THE RED GAZE

by

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The years ... when I pursued the inner images were the most important time of my life. Everything else is to be derived from this. It began at that time, and the later details hardly matter anymore. My entire life consisted in elaborating what had burst forth from the unconscious and flooded me like an enigmatic stream and threatened to break me. That was the stuff and material for more than only one life.... Everything later was merely the outer classification, the scientific elaboration, and the integration into life. But the numinous beginning, which contained everything, was then. – Carl Jung, The Red Book

My final body of work for the MFA Program consists of three series of paintings—each concerned with how I have come to terms with the world as an artist with a mission, an ordinary person doing daily tasks, and a woman who has integrated the perciipient and the perceived. These paintings present serial fragmentation and juxtaposition—a marked difference from my previous works (e.g., self-portrait with the swordfish and my series of portraits of my colleagues in the MFA program). My early works were a conscious effort to find wholeness and purpose through inner dialogue with my past and to find affinity or shared individuality with my colleagues and intimates. It is my belief that the postmodern world has been swept up in fragmentary, churning images with no context. Hence, in “Unit”, one of my final works, I intend to confidently address this belief through the clear demarcation between the overlaid canvas with text and the paintings as well as the sure focus on the facial parts. My paintings are about mirroring the ways of the world but presenting an image that preserves the individual—and the woman—within. The swordfish is alive and ever more present, but it no longer just dives incessantly into the ocean of the subconscious.
Self-portrait with the Swordfish

Oil on canvas
Portraits on round canvases (Ben, Marie, Denton)

Mixed media
Introduction and Background: The Swordfish and the Round Canvasses

The door of the Mysterium has closed behind me. I feel that my will is paralyzed and that the spirit of the depths possesses me. I know nothing about a way. I can therefore neither want this nor that, since nothing indicates to me whether I want this or that. I wait, without knowing what I’m waiting for. But already in the following night I felt that I had reached a solid point. (Pages 2-4, “The Red One,” The Red Book by Carl Jung)

Before moving to the United States, wherein my family fled from the ravages of the Bosnian-Serbian Conflict, I had been blessed with rich memories of growing up along the shores of the Adriatic. The sea and its symbolism, therefore, became my natural source of images in my art when I moved into another country starkly different from my home. One part of me felt that it would be so easy to adapt—after all, this is the land of the free, the beacon and destination for all immigrants who want to start anew—in short, my family and I were one of those “tired,” “poor,” “huddled masses” who were welcomed by the land of liberty. However, if liberty meant donning the ways of Americana and becoming American, I probably would not have chosen to be a painter, and a female artist at that. I found that I must turn inward to find my footing. Being an artist, a woman, and a foreigner, I have been all too acquainted with the rumblings underneath that always, always ensure that I will have proper “labeling”. For someone like me, it is essential to find solid ground. It would have been easy to find an anchor or a host. I have always thought and behaved first as an individual, and a woman second. As a woman, I have found it very hard to find my individuality. In society, I am a woman first, a person or individual, second. Moreover, it has been my experience that the world has always thought in a Cartesian way—you are either this or that—a man or a woman. Machines and computer systems run under this language—and society is like a machine, it is easier to only have two choices, because a third complicates things. You find a third
way of being, at a very grave risk. Yet, for artists, the intellectual freedom is non-negotiable. Freedom of thought is the fire that has been given to us and this freedom always wins out over the need for security.

The Christian gospel has always taught that the way is within, the sub-conscious. But the sub-consciousness is amorphous, and one can drown in its depths. I have drowned many times, but have awakened to find myself breathing through my swordfish’s gills. My self-portrait with the swordfish, with an orange-red background, illustrates my venture into the sea—a hungry, devouring, frenzied, churning place. The swordfish is my companion. Many people have called me “red” or always gave me a “red” something—perhaps because I get emotional in simple things that people take for granted or let pass. Sometimes I wonder if I am more reptilian or amphibian than a member of the two-legged drag of a species that has come to dominate this planet. Like the amphibian I easily get cold, but also easily get hot. Sometimes I feel my skin is like a thermometer, as sensitive as mercury.

Perhaps we artists have also retained the “third eye” in our genetic make-up—a real biological organ, separate from the bifocal pair of retinas, that has enabled reptiles and pre-mammals to sense light even in a dark place. Our two eyes are for looking into our societal mirror, the world of the senses alone. Perhaps the third is for contemplating what’s beyond the mirror? Perhaps the third eye is examining one’s mind, spirit or the soul? Is this “reflection” the same as the one we see, hear, feel, or even touch? I have come to realize that the older people get, the more this third eye disappears. Some consciously hasten its demise for they feel it slows them down, after all, society is for fast people. But for some, like me, the third eye becomes the anchor itself, eschewing the two
pair eyes in front of our faces. However, the third eye is the third, so let this third eye be used only when the first two would not suffice—for example, when it is mostly dark and our frontal eyes are useless. In various studies, scientists have found that lizards rely on their third eye the most during dusk and dawn.

If society is a dark place in which we artists fear we will lose our way, we come to look for other sources of light. This light I have come to sense also in other people, and my thirty-five paintings of my colleagues and classmates in the MFA program illustrate my way of looking at the many wavelengths of light in people. I find it strange that when I see my intimate friends, I always see them the same as I first beheld them; notwithstanding the extra flesh, the thinning or graying hair. The essence of that color or spectrum of light under which I first beheld them remains unchanging. For this reason my portraits of these people are on circular canvases. The light or the colors of the light under which I have painted my colleagues will remain long after my colleagues have passed away.
The Bitch with the Agenda

Oil on canvas with vinyl backdrop
“The Bitch with the Agenda”

Since I first gained the use of reason my inclination toward learning has been so violent and strong that neither the scoldings of other people... nor my own reflections... have been able to stop me from following this natural impulse that God gave me. He alone must know why; and he knows that I have begged Him to take away the light of my understanding, leaving only enough for me to keep His law, for anything else is excessive in a woman, according to some people. And others say it is even harmful. – Juana Ines de la Cruz, Reply to the Bishop of Puebla (1691), who had attacked her scholarly work as inappropriate for her sex (excerpted by Carl Sagan, Contact)

I have come to realize that society does not have a problem with bitches—the main problem is a woman with an agenda, or a woman who can think independently and does it openly. Society has often dualized women as either a sinner or a saint—the first is a “bad” woman, and the second, a “good” woman. “Good” women and “bad” women labels are comforting to society. However, a woman with an agenda becomes a monster or a bitch, someone difficult or threatening. Most often, women find early on that if they can think, they better not make it seem obvious—because society finds it overtly aggressive. Women therefore, are often forced to resort to camouflage and manipulation. Manipulation is a skill I have never developed nor wanted to learn. It is anti-freedom, both against myself and other people—for the very essence of art is freedom, not liberty, but freedom. But why must we not think for ourselves? Why must thinking for ourselves be construed as competing against the masculine brain? If thinking is a natural activity of any living creature, especially homo sapiens, why must the female refrain from it? What is our brain matter for?

Some women also resort to using sex as a weapon to get what they want. This has been women’s mirror and women’s guide to finding a way in society. Yet sex is a form of energy that follows a very open-ended path, and like all energies, channeling it is often
a torturous exercise. Is this sexual energy coming from within or has it merely ricocheted from the outside for which no one is immune? A woman who keenly needs to find the guidance of the third eye often finds confusion and repression or indulgence. The intellect of the female artist can be in direct conflict with her sexuality... a boxing match between mind and genitals. Both are equally strong. Thankfully, I find that artistic expression offers a way that is neither repressing nor mindlessly indulgent. Many Western, liberal-minded artists presuppose that art must come by the way of the genitals alone—but this assumption departs from the view that art is rooted also in the society from which the artist comes from, or feels affinity with. I, for one, identify with my heritage and the country from which I fled. I cannot flush away the memories and longings of my early youth, the community, the nuances of the language, and the values where I came from; to do so, would be tantamount to destroying myself as an individual. I believe that art for the woman artist offers a way to channel this sexual energy. As “thinking” women we often have problems with the expression or the communication of our views, in which the essence and the form that we want to express is preserved. We have inherited various stereotypical icons in which we model our art. In the art world, this has taken the form of images and pictures generated mostly by male artists. How can the woman artist establish a footing in an arena already replete with cookie-cutter images? The pioneering photographer Cindy Sherman has found a way to go beyond these stereotypical images and situate herself at the center, without making herself vulnerable: she’s there but she’s really not. Like Sherman, I am using myself as the catalyst in order to communicate the idea that I am the creator and the created in my work “The Bitch with the Agenda”.
Brilliantly Mundane

Oil on canvas
“Brilliantly Mundane”

But time is tied to the wrist or kept in a box, tick ing with impatience. —Craig Raine, A Martian Sends a Postcard Home, 1979

In this series of six paintings, I illustrate, in miniature, the things that surround me and take up my attention in the morning—six things that most people in the planet would identify with. I am illustrating a simple joy: most people share that something that you do. However, most viewers are unsettled or even paranoid when they see, beneath the painting, text written in a foreign language. What would they say if I told them one by one that is it merely a list of daily tasks crisscrossing the wall, written in my native Cyrillic language? Through this I found that people are more open or less judgmental with images—and that an unfamiliar language can be perceived as a barrier. For a woman artist whose level of education in languages and expression might intimidate other people, painting and photography can help me bridge these barriers. We are strangers to one another, perceiving the world like the comical but keen Martian in Craig Raine’s poem: “…but how absurd that what we find strange is nothing but differences in language”. If we could go beyond the language, and see that it is not the only arena for communication, we can find brilliance in the mundane.
Unit

Oil on canvas
“Unit”

“One becomes two, two becomes three, and out of the third comes the one as the fourth” (Axiom of Maria)—Maria Prophitessa, bet. 1 and 3 A.D.

In this set of three paintings, I have come back to the beginning, when the search for wholeness opened up a world of chaos, madness, and darkness. Is solidarity with the collective the ultimate destination? If it is, and I have arrived at that point, why the terror and the anxiety? I have always endeavored to go where I thought the point of view of another individual is—to arrive at another’s viewpoint. I had always thought that this destination was the key to wholeness—but I had always felt exhausted and drained of energy, more like a battle-weary warrior than a woman giving herself to others.

Note that my self-portrait with the swordfish is a painting of a seemingly whole, composed woman. Yet the orange-red background throbs and overwhelms the canvas, the inanimate more animated than the woman in the center, who is standing below the viewers’ eye level, fiddling with her hair in the middle. In contrast, within these three new paintings, my face is the only focus, and there is no discernible background. The sense of fragmentation only comes when they are viewed simultaneously, but each painting is a whole face, a whole persona—my ear, my nose/mouth, my eye. The light is coming from a single direction, and it highlights the parts of my face.

How did I arrive at this point? According to Jung, “It begins with the four separate elements, the state of chaos, and ascends by degrees to the three manifestations of Mercuriusin the inorganic, organic, and spiritual worlds; and, after attaining the form of Sol and Luna (i.e., the precious metal gold and silver, but also the radiance of the gods
who can overcome the strife of the elements by love), it culminates in the one and indivisible (incorruptible, ethereal, eternal) nature of the anima, the *quinta essentia*, *aqua permanens*, tincture, or *lapis philosophorum*. This progression from the number 4 to 3 to 2 to 1 is the 'axiom of Maria'...” (Psychology and Alchemy).

Perhaps in the beginning I had never looked at myself in the mirror—indeed I seldom look at myself in the mirror, less often than most women I know of. I know that more often than not, people who are in love with themselves and with others, always find it irresistible to look in the mirror. I chose not to see myself, but to see myself in other people. Though I like looking attractive and enjoy beautiful things, I vehemently shun vanity. I have always associated the mirror with vanity. I see beauty as a feeling, a moment, a timeless ideal, not an obligation to be. One designer, Miuccia Prada, once said that there is something ugly about feeling the obligation to be beautiful. And beauty is one construct that has enslaved us women. But perhaps vanity comes in many forms, not just with the preoccupation with beauty. Such as... being vain about not being vain.
Conclusion

The artist is a strong creature, but the woman is made weak. Not because she is naturally weak, but because she is vulnerable in a society that treats her as something to be gazed at, first and foremost as an object. How do we gaze back? If society is a mirror and could only gaze at us, then it does not think and feel like we do, and there is no need to cower back in alarm and fear. We can engage it through our representation of ourselves that mirrors its mechanical plasticity, but with us at the still center, resolved about what we are, essentially. Therefore, through my self-portraits, I offer the “red” gaze back to the society. The “red” gaze is looking back and questioning who has the ultimate perception, the individual or the society.