

Resurgence

July/August 2004 | No. 225

£4.50 | US\$7.00



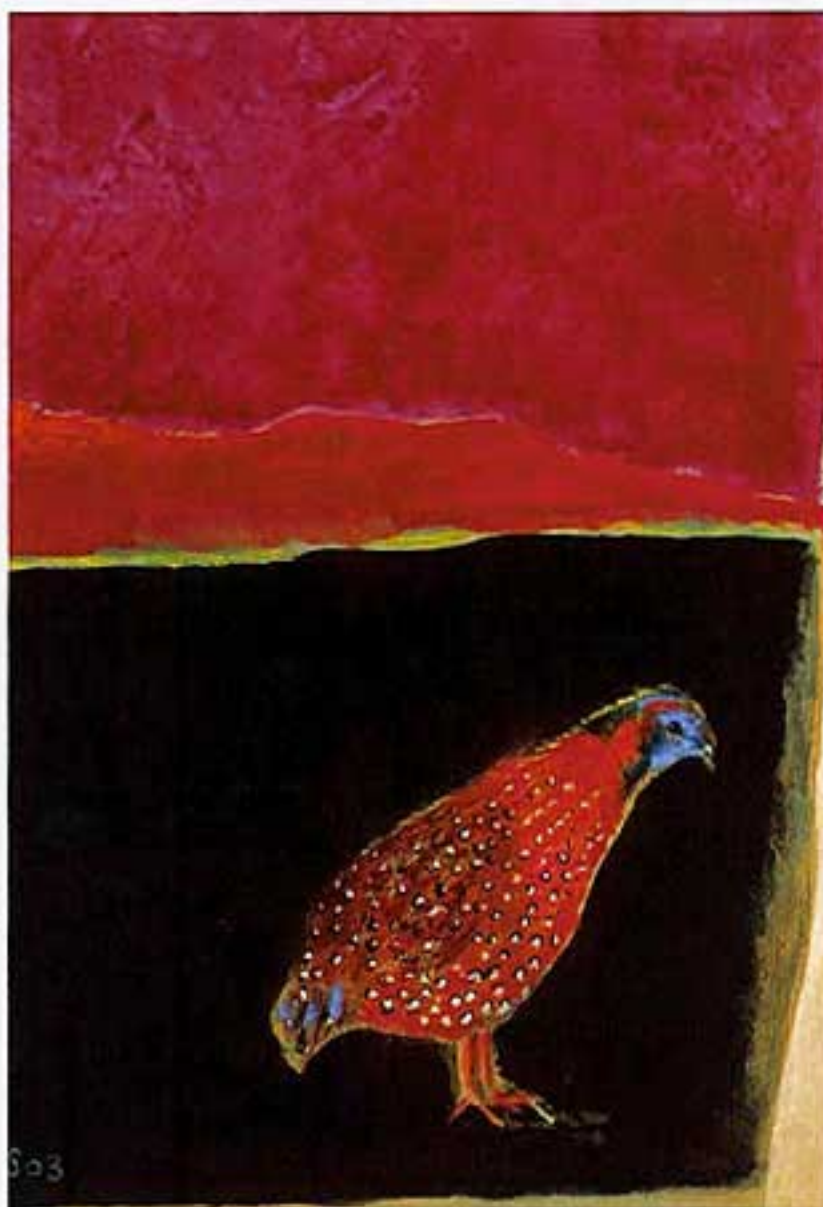
INSIDE OUT

ART: DAVID CADMAN

The paintings of Simone Sandelson reveal the Connection between painter and subject.

HAVING TRAINED AS a painter and then as a textile designer, Simone Sandelson found herself in the midst of commerce, designing ranges of fabrics and furnishings. The years passed. But then Leo, her fourth son, was born and something happened. Simone knew that she had to paint. She left the world of commerce and found a teacher, the 'renaissance' painter David Cranswick. The discipline was intense. For weeks on end, she spent her time grinding the pigment for her paints, each buttery paste being mixed with egg yolk and lavender oil. Then the gesso board had to be prepared, ten layers one on top of another and each one smoothed down before the next could be applied. Only then, when all this had been accomplished, could she start the exercise of painting, and even then she was restricted to copying the work of the old masters. Tiresome and tedious you might think, but this discipline and attentive preparation were what Simone had been looking for to still her mind, settle her hand and bring back her eye.

The first portraits were of her children, then of friends, then commissions. There is a clarity and strength to this work. Something much more than a likeness. It is the artist on the outside looking in, showing us who it is that we are looking at, the kind of person that they are. There is something in the eyes that draws us to them. This close and tender investigation comes to a climax in a picture of Simone's father, a father that she did not know well, for he was always distant and he died when she was twelve. But she had a photo of him and by working this into a portrait — oils on board — she found her father, as if for the first time, and showed him at the edge looking in.



Birds, painting by Simone Sandelson

Then one day, Simone found herself at London Zoo looking into a cage of apes. She looked in. They looked out, stoical and accepting. Returning to her studio, she painted their portraits. The more she looked at them the more she felt their suffering. "It was as if their patient suffering released something within me," she says, "and I became aware, perhaps for the first time, that I was allowing deep feelings to arise that sought expression in my work."

The portraits had been (and are) beautiful but they show the feelings of others. Now it was to work the other way around. There followed a series of quite different paintings — this time from the inside looking out. For if the portraits are accomplished, public and complete, this new work is raw, private and unfinished. They are 'work in progress'. If, for the

artist, the portraits are safe ground, this work is dangerous. Revealing someone else is one thing; revealing yourself — and your innermost self — is another matter.

And here lies the tension. For Simone is not an artist obsessed with self. On the contrary, she is an artist with a sensitivity for discipline and selflessness, someone who feels the deep and timeless impulse of tradition, someone who yearns for the song of the divine but whose work reveals the suffering of those who have not yet learnt to sing.

What is emerging is an ancient voice and one that even the artist does not entirely recognise. Almost as if without calling, the latest work carries the imagery of the gods — the tree of life, the butterfly of the soul, the bird as messenger and the cross set in a field of blood red. When confronted with this imagery, Simone is hesitant. She finds little comfort in the texts and rituals of her own Jewish tradition and, instead, takes inspiration from the bare silence of the Buddha or the glorious words of the *Bhagavad Gita*. She feels blocked by the unrelenting paternalism that governs so much that is termed 'religious'. When I asked Simone for some words that represented her work, she gave me the following from *The Prophet*:

Thought is a bird of space that in a cage of words may indeed spread its wings but cannot fly.

"Maybe", she said, "that is why I paint." And one of her latest works is entitled *Most people die with their music locked up inside them*.

For Simone, however, this blockage is beginning to break. A doorway is opening and, after all the preparations, the true journey of the spirit is about to begin. ●