

Catalogue essay

The Orphans



A small boy, filled with silent piety and devotedly at prayer, forms the central subject of *The Orphans*. Drawn from a picture produced by the English illustrator, Margaret Tarrant, Kennedy's attachment to Tarrant's work lies not with its religious underpinnings but with the way in which the image was first presented to her: as a mother's single gift given to her as a child.

The artist's concern with familial relationships has been a persistent theme throughout her painting and the small boy at prayer, devoid of human company, is a leitmotif signifying both absence and estrangement. Yet, this small boy and the way in which he first came to Kennedy, have begun in the artist a musing on the nature of human experience. *The Orphans* are studies of the emotions and occasions with which we are at all some point afflicted or otherwise, observe.

Recasting her kneeling boy in various guises and with a multitude of changing companions, Kennedy evolves symbolic narratives that are highly personal, sometimes esoteric but thoroughly, palpably, beautifully sincere. The spider clasping one child's head derives from the metaphorically laden sculpture of the French artist, Louise Bourgeois, who assigned to it the role of mother and repairer—functions undermined by the spider's spindled body, which, subconsciously, alludes to characteristics more unseemly. Under the cover of Kennedy's brightly hued and graphic styling, such symbolism is surprising and potentially, unnerving. Elsewhere, warfare is alluded to, as is the giving of birth, the act of love, the processes by which knowledge is acquired and money accrued—not always by virtuous means.

Though the deductions she arrives at in her work are sometimes sombre, the artist hopes a sense of optimism is inflected in her painting. Certainly, there is something intrinsically hopeful about the act of chronicling human experience, for by doing so, one attests to the idea that life is a phenomenon worthy of attempts to document and understand it. Indeed, the delicateness, the flawlessness with which Kennedy's procession of painterly boys have been composed represents, despite the bad, her high regard for life, her belief in the artistic act as a process of redemption.

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