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Flower & Song

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Fine Arts

by

Josiah Daniel Gagosian

B.A. University of Oregon, 2005

May, 2020

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Abstract

My work functions as a spiritual and philosophical inquiry, adapting ideas from a broad variety of sources, from the mythic and literary, to the autobiographical. I seek to harmonize paradoxical elements in service of my own higher knowledge. Genealogical explorations of my unusual familial heritage have provided me with a wealth of photographs, religious and cultural motifs, and conceptual material. I view this personal examination as an idiosyncratic path to the universal, the limbs of my family tree branching through time and space to intertwine with the whole of history. Combining both ancient and modern traditions, I create esoteric liminal spaces in my paintings as a means of arriving closer to a truth that unfolds beyond the reach of material reality. I view my task as a mystical one, a divine, even futile, attempt to make work that serves as a vehicle to the *other shore* of human consciousness.

Keywords: Art as spiritual and philosophical inquiry, painting, collage, photography, Mesoamerican art, P.D. Ouspensky, Enrique Martinez Celaya, Symbolist movements in France and Russia, Remedios Varo, the feminine in art, gay art, queer art, art and the rhetoric of beauty, religious art, Nahuatl concept of *difrasismo*, flower and song, poetry, liminal space, Armenian art, Mormonism, LDS Church

Chapter 1

Introduction

In order to characterize my current artistic path, it is necessary that I examine my childhood briefly, as it was governed by an enduring religious sentiment that continues to profoundly shape my work. I was raised in an exceedingly conservative Evangelical Christian household. My father is a descendant of Ottoman Armenian converts to Mormonism, and my mother is the daughter of a devout Mexican Catholic and a lapsed Mormon of Scandinavian extraction. I was peculiarly focused as a child and possessed of a voracious curiosity I sated with books and time spent out in the natural world hiking, camping, fishing, observing and exploring the landscapes of Oregon and Idaho with my family. My simultaneous inculcation into the church of Christianity and the church of nature led me to develop a keen interest in the biological sciences alongside a rapacious creative impulse fueled by a need to immerse myself in magic and mystery. Thus, my world was rife with contradictions, informed by a love of scientific knowledge, and also to no small degree by a kind of “magical thinking.” As taught, I venerated a world that was the artistic conception of an omnipotent-yet-knowable-God. Humanity dwelt on a planet that was scientifically classifiable and comprehensible but was also ground-zero in a spiritual conflict between the less-explicable forces of “good” and “evil.” Demons and angels battled for our souls, just beyond our sight, and the “kingdom of heaven” stood shimmering at the periphery of our view, reflected in the obscured glories of a corrupted earthly creation.

As I grew older, a rift developed between the spiritual faith of my upbringing and my own sense of identity. The realization of my homosexuality and the subsequent trauma and instability of coming out as a teenager led me to abandon all semblance of the religion of my childhood. I took to atheism with the same fervor I had for the god of my childhood. In my undergraduate studies at the University of Oregon, I studied painting and English literature as well as Eastern philosophy and Indian art. I delved into the occult, tarot, and astrology. I read books on religion and philosophy and history. The artwork I developed out of this period focused heavily on sexual imagery to confront and challenge the contrived notions of shame and decency that were so profoundly entrenched in me. I sought to draw the viewer in and engage them with imagery they might otherwise have found disturbing or repugnant. The goal was to provoke and unsettle, using the work as a psychological catharsis for the profound wounds my severing from family and faith had wrought.

I spent my twenties in that grim miasma of suicidal depression and burgeoning alcoholism so commonly associated with artists, particularly the homosexual ones. I saw my own life in the tormented splendor of Francis Bacon's paintings, his obsessive near-reverence for pain, his bleary and bloody vision of a world in which abject anguish could somehow glow with a bleak radiance. I began to consider this perpetual state of suffering as a feature of my identity. I would burn brilliantly and die young, destroyed by my own hand before I turned thirty (a sentiment that was as profoundly earnest at the time as it is adolescent and theatrical in hindsight).

My painting, *The Rape of Ganymede* (Figure 1), stands at the crux of a shift in my conception of art. It references a tradition of homoeroticism in classical art that depicted Zeus as an eagle "abducting" (a tempered euphemism for sexual assault) the boy Ganymede, taking him

to serve as cupbearer to the gods. My version focuses on the violence of the act, the roiling turmoil of it, the eagle transmogrified into a vulture, the male figure tumbling backward in an ambiguous position of subjugation or resignation. He reflected my own psychic turbulence, chronic victimization, masochism, and fetishization of death. However, the work signaled a shift in my process, a desire to connect my personal experience to a larger context and conversation, beyond the cyclical misery of my personal struggle with mental illness.



1 *The Rape of Ganymede* (2010)

Chapter 2

Current Practice and Processes

The overall content of my work is still rooted in an abiding interest in my multifaceted cultural and religious heritage. Enrique Martínez Celaya says that “religious work wants to suggest some experience that is extremely clear but unnamable.”¹ In light of this unnamability I have come to view my family tree as a spiritual sensory organ, branching outward to intertwine my own inconsequential existence with the whole of human history, uniting me with the natural and cosmic order from which that history is born, and by which it is shaped. What is most personal is what is most fundamentally universal: love for family and a desire to know where we come from and who we are. “In love is hidden an infinity of egoism, vanity, and selfishness. Love is the potent force that tears off all masks, and men who run away from love do so in order that they may preserve their masks.”² It is a simple thing to say one loves one’s family, but it is quite another to turn one’s gaze inward to extricate from within oneself the hereditary and cultural masks that are so often one’s birthright. My work has evolved out of a need to reconcile the fragmented and fraught family history which is my inheritance, both metaphorically, and literally, in the cutting, pasting, and restructuring of personal and symbolic imagery.

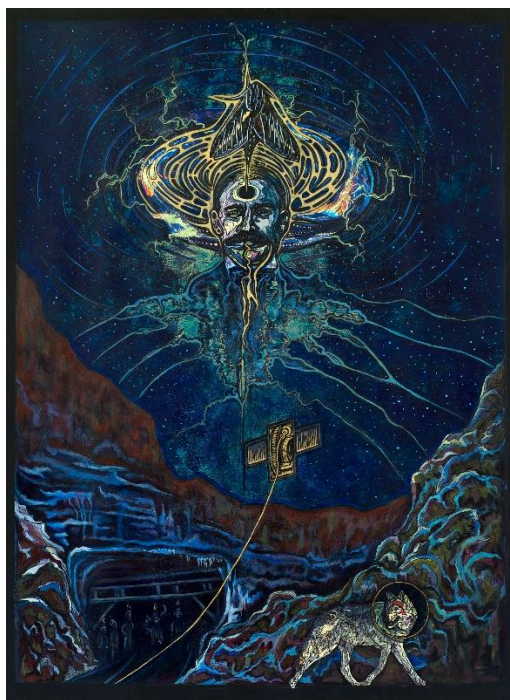
I have extensive family ties to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Days Saints, (Mormonism) the genealogical fixation of which has given me access to a wealth of historical information, family accounts, and old photographs. These I print up, disassemble, and merge into

¹ Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Collected Writings & Interviews, 1990-2010* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 52.

² P.D. Ouspensky. *Tertium Organum* (Milton Keynes: Aziloth Books, 2016), 141.

my own paintings and drawings. The images are both familiar and foreign, and removing them from their context seems an act of desecration that renders them, paradoxically, more sacred and allows me to re-purpose and thus re-consecrate them within a new realm. With my paintings *Arekaguhi* (Figure 3) and *Ardzatixtli* (Figure 2) I began with a vision of my ancestors as a pantheon of incarnate concepts or *deities*, if you will. Their images were no longer time-weathered apparitions of long dead humans, but raw and living conceptual material I might use in the construction of a personal cosmology. I am fascinated by that margin where history and myth merge, how the fragmentary memories of our past can be remade into a new vessel. To that end, I have envisioned my great-great grandparents, Arake Setigian and Hagop Tumas Gagosian, as ancient pre-Christian lunar and solar deities, references to which remain in fragmentary form in Armenian folk tales and songs as Sister Sun and Brother Moon, who, at the behest of their father *Asdvadz*, take turns watching over the world.³ I wanted to honor their particular history, while also reversing the traditional gender roles which had rendered my great-great grandmother a satellite to the whims of her husband, uprooting her from their ancient homeland in Anatolia to settle in a coal mining town in rural Utah.

³ Սարգիս Հարությունյան, “ՀԱՅ ՀԻՆ ՎԻՊԱՇԽԱՐՀԸ,” ArmenianHouse.org, Armenian House, 1987, <http://armenianhouse.org/harutyunyan/03-nature.html>.

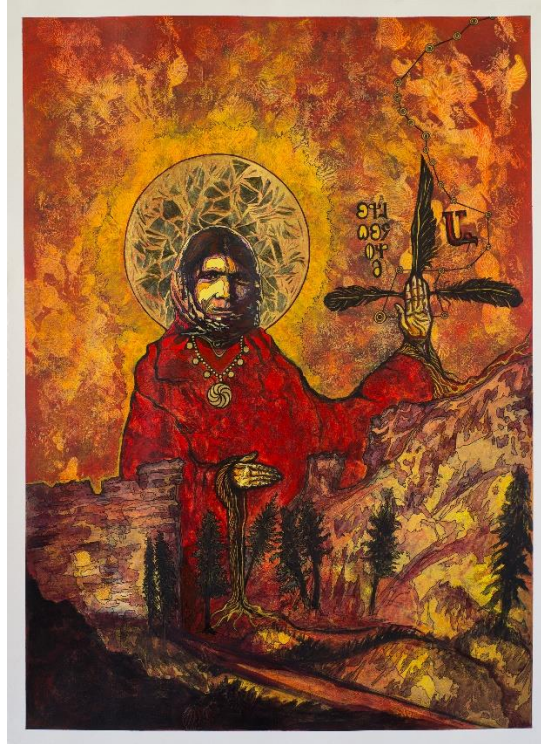


2 *Ardzatixtli* (2017)

I incorporate a great deal of photography into my work, using found images and my own digital photographs, as well as photos of immediate family from both my childhood and the more distant past, sometimes including symbolic found materials that impart a ritual element.

Arekaguhi, (Figure 3) contains a mosaic of crow feathers in the halo of the figure, for example.

In addition to photographs there are often drawn or painted elements I cull from my various sketchbooks and integrate into the pastiche of images and atmospheric textures. All of these are then painted over with thin translucent layers of acrylic paint in order to harmonize them with the whole.



1 *Arekaguhi* (2017)

In *Anmah-katavaino* (Figure 4) I fused deeply personal autobiographical imagery (photographs of my grandfather intubated and dying and my cancer-stricken aunt in one of her wigs) with various invented elements, bringing them together in a liminal space where disparate fragments bask in the same unearthly glow. I balance these different media within a painted, lyrical domain, both wrought of this world, but separate from it, “magical is not the right word. What I mean is the feeling of that which exists beyond what is...I am talking about the spirit of being—consciousness; what is left once everything relevant has been accounted for.”⁴

In this oft-abstruse endeavor, the para-Surrealists Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington have proven a wellspring of inspiration in terms of both process and content. From Varo I have adapted the use of decalcomania (a Surrealist-invented primitive printmaking

⁴ Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Collected Writings & Interviews, 1990-2010* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 52.

technique), in the creation of ethereal landscapes for my figures to inhabit. The natural process involved in pressing the paint to the paper creates abstract, organically branching forms which lend themselves well to the formation of organic, atmospheric spaces. More literal renderings of flora and landscape features like rocks and rivers emerge from and then fade into the delicate textural qualities created with this technique, resulting in an interplay of hazy ambiguity and crystalline specificity.



4 *Anmah-katavaino* (2018)

Anmahkatavaino (Figure 4) utilizes both this decalcomania landscape technique as well as other “Surrealist” flourishes. In paying homage to Varo and Carrington, whose work both alludes to and refutes the male-centered tenets and tropes of canonical Bretonian Surrealism, I hope to allow myself to emulate work that might be perceived as more “feminine” in defiant embodiment of what Dave Hickey wryly refers to as “the dread charge of bourgeois effeminacy” wherein “the self-consciously ‘lovely,’ that is, the ‘effeminate’ in art, is pretty much the domain of the male homosexual.”⁵ As just such a “male homosexual” I believe I am in unique position to create work that exalts the “feminine” and the “beautiful” by embodying it rather than

⁵ Dave Hickey, “Prom Night in Flatland,” in *The Invisible Dragon: Essays on Beauty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 38.

fetishizing or idealizing women as mere props and tropes in a male-dominated narrative. In doing so, I hope also to situate my work in a sense of the masculine that is more nakedly vulnerable, spirited, and jubilant, rather than narcissistic and dictatorial.

Remedios Varos' adherence to a Gurdjieffian notion of art as a carefully orchestrated scientific and mathematical endeavor—her deliberate rebuttal of the Surrealist emphasis on automatism as a means of accessing the Freudian subconscious—has challenged me to employ a far more painstaking method to my own work, eschewing the wholly random for a more purposeful approach to matters of form and composition that aspires always to otherworldly beauty. Though I disagree with Varo's assertion that art should be purely mathematical,⁶ I see a kindred blending of Surrealist ideas with a deep interest in the mystic, the shamanistic, the spiritual, and the philosophical that has more in common with the Symbolist movements in France and Russia, with their mutual interest in theosophy and "a profound awareness that the key solution to the problems of alienation, depersonalization and moral disintegration...lay not only in the application of symbols...but also in the deliberate cultivation of rhythm, of the melody of construction."⁷

My use of color is central to how I convey this "rhythm" and "melody," the color soundlessly singing the expressive and emotional landscape of each painting, delineating and defining an intuitive emotional energy for each form to inhabit and embody. The building of many thin translucent layers as well as a dry brush stippling technique adds richness and depth to the color and heightens its emotional impact. These material techniques are not a "mere purposeless creating of things that dissipate themselves in a void," but are honed and developed

⁶ Tere Arcq. "In Search of the Miraculous," in *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo* (Artes de Mexico: Mexico City, 2008), 45.

⁷ John E. Bowlt, "The Blue Rose: Russian Symbolism in Art," *The Burlington Magazine* 118, no. 881 (1976): 573

as “a power that has a purpose and must serve the development and refinement of the human soul...”⁸ Toward that end my work has become a daily mindfulness ritual and religious practice. My anxious mind often rebels, but I force myself to sit and face the task at hand until the clamor in me has quieted. I use meticulous detail and deliberately monotonous and tedious techniques both for their aesthetic effect and as a study in sustained awareness. I seek to not merely make art *about* the sacred, but to establish a practice that is itself the mystical path I travel toward a higher consciousness.

⁸ Wassily Kandinsky, “On the Spiritual in Art,” *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994), 212.

Chapter 3

Historical and Contemporary Influences

Mythological and religious allusions are replete throughout my work. I deliberately employ mythological symbols as a mechanism for psycho-spiritual examination, seeking out the overlapping motifs and thematic patterns that span the illusory chasms between disparate eras and cultures, elucidating both personal and socio-political experiences. Artists have always played a critical role in the reinvention, reinterpretation, and revitalization of these mythic forms, breathing new spiritual life into them so their mysteries remain accessible and relevant to contemporary audiences. According to Joseph Campbell, it is this dynamic relationship to our myths that makes the artist a modern shaman.⁹

I prefer to use my own family history to guide most, though by no means all, of my mythological explorations, culling information from regional traditions to which I have some ancestral ties. In my painting *Cuernoithan* (Figure 5), I was interested in how unrelated cultures incorporated horned animals like deer and goats into their art and shamanic rituals and how these all seemed to convey a similar conceptual energy or presence, suggesting that point where humanity and nature merge in primordial union. In constructing the imagery of this painting, I combined a photo of my great grandfather, Ferdinand Gagosian, with a version of an anthropomorphic horned deity with the antlers of an elk, the torso of a man, the body of a large wildcat, and the beak and eyes of an owl. I hoped to tie my own historic past to an ancient mythic motif present from the antlered cave painting known as “The Sorcerer” of Trois-Frères

⁹ *Joseph Campbell and the Power of Myth*, created by Joseph Campbell and Bill Moyers (1988; Apostrophe S/Public Affairs Television), DVD

(13,000 B.C.), to the Celtic horned god Cernunnos, to the Yaqui deer dancers of Sonoran Mexico and Arizona. The arc of my cognitive pilgrimage forms a path across the world that mirrors my own ancestors' migrations from Europe and the British Isles to the Sonoran desert where my mother and her mother, and her mother's mother were born. This practice of overlapping and layering autobiographical narrative and mythic motifs is one I employ often, and it is critical to how I cultivate the content and meaning of each piece.



5 Cuernoïhan (2018)

Gyorgy Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky have wielded an enormous influence over artists and intellectuals since the early 20th century. Both Gurdjieff and his protégé Ouspensky claimed that human beings were, fundamentally, sleep-walking automatons governed by a commotion of competing appetites and natural processes over which they exerted little to no conscious control.¹⁰ Ouspensky stated that “Art anticipates a psychic evolution”¹¹ in humanity and Gurdjieff taught his students a way of approaching their work and their lives with ritual intention and mindfulness in order to harmonize, transform, and awaken themselves from their mechanical

¹⁰ Tere Arcq, “In Search of the Miraculous,” in *Five Keys to the Secret World of Remedios Varo* (Mexico City: Artes de Mexico, 2008), 45.

¹¹ P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (Milton Keynes: Aziloth Books, 2016), 70.

torpor. Over the past century, art has often departed from this higher aim and become self-consciously materialist, obsessed with surfaces and planes and visible processes undergirded by a fragile ontological framework meant to justify the work's reason for being to an audience that is often either dubious or confused. Too often art has become a frigid cerebral competition rather than a transcendent experience of the ineffable. My work, I believe, reflects a resurgence of the mythical, the shamanistic, and the anthropomorphic in contemporary art that can be observed in the work of artists like Enrique Martínez Celaya, Hannah Faith Yata, Christina Mrozik, Laksmi Shitaresmi, and Kiki Smith. There is an inclination toward art that exhibits a desire to reconnect with the natural world, reexamining the blinkered notion of human supremacy and our place in a society dominated by technology and a callous, myopic culture of acquisition and distraction that presents material Science as the sole intellectually viable repository of human knowledge and experience. "Rationality is efficient and often the most useful approach, but there's a boundary beyond which it doesn't work. That's where art begins. Art is a leap in consciousness, but its workings are mysterious, unspoken."¹²

The work and philosophy of Enrique Martínez Celaya have had profound impact on the development of my current practice. I saw Celaya's massive multimedia installation "The Pearl" at SITE Santa Fe in 2013. Celaya used painting, writing, sound, sculpture, video, and photography to create an immersive and dreamlike narrative experience. According to Celaya, "The Pearl is a poem about time, the marker as well as the current of those markers."¹³ While my own work is vastly different in style, it is also very much immersed in time and memory through the use of evocative, expressive imagery. Celaya also said that "The idea of the avant-

¹² Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Collected Writings & Interviews, 1990-2010* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 73.

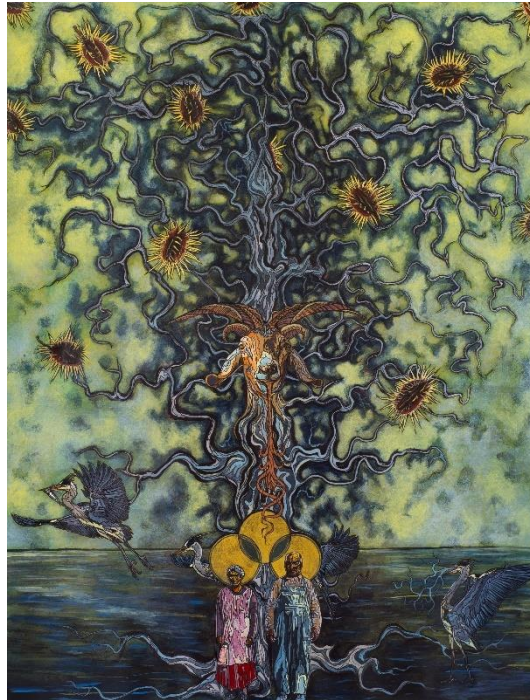
¹³ SITE Santa Fe. "Enrique Martínez Celaya: The Pearl" sitesantafe.org. <https://sitesantafe.org/exhibition/enrique-martinez-celaya/> (accessed February 29, 2020)

garde has become a convention of the ruling class it once disrupted. Anything that demands serious, sustained engagement is revolutionary today.”¹⁴ I have come to much the same conclusion in the course of my artistic development. I want to make work that demands “serious and sustained engagement” both of myself and of my audience. I am not at all interested in easily digestible answers or neatly linear narratives. The world rarely provides tidy answers, so why should I? I want to make work that challenges its audience, work that obfuscates as much as it reveals, but rewards prolonged attention.

Paregamistadh (Figure 6), is a painting I created to explore the multifaceted concept of love. I was at first reminded of the imagery of the Rider-Waite Tarot, specifically The Devil and The Lovers of the Major Arcana. The two cards are compositionally similar and reflect, on the one hand, a mind turned inward shackled by self-interest and destructive desires, and on the other, the earnest engagement of two of people in noble devotion to one another. I wanted to convey how the two ostensibly opposite forces come to play in human relationships and how that spurs us to either spiritual growth or psychic stagnation. The goat is an animal laden with cultural significance and moral ambiguity, associated with both bucolic domesticity and absolute evil. Its four-horned visage watches over an elderly couple from the center of an enormous, writhing tree. They are my great-great grandparents, Sun and Moon, Arake and Hagop. As emigrants their lives were beset with difficulty, their marriage a product of millennia of tradition, their fates bound together by cultural traditions and the shared trauma of genocide and exile. Through the creation of this work, I came to better understand that two contradictory ideas can simultaneously hold truth, that the apparent dualities that often tidily divide our understanding of

¹⁴ Enrique Martínez Celaya, *Collected Writings & Interviews, 1990-2010* (Lincoln and London, University of Nebraska Press, 2010), 108.

the world, vanish into an equivocal fog of gray upon closer scrutiny, and that the true essence of art lies in that realm of mist and mystery, where the only certainties are shrouded.



6 Paregamistadh (2017)

Aspects of inherent/apparent dualism are also reflected in other spiritual and philosophical traditions which have influenced me, most notably Buddhism and Gnostic Christianity. Throughout my work, the trappings of my childhood Christianity have stubbornly persisted. I am still moved by flights of angels and haunted by demonic terrors, though I am less enslaved by my fears than I once was. I pay oblique homage to these traditions in frequent allusions to Byzantine and early-Renaissance iconography as well as Armenian and Celtic illuminated manuscripts. Halo-crowned, frontally faced figures with eyes fixed beyond populate many of my paintings and I often use “gold” or “silver” and elaborate ornamentation to indicate sacredness or preciousness. Beyond the simplistic eschatological duality of mutually exclusive opposites as expressed in the Evangelical Christian tradition, the mystics have historically recognized that “being and not-being, order and disorder, life and death, light and darkness,

masculine and feminine, dry and wet, hot and cold, and active and passive...life and death” are “mutually arising, interdependent, and complementary aspects of one and the same process.”¹⁵

Much of my work references mystery cults or ancient and dead religions in order to convey a sense of the unknown. I seek out patterns and parallels among disparate histories and mythologies and layer them like conceptual palimpsests to form a new version of an old motif. I want the viewer to reach for a story amidst the images and to perhaps not quite find it there in its entirety. Instead, they may encounter a fragment of a tale told in a long-forgotten tongue, a remembrance that flickers at the corners of our communal consciousness like a dream that fades upon awakening.



7 *Abrasaxochitl* (2018)

In the sculptural painting *Abrasaxochitl* (Figure 7), I was primarily drawn to the similarities between the hand reliquaries of Roman Catholic tradition and their marked similarity

¹⁵ James Maffie, “Aztec Philosophy,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, University of Tennessee at Martin, Accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/>.

to Phrygian bronze hand sculptures associated with the mystery cult of Sabazios. I sculpted and painted tropical orchids and Anatolian hieroglyphs onto a cast sculpture of my own hand raised in the familiar gesture of benediction and emerging as if from behind an undulating curtain of writhing lines. A serpent emerges from the index finger, symbol of arcane knowledge, or original sin, or neither. The piece becomes a religious object of sorts, a relic of my own vision come to life with emblems of my own creation and the scattered seeds from which they spring, the ancient symbols and timeless mysteries of voices long silent.

Chapter 4

Visual and Literary Language

I owe much to literary fiction and poetry, in particular, the works of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison. I read a great deal of poetry in English, Spanish, and Armenian, poets like Federico Garcia Lorca, Yeghishe Charents, Baruyr Sevag, Dylan Thomas, and Li-Young Lee. Magical Realism has inspired me to combine mundane references to my own life experience with events of a more magical or mystical bent. In *Camazotz, que desangra nuestras vacas* (Figure 8), the mundane image of a cow with an ear tag dominates the foreground of a childhood fishing spot in rural Idaho, but it takes on a mysterious, ethereal quality. The cow is anthropomorphized. The landscape glows with colors unnatural to it. Bats fly overhead and appear as though arrested in stained glass. The entire image hovers in suspension in the mouth of an ancient Zapotec-inspired cryptid, *Camazotz* who, according to modern rural Mexican folklore, preys upon cattle, carrying them away and drinking their blood.



8 *Camazotz* (2017)

Over time my work has developed an elaborate language of symbols and recurring themes often rooted in the natural world and my ties to it. Different plants and animals symbolize different conceptual frameworks or aspects of consciousness. Be they orchids and aspens, or hoopoes and hummingbirds, mountains and mineshafts, or anthropomorphic badgers, “there is nothing dead or unconscious. Everything lives, everything breathes, thinks, feels; everything is conscious, and everything speaks.”¹⁶ Each painting becomes, in my mind, a wordless incantation, a poem, a song. Whenever I do incorporate actual text into an image, it is not so much in service of a literal explication than an exploration of the ambivalence of the written word itself and the images we use to illustrate it. Historically, written language has been used both as a method of communication—a bridge—and as a means of obfuscation—the encryption of information for the eyes of a specific elite or enlightened audience. Literacy was the provenance of monks, sages, and kings, a magical power for transmitting information deemed

¹⁶ P.D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum* (Milton Keynes: Aziloth Books, 2016), 219.

too unwieldy for the common people to comprehend. (In this it was also a tool of oppression). In order to paradoxically express or describe something of the inchoate nature of the written word, I have often incorporated nonfigurative, abstract symbols of my own design, alphabets, glyphs, arcane, sometimes invented text, obsolescent writing systems, runes, as well as specific stylized techniques for rendering certain symbolic phenomena (fire, or smoke, for example) borrowed from Mesoamerican, Mesopotamian, or other ancient artistic traditions.

Art is not always morally buoyed up by the stated aim of illumination, insight, and spiritual liberation. It has, throughout its history, been deeply rooted in systems of power and manipulation, and I often struggle with how to align a desire to create refined, emotionally and intellectually sophisticated work with my own profound antipathy toward those entrenched hierarchical systems of wealth and authority by which our practices so often are financially sustained. Beauty, however, can be an instrument of subversion when wielded appropriately. “Far from ameliorating the artist’s radical, infantile wishes, the rhetoric of beauty *politicizes* them, makes them publicly available, and proposes them, like it or not, as social options.”¹⁷ In pursuit of this “rhetoric of beauty” I have not only referenced literature and poetry in my painting but have begun to merge my visual work with my poetry practice, which for most of my life has remained an intensely private endeavor. The chapbook of thirteen poems that accompanied my thesis exhibition merged the visual and poetic elements of my work, interweaving them, allowing the cadence and rhythm of the words to lend both intricacy and illumination to the paintings, while the color and form of the paintings harmonize with the countermelody of lyrical devices.

¹⁷ Dave Hickey, “After the Great Tsunami: On Beauty and the Therapeutic Institution,” in *The Invisible Dragon* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 57.

Painting as Poetry: *Flower & Song*

The literary and artistic traditions of Mexico are of particular personal significance to me. They are born of a rich and multifaceted creative and spiritual past, carved out of the violent collision and eventual synthesis of disparate human cultures, from Medieval Spain and North Africa to Tenochtitlan and the American Southwest. Central to this is the Nahuatl concept of *difrasismo*, a sophisticated linguistic device wherein two words or phrases are combined to form a metaphorical image or concept. “Water-fire,” (*atl-tlachinolli*) for example, refers to “war,” while “the tail, the wing” denotes the “common people.” The *difrasismo* “flower and song” is the Nahuatl expression for poetry, music, and art. Nahua shamans claimed that *truth* can only be expressed through “flower and song.” In essence, spiritual truths can only be expressed through the refinement of artistic metaphor, through poetry, through the blooming of the “body’s flower” in entheogenic ecstasy and the subsequent artistic response to that spiritual journey. “Nahuatl philosophic thought thus revolved about an aesthetic conception of the universe and life, for art ‘made things divine,’ and only the divine was true. To know the truth was to understand the hidden meaning of things through ‘flower and song,’ a power emanating from the deified heart,”¹⁸ or *yoltéotl*, a concept analogous to the Catholic principle of the Sacred Heart.

Despite my interest in language and literary narrative, the bulk of my focus lies in the creation of a body of visual work that is lyrical, cobbled together from the overlapping patterns and symbolic evocations from which our stories are told and retold. There is a certain “painterliness” to poetry and there is much of the poetic in painting. I find inspiration in the archetypal themes of the Imagist poet T.S. Eliot, in the vibrant ancestral meditations of Li-Young Lee, and the strange druidic incantations of Dylan Thomas. Poetry exhibits a quality of

¹⁸ Miguel León-Portilla, *Aztec Thought and Culture* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1990), 182.

abstraction and divine “illogic” which touches upon the kind of metaphorical truths I hope to convey in my work. Poetry in languages other than English (Armenian, Spanish, Nahuatl) provides me with unique metaphors and idiomatic insights. I consider each work a poem or song. Rather than speaking illustratively and in linear narratives, I create lyrical work that engages the viewer and invites them to fill the gaps in their own understanding with stories of their own.

Conclusion

What might seem like a preoccupation with nostalgia and the past is more than mere self-indulgent sentiment. It is, at heart, an exploration of the nature of time, memory, and ultimately, human existence. I am fixated by questions of identity, culture, and mythology, not because of their specificity to my own situation exclusively, but because the deeper I delve, the more the edges of separation blur. Through an ongoing examination of my own place in historic and mythic time, I can better understand the human condition as a whole: that we are each heirs to a myriad-voiced legacy, a clamorous inheritance of base appetites, prehistoric fears and longings, and soaring aspirations played out in this field of energy we experience as time. It is one unified simultaneity, or as Jack Kerouac once wrote: “listen to the silence inside the illusion of the world, and you will remember the lesson you forgot, which was taught in immense milky way soft cloud innumerable worlds long ago and not even at all. It is all one vast awakened thing. I call it the golden eternity. It is perfect.”¹⁹ I cannot deny a certain sense of fatalism in my work, that even the superficially automatist techniques I employ merely uncover a series of potential results already set forth in an infinite array of concurrent and parallel realities. I experience each step in the process as my own choice, merely by nature of the fact that I cannot see what is to come. But the path I must follow is laid out for me and I must trust what I suppose can only be called a sort of honed intuition, or perhaps faith—faith that my singular engagement in this quest for understanding through art is not utterly vain and self-indulgent, faith that I am devoting myself to some higher purpose, which, for lack of a better word, I call divine.

¹⁹ Maria Popova, “Jack Kerouac on Kindness, the Self Illusion, and the ‘Golden Eternity,’” Brain Pickings, Accessed April 5, 2020, <https://www.brainpickings.org/2014/03/12/jack-kerouac-golden-eternity/>.

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Vita

Josiah Daniel Gagosian was born in Pocatello, Idaho and raised in both Oregon and Idaho. He received his Bachelor of Arts degrees in English Literature and Painting from the University of Oregon in 2005 and moved to New Orleans shortly thereafter. In 2017, he enrolled in the MFA program at University of New Orleans, where he taught undergraduate painting and design courses as a Graduate Assistant while working to merge disparate practices in painting, sculpture, and poetry into a cohesive body of work. During his tenure at University of New Orleans, he showed work at both Barrister's Gallery and Søren Christensen Gallery, in addition to his Graduate Thesis Exhibition at the UNO St. Claude Gallery.