



Tarka Kings

Mornings at the Lido



Introduction

Lily Le Brun

I To find Tarka Kings you must go to the water's edge.

First, pass under the busy road, go along the path by the pub, and emerge to see the Thames as it broadens and turns slowly towards the city. Walk down a steep gangway and onto a pontoon. Here, in amongst the houseboats, is Kings' studio.

Like open eyes, it has two windows that look over the water to the bank beyond, where the trees have just exploded into green. The water today is peaceful, slow and low. Sunlight streams into the studio and over the sharpened coloured pencils fanned out like a rainbow, waiting to be used.

Water has made its way inside Kings' studio, too. In her latest body of work, water drips from hair, seeps into cotton mats and gets towelled away from toes. Using those fine coloured pencils, she has been drawing the figure of a woman who has just emerged from water.

The swimmer is seen in glimpses. In one of Kings' pictures, her cold fingers button up a shirt; in another, she pulls on socks; in another, she is putting on her underwear. Kings often depicts her from behind: pulling a comb through her straight wet hair, putting on a jumper, or seated at a café table, reading.

Each morning, throughout the year, Kings swims in the Serpentine Lido, a section of the lake at the heart of Hyde Park. This has been a daily ritual for the past five years, an activity that she says, with a smile, has made her life "so much more interesting". But how to capture the *feeling* of swimming? Around two years ago, she found an answer in a friend of one of her three sons, whose "sculptural" appearance intrigued her. She agreed to model, and Kings began to accompany her to the Lido every two or three months to take photographs that she then uses to work into these beautifully concentrated pencil drawings.

The finished compositions are amalgams. Kings no longer works from life, and yet the compulsory hours she spent in the life room while studying at the Royal Academy Schools are evident in her intuitive understanding of pose, scale and muscle tension, as well as her technical precision. Look closely, and you can see the intensive layering of lines and colour in precise combinations, varying according to the textures being described. A jumper might be composed of a

thousand jagged lines, each no longer than an eyelash, while the skin it warms is made up of softer and longer strokes that are, individually, barely visible.

Sometimes Kings will set herself parameters – to use only dots, for instance, for one section and only straight lines for another. Yet even with set intentions, there are infinite small adjustments that Kings makes along the way. As the drawing progresses, the jeopardy of the process deepens. Unlike oil paint, which can be wiped away, coloured pencils leave no room for error. Kings says her process can become “incredibly mathematical”, with every part of the picture being “redrawn hundreds and hundreds of times.” It is a meticulous process, that cannot be easily corrected without beginning the whole drawing again.

Among the loved images, reference photographs and past works pinned to the walls in Kings’ studio there is a picture of a Degas charcoal of a woman drying herself after a bath. Kings shares his subject of the private ritual, a moment captured seemingly unawares, yet there are crucial differences. Degas caught his models swiftly in fluid, easy lines that echoed the rhythm of their movements. Kings’ images are stiller, with a richness that is rarely achieved in her chosen medium.

The depth of Kings’ drawings arises from an identification with her model as well as the time absorbed in them. They are of someone else, but they are soaked in personal experience. Despite the democratic smoothness of her medium, Kings manages to convey a distinctly tactile sense of texture and temperature: the way a damp foot might leave an imprint in a deep cotton pile rug, or a wet clump of hair might hang differently to the drier parts. Kings is acutely observant of external appearances, but she makes astute internal observations too. She is attentive to sensation, not just sight.

- II In the park, take the path that hugs the lake and follow it to the clock tower just before the bridge. There, you will find the café, and beside it, tucked out of sight, the Lido. It is separated from the rest of the lake by a string of white buoys that hang like a necklace from the optimistically-named concrete “beach”. A small gap has been left for swans, moorhens, ducks and geese to glide serenely in and out. With the hint of the city in the distance, and people milling by the water’s edge, the scene is evocative of *Bathers at Asnières* by Seurat – an artist beloved by Kings.

By the time we meet, Kings has already been in the water. As a member of the Serpentine Swimming Club, she goes early and is allowed to swim out beyond the buoys. She tells me of the separate changing room that its members can use, of its habits and unspoken rules. The conversation there has a particular quality, especially in winter, when the number of swimmers is fewer, and they share in the rush that follows their icy dip.

Her recent drawings, she points out, are nearly all to do with changing. The swim is implied, never seen. In capturing the routines surrounding the swim, its meniscus, Kings respects the privacy of sensation. Yet in her depictions of the literal change – the putting on of clothes; the wiping away of water from the body – she hints at the feeling of transformation that the swim gives. The physical exhilaration is not so potent in the warmer months, but Kings still finds that to be immersed in nature in the middle of the city provides an important reset, a moment to earth.

This is what is special about swimming here. From the shore, the swimmers look diminutive. Their bodies seem to dissolve into the water, which is ever-changing with the light and the breeze. If you swim, the feeling is similar. Submersed in the lake, your sightline aligns to the birds who call it home, your limbs disappear into the green-brown water. You are absorbed into the landscape – just like how, in Kings' drawings, every line swims together as part of the whole.

Emerging from the lake, your body reappears. Clothes go back on. Hair is towelled dry. Droplets evaporate off damp skin.

And you go on with the day, changed.