

La Rançon

*L'homme a, pour payer sa rançon,
Deux champs au tuf profond et riche,
Qu'il faut qu'il remue et défriche
Avec le fer de la raison:*

*Pour obtenir la moindre rose,
pour extorquer quelques épis,
des pleurs salés de son front gris
Sans cesse il faut qu'il les arrose.*

*L'un est l'art, et l'autre l'Amour.
-- Pour rendre le juge propice,
Lorsque de la stricte justice
Paraîtra le terrible jour,*

*Il faudra lui montrer des granges
Pleines de moissons, et des fleurs
Dont les formes et les couleurs
Gagnent le suffrage des Anges.*

Les Fleurs du Mal
Charles Baudelaire, 1857

MY SWIRLING GLOBES

Baudelaire believed that only those few human beings able to pay ransom for their own soul would be able to make it on Judgment Day. This capital can be earned via just two routes, both equally arduous: You must accomplish some great deed either in art or in love. The beautiful colors and forms these two elusive phenomena may take on are your sole means of bribing the angels, who will vote for or against you based uniquely on your merits in either of these fields.

Hoping to score double points, I have opted to make *art about love*. This confession may be sufficient to forever bar my entrance onto the scene of hip postmodern artists: I have owned up to my outdated belief in no less than three anathemae, namely a divine power and art and love as realms of the sacred. How embarrassing; a Romantic, still hanging on into the twenty-first century!

The world I create has a great deal of motion and emotion, but it has also – because I am drawn to the tension of opposites – a measure of control. I wish to arrive at that sense of slippage, the moment in which the world of human interactions declares its disconcerting strangeness. Using the vulnerable, naked body as my vehicle, I attempt to say something about how we humans relate. I believe that the less I try to conceal, the less there remains to be ashamed of: I wish to show my characters deprived of their airs and graces, stripped to the level of animals cleaning themselves.

Erotic imagery no longer represents any artistic bravery per se – rather than outrage, the artist who serves up such fare is more often greeted with a yawn. However, one taboo remains: neither pornographers nor many artists grapple with the theme of love. Having had various viewers refer to my work as “orgy scenes”, I feel obligated to differentiate myself from the many, many other practitioners addressing what may arguably be seen as similar content. I agree with Lucian Freud that the task of the artist is to make the viewer feel uncomfortable, to question his or her right to be there, and yet feel drawn to the work by involuntary chemistry, like a hound getting a scent. But if the *only* effect a work produces is the smell of pheromones, it is operating on the same level as the supermarket tabloids. Sensationalism is easy. I demand more from someone who lays claim to the title of an artist: I want some sort of mediation that allows me to believe that “the thing” is more than what it seems. I expect to be persuaded into trust by the demonstration of skill, by the darting subtlety and persistent slowness of a painter’s eye, and the repeated touch of a sensitive, vulnerable hand.

The emotionally and physically intense acts of painting and drawing remain my medium of choice because of their inimitable quality of co-presence. Drawing, one might say, is exactly what mass visual media are not: a means of specific engagement, not of general seduction. Any physical process of creation, as the act of healing, therapeutic touch and loving embraces, involves the hands as powerful ministers and architects of our thoughts and spiritual energies. That is plain old image-making's continuing relevance to us.

The material point of departure for the *Swirling* series is bare bones: a simple HB pencil and a standard size drawing pad. In a culture supersaturated with fast, loud images in Technicolor, I am interested in limiting my means of seducing the audience. Here, communication won't happen unless the viewer slackens his or her pace enough to capture the subdued voice of these pieces. Works that slowly come into being only speak to those who look slowly. The time-consuming, concentrated process appeals to me because of its kinship with the solitary, meticulous work of monks. On a certain level, I believe the mazelike complexity and the interlacements of certain *Swirling* segments operate in a way similar to certain Hiberno-Saxon manuscript illuminations, mandalas, and Islamic woven patterns, where intricacy and repetition suggest divine infinity and indefinability. In their maker, the delight in the revelation and exploration of pure form induces a state of mind similar to meditation.

This ties in with my choice of the *grisaille* as pictorial language: The mono- or achromatic palette was once the only one allowed in Cistercian monasteries which rejected the excitation of the senses and the distraction of color. The visual silence of Cistercian art allowed the monks to reflect on the salvation of their souls without being distracted by "les formes distrayantes et inutiles" of the material world of soft, glowing flesh and blushing red apples. Similarly, Peter Handke tells us in *Der Himmel über Berlin* that the angels can only perceive the world in black and white; colors are just for earthlings. By restricting myself to such ascetic means while treating a flagrantly sensual theme, I wish to comment on the paradoxical co-presence of supposed opposites, the spiritual and the corporeal.

The juxtaposition of black and white also calls to mind Yin and Yang, binary opposites forever swirling, whirling, tumbling and spinning in a constant struggle for the upper hand. While tradition has it that the light force is masculine whereas darkness is the feminine principle, I make a second attempt to turn convention on its ear by depicting white female figures and black males. The alternation between ethereal lines and massive, dense rendering is yet another play of reversals: Can bodies be weightless and immaterial as well as compact and concrete?

In these images, the compact and concrete is nowhere as evident as in the swirling globes. Hovering, glowing orbs have been a recurrent element in my work for the past seven years. Initially, I saw the globe as just a private symbol. It first manifested itself during meditation, when I had a very physical sensation of holding a radiant orb in my cupped hands. The experience made me perceive the closed circuit of the globe as an emblem of spirituality, that spark of otherworldly consciousness within reminding us that we are part of a larger scheme.

Gradually, I realized that this personal symbol didn't just emerge out of a vacuum. Why is it that the pushy psychics on 42nd Street read your future in a crystal ball, the Good Witch in the *Wizard of Oz* materializes from a floating sphere, and the plastic Buddhas of Japanese artist Mariko Mori swirl around in shiny orbs? Pop culture reflects archetypes, and it turns out that the sphere has a long history as a mystical symbol. *Ouroboros*, the snake that bites its own tail, exists on every continent as a symbol of eternity, and the circular outline of Atlantis emblemized its perfection. As an astrological sign, the orb represents the immaterial spirit of life, as opposed to the physical body. Moreover, the sun-like golden globe stands for the ultimate goal of alchemy: Through the transformation of base material, the alchemist arrives at *coniunctio*, the mystical union with the divine principle.

The globe is also a recurrent element in Christian iconography. Both Mary and Christ were often depicted holding the orb of the sun god in their hands. In Christian symbolism, the solar connection is to resurrection and immortality: the orb is the risen Christ. As the *salvator mundi*, Christ also holds the imperial globe, symbolizing the universality and supreme rule of the Christian religion.

However, just as Yin always contains a grain of Yang and vice versa, traditional symbols can be ambiguous. At first, all the historical evidence I gathered seemed to fall neatly into place: The globe represents spirituality. Then my laboriously threaded chain of pearls was ruptured by one of my very best friends: *The Exposure of Luxury* (1546) by Bronzino. It ranks high among my all-time favorite paintings, and I was delighted to recognize the glowing orb I had visualized in my own hands as identical to the one held by Venus. But Venus? Returning to my art historical sources, I discovered that the globe also serves as the attribute of Eros and of the Earth Goddess Cybele. My sense of confusion was downright Confucian: "Shock comes – oh, oh! Laughing words – ha, ha! The shock terrifies for a hundred miles." (*I Ching*) How can the time-honored symbol of spirituality simultaneously be the very emblem of physical seduction?

Like the particle-in-a-box of quantum physics, Cupid's globe set every single element of my thesis in motion, fluttering apart into entropic disorder. But once these whirling pieces crystallized into a pattern, I could see a bigger picture. While traditionally representing the firmament and the heavenly spheres, the orb obviously also speaks of earthly humanity, in that it is the very ball of soil on which we live. The sphere is also Eve's apple, representing fecundity, sensuality and passion. In medieval anatomical codices, it signified the heart and the circulation of blood. All this is the domain of Eros, and vibrant red is its color. Hence, the red globe is spiritual AND sensual experience.

I used to think that monastic seclusion at a safe distance from my body was the way to knowledge. Now I am convinced that human beings are clothed in flesh for a reason: The path is through the skin. Opting for either Dionysus or Apollo is choosing the easy way out; the challenge is to maintain your balance between the two. Preceding my Apollonian task at the drawing table then, is the very physical labor of enacting all the female poses in my drawings. In order to tell these stories in images, I must first experience them in my body. The bruises and cuts I endure along the way remind me that I am made of flesh and blood. This sensory awareness is the indispensable complement to the mental portion of my process: The mind is a muscle, just like the globe is to be found in human breasts, buttocks, biceps, balls and bald skulls.

The hemispherical shape of these flesh parts calls to mind the famous story of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*: The primeval human came in pairs (man-man, woman-woman and the androgyne) shaped like my globes, constantly swirling and rolling. This mighty race rose to attack the Gods, and in revenge, Zeus decided to cut all humans in two, "like a sorb-apple which is halved for pickling." After this division, the resulting sections of humans are doomed to a frantic search for their other half, throwing their arms about one another and dying from hunger and self-neglect in the process. "So ancient is the desire of one another which is implanted in us, reuniting our original nature, making one of two, and healing the state of man." (Plato)

Uniting the two halves remains the big juggling feat. Just as the individual sheets of images may shift and slither and form ever-changing constellations, the globe is never stable, always swirling, slipping and sliding out of your grip.

So, happy little tales my works are not. I tend to fish for my subject matter in rather rancid water. Being a baudelarian at heart, I think that the greatest challenge for any artist is to extract the beautiful from the foul smelling, to pick the flowers in the gutter.

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