

## ON LONE STAR (I)

I have written three separate texts on my new body of work, *Lone Star*. The first of these, which I am posting today, outlines a few ideas in the work and discusses its aims as well as aspects of the imagery. The second text, which I am posting tomorrow, is a brief survey of the environment of works. The third, which I will post on Friday, is a poem-like note. All three texts are different and all of them are related. One way to think of them is as different facets of the same crystal.

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On the evening of a turbulent day in my childhood I searched the night sky for something in myself that was adrift and looking at those stars and at the abyss of nothingness between them, I felt both a piercing awareness of selfhood and an equally intense sense of self-negation. Although I had considered that dome of stars many times before, it had never seemed as relevant to who I was nor as distant from my life, but what struck me most was the awe and dread I sensed at facing the mystery of the vast hole above me.

Some mysteries, like the cosmos, are more apparent than others, but all things, as Maurice Maeterlinck wrote, are secret—the window through which I saw the sky, the curtains of my old bedroom, my eyes, and whatever in me gathered the vision of those stars. Everything, including consciousness, radiates with the glow of this inherent mystery, and depending on our capacity for mystery, the allowances we make for this unknowable basis leads us to fears, to the safety of the measurable, or to dreams. In any case, our arrangements with the unknowable allow us to wake up each day and put aside the likeness of our insignificance and our transience to make sense of our lives. We build memories, have children of our own, collect stamps, write journals, measure our age and our progress, and make lists of the places we have visited to confirm we have lived. Part of that confirmation is looking in photo albums at what will never be again or, perhaps, at what never was, and also walking as ghosts the rooms and the landscapes we once walked as children or as men or women.

Sometimes we find a place for ourselves under the great canopy of stars and sometimes we do not. Regardless, there usually comes a time in our wandering when familiarity

replaces innocence and freshness, and with that replacement, almost inevitably, the glow of the unknowable dims.

There is, of course, no growing up without a rupture with our past—with those childhood bedrooms from which we looked at the night sky—but the necessity of rupture does not prevent us from feeling homesick for a vanished, mythologized time when the world was more radiant and when we were less weary, even if not necessarily happier. Unlike the prodigal son, whoever longs for a vanished time can never return home. What was no longer is, except in our memories, and so we wander forward managing our restlessness as best as we can. At times we might feel at ease and distant from these stirrings, assembled by our routines, by our accomplishments, but in the depths of the self-content there is always restlessness.

The interactions between these forces as well as love and loneliness define, in my view, the dynamics of becoming. While much has been said and written about these dynamics, I find that it is mostly through the "indirect" approach of art and literature that I gain insights into their movement and consequences.

This new body of work, *Lone Star*, considers aspects of that dynamic by means of an environment of paintings, installations, sculptures, drawings and writings. I write the word "considers" reluctantly. While my conscious efforts and readings helped guide the work in the studio, it was the undercurrents and vague nags that were most valuable during the critical periods and also most influential in what came about. But since undercurrents and vague nags are difficult to talk about—especially with the distortions of hindsight—this writing concentrates on those aspects of the work that I can articulate with more success.

The ideas for this cycle first emerged thirteen years ago while I was thinking about the connection between the big gears of nature—time, space, light, matter—and the small gears of personal experience—gains, losses, love, hopes, birth, death, joy. Most of us understand these small gears are forever bound to the big gears by knowable and unknowable forces. What is more difficult to understand is where we fit in those gyrations and where they fit within us. The mystery of how these gears fit makes not only the

world but ourselves into a riddle. Herman Melville writes in *Moby Dick* about this riddle,

With a wild whimsiness, he now used his coffin for a sea-chest; and emptying into it his canvas bag of clothes, set them in order there. Many spare hours he spent, in carving the lid with all manner of grotesque figures and drawings; and it seemed that hereby he was striving, in his rude way, to copy parts of the twisted tattooing on his body. And this tattooing, had been the work of a departed prophet and seer of his island, who, by those hieroglyphic marks, had written out on his body a complete theory of the heavens and the earth, and a mystical treatise on the art of attaining truth; so that Queequeg in his own proper person was a riddle to unfold; a wondrous work in one volume; but whose mysteries not even himself could read, though his own live heart beat against them; and these mysteries were therefore destined in the end to moulder away with the living parchment whereon they were inscribed, and so be unsolved to the last.

Unfolding that riddle of self—or, perhaps more properly, of being—amid the dynamics of what is unknowable, awe, homesickness, and restlessness, seemed, and still seems, critical and urgent, though not easy. The riddle insists on being "unsolved to the last." But what are we to do if not sort out what we can, marvel at the mysterious dynamics of becoming, and try to deceive death by carving the wood of our coffin with the markings on our skin?

To help me find a way through these efforts and ideas I have used my writings and my own observations as well as aspects of the writings of Karl Jaspers and Otto Rank, and the poem *Desert Places* by Robert Frost. These texts have been useful in giving form to the elusive confrontations and ensuing transformations implicitly or explicitly addressed in this body of work. I have also been thinking about two Grimm fairy tales, *The Rose* and *The Juniper Tree*. In addition to using these fairy tales as stand-ins for the biographical, what intrigues me most about them is their clear relationship between the large and small gears, which in both is framed through the device of fate in the form of revelations and curses. The fairy tales also point to the inheritance of loneliness, an idea that first came to me in relation to Arthur Schopenhauer.

Eight or nine years after the night sky incident, I ran across his book *The World as Will and Idea*. His writings had a lasting influence on me, but it was the loneliness I sensed in the man and in his family that created the biggest impression. Familiar as I was with it, I did not need Schopenhauer to recognize loneliness, but his example, in relation to his family's history in particular, was haunting so I kept a picture of the philosopher's childhood home as a reminder. I use the image of his house for a sculpture as well as a painting in *Lone Star*.

I do not think of this body of work, however, as an assembly of individual artworks and writings. Instead, I approach it as a totality or as an environment where one artwork is revealed or hidden by another. Throughout this environment the friction between images and their negation, often through the agency of materials, suggests the instability of recognition. This instability and the layering of ideas bring about circuitous discoveries as well as reflective or indirect recognitions, often the only kind of recognition available to us. *On my Philosophy*, Karl Jaspers writes the following about indirect recognition,

In every form of his being one is related to something other than oneself: as a being to his world, as consciousness to objects, as spirit to the idea of whatever constitutes totality, as Existenz to Transcendence. Man always becomes man by devoting himself to this other. Only through his absorption in the world of Being, in the immeasurable space of objects, in ideas, in Transcendence, does he become real to himself. If he makes himself the immediate object of his efforts he is on his last and perilous path; for it is possible that in doing so he will lose the Being of the other and then no longer find anything in himself. If man wants to grasp himself directly, he ceases to understand himself, to know who he is and what he should do.

In the case of the paintings, instability and indirectness are generated by the way they are painted as well as by images themselves. The scenes, for instance, seem convincing and stable *only if* one does not look at them carefully. When considered with some attention, images are become disrupted, space is flattened by drips, the edges fray representation, light is rendered as materials, and so on. This dissolution of trust in what one sees, which I find important in relation to indirect recognition, is

especially manifested in those represented objects whose optical qualities make them natural metaphors for the unknowable. Ice, glass, water, and clouds, for instance, are familiar and yet our encounter with them often uncovers the unexpected, the unknown, in the commonplace—light bends around, colors shimmer, the real becomes evanescent.

The painting of these optical elements is, by necessity, futile, regardless of whether they are painted by Jan Davidszoon de Heem or by me. Even a *trompe l'oeil* rendering of light reveals itself to be a viscous smear of dirt when carefully inspected. But rather than a fault of painting, this incapacity to represent that which cannot be represented despite efforts to do so is at the very heart of what makes a painting into a work of art, and it also what gives a painting its strength and its tenderness. Art is truest when it is, both, convincing and revelatory of the artifice. Theodor Adorno writes in regards to these unresolved contractions in the work of art,

A successful work of art is not one which resolves contradictions in a spurious harmony, but one which expresses the idea of harmony negatively by embodying the contradictions, pure and uncompromised, in its innermost structure.

The painted image of, say, an ice block, is banal yet radiant, affirming of the painted act and eroding of its conviction, innocent in its wanderlust but untrustworthy. In addition to suggesting an emotional atmosphere, these collisions of attributes reveal the ethical stance from which the works are made, a fragile stance built on unknowns. Art depends on unknowns and on the actualization of imaginings, dreams, thoughts, and emotions that are almost always poorly understood. Plato writes of the poet in the *Laws*,

is not in his senses, but, like a fountain, lets flow what comes to him, and often contradicts himself without knowing whether the one or the other thing that he says is the truth.

Like Queequeg, the logic of our carvings is partly or completely beyond us, but that does not prevent them from unconcealing truths, or even from marking the choices we make and the world we find in and through our wandering. *Lone Star* is maybe best thought of as an inventory of these markers.

## ON LONE STAR (II)

*Lone Star* is a new cycle of paintings, installations, sculptures, and writings. The environment, which opens to the public on April 9, incorporates all the galleries at LA Louver in Venice, California. It begins with a flooded room of mirrors where a bronze boy cries silently and ends with an outdoor room where the same boy, his chest made into a birdhouse, stands in a cage with live birds. Among other things, these boys suggest loss, perseverance, and redemption. Their innocence comes across as a state of missed or yet-ungained awareness of experience as well as a condition of completeness where nothing is lacking.

The paintings and sculptures we find between those two rooms mark a possible trajectory of the boy and point to a world that is familiar and unknown, radiant and brutal, personal and vast. Some of the imagery in these other works, such as ice, sunlight, birds, glass, and water, bring forth everyday marvel, while the appearance of skates and rays, Schopenhauer's childhood home, cages, fire, and bridges reveal a darker undercurrent. The claim to representation in the paintings is under pressure and often collapses in the collision of the chosen imagery with the means of painting and use of texts.

Throughout the environment of paintings, installations, and sculptures as well as the writings, there is an emphasis on those instances of the world which are of interest to children and through this emphasis the work layers innocence, loss, hope, possibility and dreams to construct a new state, which seems to be the real aim of *Lone Star*.

ON LONE STAR (III)

A boy (a girl; a self in mid-flight) in front of a mirror  
stands in a lake of tears.

This is how it is, I hear the voice of bitterness say.  
Grace, where did it go?

On the other side of the mirror the sun rises and sets. Its  
absence is my hollowness. Give it a name.

Lone Star, you say.

Speck of heat-light in the night sky, too far and too  
frigid a lantern for feet soaked in tears.

My kingdom is small but deep, you say, and I rein it from  
the gaps.

I listen by placing candles in rooms of dust, by lighting  
fires by your photographs.

I count you in skates. Water-ravens. Impatient. All eyes.  
Slimy, like vaginas. Smelly, like sheets soaked in urine.

Houses are cages. The world is glass. Start over in birds,  
their song so far away from mirrors.

Lone star, I say.

And separated from the letters you wrote to me (spiders on  
thin glass webs) it is now my time to weep.