

Fragments

by Krassimira Drenska

Pas assez subtils, mes sens, pour défaire cette œuvre si fine ou si profonde qui est le passé ; pas assez subtils pour que je distingue que ce lieu ou ce mur ne sont pas identiques, peut-être, à ce qu'il étaient l'autre jour.

Paul Valery, Monsieur Teste

Boyana - Sofia: 1954 – 1978

I remember Boyana. Two small children are playing in the garden. That's me and my brother. My hands are covered with dirt and water. I'm moulding clay into shapes and laying them out on the ground. My little brother asks, "What's this?" – "A secret garden." I reply. I must have been 7 or 8 years old.

We go wild during the summer. Frolicking around a ravine not too far from our house. We had strict orders never to play around the area. I can still see myself running along the steep slope of the ravine, tears running down my cheeks, torn between the fear of my father's wrath and the vision of what I left behind. Our father is taking me right back up the slope, his imposing figure looking more and more menacing. On top of the ravine my young brother is hanging precariously by the last shred of his T-shirt from the branch of a tree. My father rushes forward before the little one should land on the ground and break his neck. Needless to say, my father gives us a good telling-off for breaking the rule, specially me: being the older one I should have known better.

I remember that somebody is left up there alone, skillfully tied up to the branch with my father's belt.

I don't think it was my brother...

I am thirteen and must decide on a career orientation as required by the school system. My dream is to become an artist. There is only one art school in Sofia and all candidates must take an admission test, which put far greater demands on us than what we were prepared for. So, the only hope of being accepted was to join a preparation course. My first memories of lessons in art go back to Mrs X. She was as tough as I was shy and awkward. She opened no new vistas, she left no room for imagination, but taught us the rudiments of perspective and the rendering of volume of three-dimensional objects. Looking back, I think I learned something very important: light-heartedness in art vanishes through the window when perspective walks through the door; even matchboxes can be made to look like skyscrapers, if one manages to locate their vanishing point; I am not sure which I hate more: the vanishing points or painstakingly shading the sides of some jug.

I pass the exam.

My golden years are the time spent at the Art School. Everything was new and exiting: drawing and modelling, the stories about the Old Masters, our teachers - each of them with a character of their own - my schoolmates, some of whom are still my friends. Emerging from teenage to enter a world full of promise – the world of art. Being given purpose and goal, life was getting colorful. The still unexperienced hand couldn't quite follow the greedy, impatient eye, but learning had the taste of joy. Modelling with clay proved to be very helpful in developing drawing skills. In order to be able to grasp the relationship between different parts of the body, for instance, one

had to go around it and take a look from all sides. Thus, one's own body involved in the process, the fingers were mysteriously sending signals to the brain: the lively form is not solely an outline – it is volume, it should relate to one's own body! The following story dates probably from this period:

A young apprentice is sculpting the statue of a saint meant for a niche in a church. Comes by his old master who says: "Young man, there seems to be something wrong with this figure." – "But Master, I have modelled every single drapery fold, every detail of the face exactly as you taught me!" The old master runs his hand over the back of the statue. "And why have you left the back unattended? You haven't worked at it at all!" – "But Master, nobody is ever going to see the back, it will be against the wall." – "God is going to see it, my son. Work on it!"

To this day, when visiting a gothic cathedral, I ask myself how exactly God is able to see the backs of all the statues.

It is now time for another exam – the admission test for the Academy of Fine Arts. Full of apprehension, groups of young candidates scrutinise the lists of the successful candidates, posted on the famous red walls of the Academy. I am accepted in Sculpture, although my first choice was Printmaking and Arts of Bookmaking. As the only female student in this batch, I spend my first year enduring the rough manners of the professor, a former army officer, and treated as a joke by all the young men in the class. It soon becomes obvious to me, that my place is not here. I manage to switch to Printmaking. Professor Staikov initiates us into the art of wood engraving, which is to become my sphere of predilection.

Coating the metal plate, the alchemy of intaglio, the whole secret cuisine behind the techniques was fascinating enough, but above all I preferred the polished, heavy boards of pear wood, carefully prepared with a black coating to receive 'the path of light', which I was going to open up with my burin.

I have always needed the resistance of the material: the effort to model every line with the woodcutter's knife brought back the feeling that drawing is a form of sculpture.

Leafing through the works from this period, I realise that I never made preliminary sketches for my larger wood engravings, neither did I use any of my drawings as starting point for compositions – they seem to be born from the very interaction with the characteristic resistance of wood.

Light, a filigree luminescence, finds its way between the shadows, allowing forms to emerge from the darkness. Even if wood's very materiality seems to contain an eternity of light, it acts as a veil – the light somehow always seems to emanate from behind.

Paris: 1978 -1979

Thanks to a scholarship offered by the French government, I went to Paris for a postgraduate specialisation. This turned out to be a turning point of my career as an artist. Strangely enough, I didn't realise it right away. It wasn't until I returned to Bulgaria, that I was confronted with the fact that my perception of the existing system had undergone a change and that I was no longer willing to let my life follow a pre-established course.

Paris felt dangerous: propelled out of the net of familiar relationships, I became painfully aware of my own insignificance and vulnerability; but at the same time, Paris was vibrant and irresistibly attractive!

In Atelier 17, where prof. S.W. Hayter introduced me to new developments in intaglio printmaking, an interesting international group of printmakers were following his courses. Americans, Canadians, Latin Americans and

several Japanese, all eager to absorb as much as possible of everything the Atelier and Paris had to offer. I was considered an exotic bird, being the first and only Bulgarian ever to have crossed the Atelier's threshold. Due to chronic lack of means, everyday life was not always easy, but youth and energy compensated and got the best out of the situation. I became a real 'afficionado' of the cinema. In the Quartier Latin, where I lived, three or four cinema houses regularly showed old jewels of the seventh art, tickets being quite affordable at student prices. Museums, bookshops and libraries, virtual labyrinths of culture, became never ending sources of delight. Leisurely week-end strolls through the famous Parisian 'marchés aux puces' provided ample food for reveries.

Atelier 17 has always been a privileged encounter place for artists. Only 40 years ago Max Ernst and Juan Miro, sitting at the very same tables we were using, had tried their hand at etching! Alberto Giacometti had dropped by for the occasional chat with Hayter. The Atelier having moved to New York during the Second World War period, Jackson Pollock and Alexander Calder used to go and work there.

Amazingly enough, although very proud of these facts, nobody was unduly bragging about the glorious past, least of all the main actor – S.W. Hayter himself.

The Atelier was located on two levels. The space underground was reserved for beginners like me, only allowed to print in black and white until introduced to Hayter's particular method of color printing. Only after having successfully passed the trial of the 'metamorphosis of the etching plate' was the novice accepted into the higher spheres of advanced printmaking and could have access to the main floor where the large, majestic etching press stood. By 'metamorphosis' S.W. Hayter implied extensive working on the plate using any means which would drastically change the original image, leaving only a ghost behind. From its ruins a new and different image was bound to emerge. "The final image is not interesting in itself, neither is it the goal and crowning of our efforts. The winding way that leads to it is what is worth attention!" This approach, in itself a sacrifice of the fruit of one's long and arduous labor, consequently helped me to adopt a more agile attitude to creative work.

Basel: 1979 – 1989

I arrived in Switzerland in 1979 and enrolled at the School of Design Basel (Schule für Gestaltung), for further specialisation. The five years as a student encouraged me to experiment fearlessly with different lines of thought. In 1980 I got married to Dadi Wirz, a well known Swiss artist. This marked the beginning of a wonderful companionship both professionally and in personal life. We moved into an old studio apartment at Lohnhofgasse, located in the medieval part of Basel near a former prison, 'The Court of the Indebted'.

In 1985 I started my career as faculty in the printmaking department at the School of Design Basel. An interesting period began: I was nearly the same age as my students and not yet quite fluent in German. Each work day was a fresh challenge. Once again I was the 'exotic bird' – a foreigner and a female in a predominantly male academic society. Today, it sounds almost like a heresy to assert that at this point of time, at least in Switzerland, a common belief was that a career in teaching art was not a good choice for women. It was not spoken aloud, but most people believed that women art teachers simply couldn't compete with their male colleagues. The notion was probably inherited from the late 19th century when even Hodler, the highly esteemed and influential painter, was convinced that "women artists should stick to watercolor or crochet work". Female members were not accepted in the Union of Swiss Artists, founded in 1866. Thus the women artists were forced to create their own union. While today the Union of Swiss Artists counts as many male as female members, its counterpart the 'Ladies Union' is still solely reserved for women artists.

Despite a few hurdles I had to overcome, I have always enjoyed teaching immensely and can now look back with pleasure and a sense of satisfaction on the 23 years of my career.

This decade was a time of deep doubts and enthusiastic discoveries, of new friendships and many travels. In Dadi's fourgon H, this old Citroen van serving as a camping car, we criss-crossed Europe. Travel helps gain some distance from routine. It was a way of life and a way of appropriating the world. One after the other, I fell in love with Italy, Spain and Portugal. London became very important: many hours were spent walking its streets, contemplating art in the museums and rummaging in the libraries. London feels like second home, in a way it took the place Paris once had in my heart.

Reinach by Basel, USA, London: 1982 – 2012

In 1982 we decided to leave our Basel flat to return to the family house in Reinach, outside Basel, near a small forest. It was built in the thirties by Dadi's father, a famous Swiss anthropologist, and is now surrounded by a lush garden – my pride and glory.

The transition decade of the eighties marked a gradual but steady change in my creative work. Experiments with a variety of media and methods left their traces. Gradually, silkscreen came to replace wood engraving as my technique of choice. I was striving towards formal simplicity. With a minimum of forms and few colours, I was trying to arrive at compositions devoid of any figurative connotation – just vibrations of the space. Rythms of pure lines, signs set within the pictorial field. The grid as one of the fundamental principles of the organization of space held my attention. My admiration went to Arte Povera, Minimalism and Conceptual Art – tendencies held in high esteem in Basel at that time. As a tribute to this important period in 20th century art, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Basel houses an outstanding collection. The Series Southern Belle resulted from this work period, followed by Magical Museum and FlugSandFlug, two larger series which took several years to complete and reflected my passion for the formal purity of archaic idols or work utensils.

In 1996, a grant from the Department of Education in Basel enabled me to pursue research in the field of 19th century photography techniques at the University of Texas San Antonio. This was a time when photography was still open to discoveries. Long before silver bromide became the prime means of printing in black and white, a wide range of other chemical processes had been experimented with. Dating from those early days are the cyanotype and the Van Dyck methods. The printing methods of the photographic image were similar to those of printmaking, both of which require heavy, intaglio-type paper. The techniques required that the paper be manually coated with substances to render it light-sensitive and a negative as large as the final image. The final result showed deep soft shadows, that seemed to absorb light, swallowing sharp outlines, blurring details and yet highlighting the contrast – qualities which can only be achieved in this manner. As I continued to explore this style I gradually became aware of a second streak in my nature, which was later nicknamed by my friends as my 'baroque side' – the tendency to reflect upon the darker sides of the visible and a dormant taste for narrative. Almost as if to restore a balance, I gave in.

By the end of the nineties photography has taken quite an importance in my work. Quite naturally, still life was chosen as a subject of particular attention. I started to 'stage' the trite objects surrounding me in the studio. Every now and again, a bizarre, anthropomorphous object would bring up 'anecdotes' in those scenes, but mostly those

early still lives looked motionless and suspended in time: tables became a stage, the objects silent actors; the void between them, tracks laid for a leisurely gaze to follow. A gaze that flows and lingers is the force that brings the encapsulated time back and repositions it in the present. Anecdote or narrative conveys the notion of events in a succession of moments: these still lives are 'freeze shots'. I started to use the sequence form which, in my opinion, enables a basically static art form to acquire a time dimension – a series gravitates around a ground theme, abandons a motive or comes back to it.

Several key exhibitions in Switzerland as well as abroad, alone or together with Dadi Wirz, took place in the nineties. These exhibitions gave us more opportunities to travel and spend time in the USA, Mexico and Brazil.

In 2000 yet another strain found its way of expression. During a trip to Papua New Guinea in 2004, accompanying a film crew shooting a film based on the life of Dadi's father Paul Wirz, I wanted to motivate a group of Papua girls and women to draw, who, I was told, had never used drawing paper and pencils. I took them a few coloured pencils and strings. The pencils were rejected, but to my surprise and delight, the women produced the most beautiful designs and patterns using the traditional methods of making baskets and bags. Based on their traditional sense and skills, they spontaneously replaced the notion of a virtual grid with a tangible grid manufactured from knotted strings as supporting structure, which in itself created a picture space. This was a revelation.

Inspiration sometimes comes from the most unorthodox sources. And so followed the series Cyan Drawings, 2005 - filigree nets suspended, lineaments grown, seemingly following a will of their own, and much later – Appropriations. The Appropriations, created 2008/9, display a luxuriant proliferation of forms similar to exotic vegetation which could be traced back to the Herbarium Series done in 2007. Thus, following a meandering path, 'families' of works came into being.

In trying to exploit in an unconventional way the wealth of hidden possibilities the 'classical' printmaking and photographic techniques may still hold, I remain keen on exploring new paths.

I also find new impulses in the established genres of the past. The last series Ombres et Vanités delves into the well known 'vanitas' theme in still life. Perhaps unconsciously, and almost as a rejection of the 'torture of the vanishing point' which haunted the early days of my apprenticeship in the art of drawing, once again I have chosen the close-up, the focus on a subject just laid out there, under control and within arm's reach. Instead of offering plunging vistas and wide horizons, space is reduced to a corner of my studio, draped in darkness. Set against this background, glinting silk draperies and glass objects catch the light. My fingertips can almost feel the smoothness or the roughness as darkness and light hold themselves in a state of mutual exaltation. Contained within itself, the visual can carry us towards a point beyond.

Some say: "All we shall ever know is this world, and the things of this world."

As a way of retaining a trace of the passage and 'à l'imparfait du subjectif', I try to convey my feeling of the things of this world.

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