went. I would sooner fail at trying to do that rather than carving out a little niche for myself and for which I am venerable and respected.'

Her change of gallery is important. She felt it was time to move on and, like a star footballer, was delighted when she was poached by the rival gallery just two doors down the street from her old gallery. 'I always felt my pictures were battling valiantly against the surroundings; I had to beg them to put up canvases on the wall when I was doing the desert show. They would die on the red velvet. I did feel I was cycling uphill and I thought I wouldn't mind having my work in a gallery which was neutral in its space, to see how the pictures would do when they didn't have to battle against their surroundings.'

Raphael's life is defined by her compulsion to paint: 'It is an ongoing struggle between the best and the worst of myself. I am so ludicrously ambitious in that I have a ridicu-

lously inflated idea of my own importance. Therefore, all the worst things about me will be tempted to come out in my painting – my flashiness, my desire to impress people, my desire to show them how fucking good I am, to absolutely smack them over the head with my opinions – all the stuff that I try and control. I observe that when I am alone with myself – like some evil twin. I can see that bit of me and it goes blah blah blah, and chats away and is rude to people, and when I am painting and trying to work out technical pictorial compositions, that bit of me goes blabbering away. I don't think painting is therapy. It is not to do with that. It is to do with the business of making art. The fact is that the majority of things one makes fail if you use all of the art of the past as your barometer. It is important to remember that, otherwise more of my pictures would fail than already do. Look at Massacio, for Christ's sake. He died when he was 26. If I didn't think about that I would be unbearably pleased with myself. When I paint I discover what I think about things. It is a compulsion which was just always there.'

Heady acclaim and high profile exhibitions, for all their rewards, are not what Raphael feels most comfortable with. She is repulsed as well as attracted by the hype and hoop-la of exhibiting her work. 'I don't want to show in England for a long time. It is the thing I hate about being an artist. I have got completely the wrong temperament. Showing my work brings out my worst character defects. I get so upset in advance, weeks before the show. I get so distressed at what people will think and say. I am torn between thinking that the pictures are so awful and hoping no one notices them, or I feel these pictures are really good, but I bet that no one will notice. It is a nightmare, but I also feel embarrassed that I feel it is a nightmare. It is somehow dreadfully ungrateful. I either want too much or too little.'

Few doubt she will bear the ordeal once more. But what it will be is anybody's guess. The metamorphosis of Sarah Raphael is far from over. □