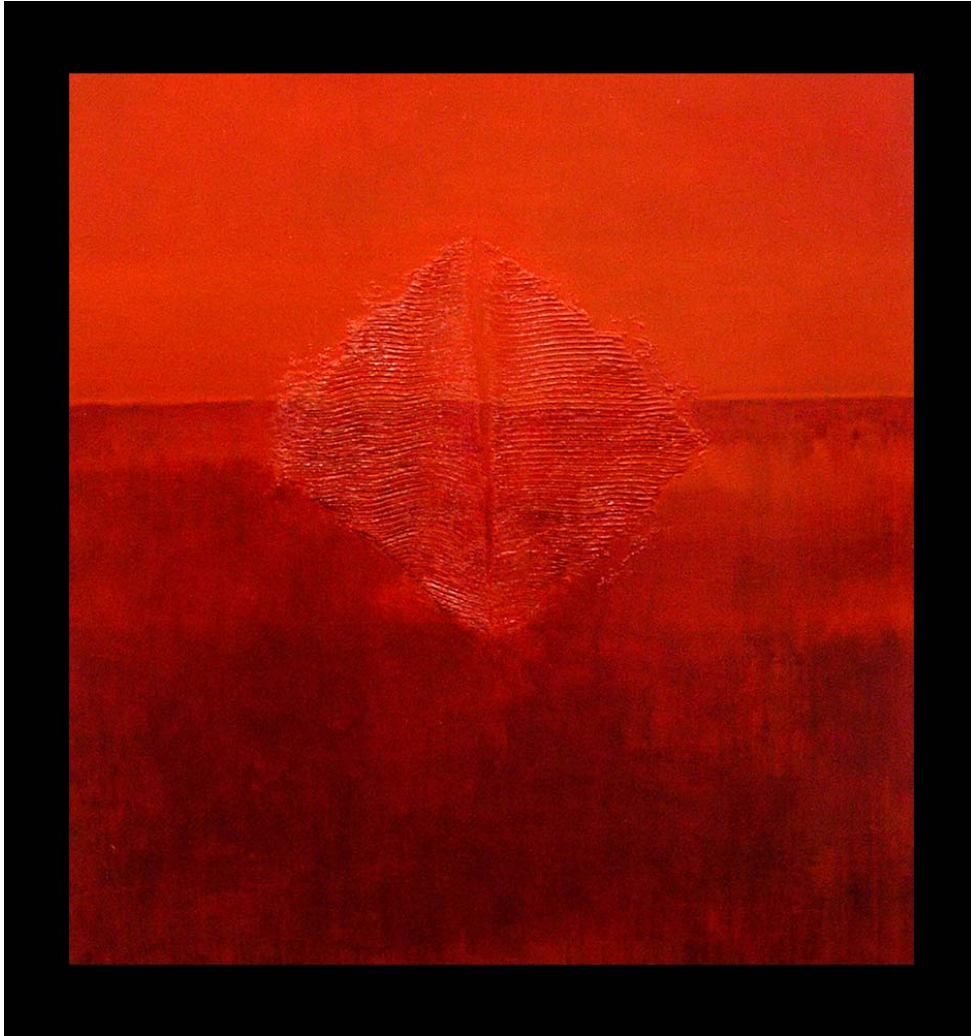


## ART REVIEW: CONTEMPORARY “TRADITIONALISTS”

From Friday, March 13, 2009, to Sunday, March 15, 2009, The Gallery, 111½ East 64<sup>th</sup> Street, New York City showcased the work of two contemporary artists, each of whom uses a “traditional” art genre to illuminate psychological and spiritual states of being.



*From the red painting sequence of  
Separations in the Silence, 18" by 18"*

Sue Burickson’s show, “Separations in the Silence: the red paintings,” features 18 oil paintings consisting of a red background with a diamond shape consisting of two vertically separated triangles with thin vertical carving on their raised surface. Her paintings are spiritual meditations, and seem linked to two “traditional” art genres, to the yantra or mandala found in India and other Asian traditions, related also to American Indian sand painting, and to 20<sup>th</sup> century monochromatic explorations.

The mandala tradition seems drawn on in that the diamond shape, the “diamond heart” tradition in Buddhism, has particular meaning. Vajrayana, the diamond vehicle, values the heart-mind connection between teacher and disciple, and the diamond sutra teaching, a Buddhist text, teaches that a text cannot transmit knowledge, that enlightenment is

transmitted from mind to mind. Thus a diamond shape at the heart of a painting can evoke the transmission of enlightenment, the diamond heart path, which examines delusion and dualism, and brings mind and body together. The split in the diamond heart at the center of the paintings therefore brings us to an understanding that dualism is a delusion, that splits can be healed. There is a sacred and psychological aspect to the repetitive image of the split yet unified diamond in Burickson's work.

The other tradition, the monochromatic tradition of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is rich and diverse.. One might think of the 1950's all-white, all-black, all-red paintings on small panels of Robert Rauschenberg, the 1960 black monochromes of Ad Reinhardt, (although both Reinhardt and Rauschenberg were more focused on the canvas as objects). More to the point work by colorfield painter Robert Motherwell, since his monochromatic work evolves from Matisse, particularly Matisse's Red Studio, and symbolic use of color and red as color field. A bit more far afield the 1960 mono blue, mono gold, and mono pink of Yves Klein, and later in the century the white on white paintings of Robert Ryman, essentially more white on white contrast than monochromatic. Matisse would be a major jumping off place for Burickson, since she explores red. About 13 of her paintings are 18" square, with a 6" by 7" red center, and two larger paintings are 42" high by 36" wide. From painting to painting, the "horizon line" shifts, a slight demarcation within the red, on which the diamond is placed, so that we look at the shifting reds, the varying brushstrokes, in relation to where the horizon line is implied and where the diamond heart "beats." In the sense of creating landscape with color field and implied horizon line, another important forerunner is Rothko and his use of hovering colorfields that imply an internal landscape. Burickson is an explorer of internal landscape, from within the mandala, and within the red color field of the heart and the emotions. As Burickson explores red, the viewer discovers blue. As the viewer changes position, the light seems to shift, and an underlying blue vaguely manifests in some of the paintings.

Red is the color of the heart, and diamonds frequently glint with blue highlights.

What meaning do we find in the exploration of red and the agon of the bifurcated scored diamond heart?

The dynamic of the paintings point to a subtly shifting center. Energy is absorbed into the center. We are led into a spiritual meditation on the center. Diamond heart teachings frequently question the structure of reality, of internal and external reality, of what is manifest and what is not, and lead to a question of what is our true nature, and leads to an understanding of pure spirit. Vajrayana Buddhism teaches that the soul will explore the self.

When we encounter splits, such as the vertical splits in Burickson's work, we may think of the various kinds of disconnections in the self, lack of integration, risks of disintegration, of fragmentation. When we consider vertical splits, we think of Kohut. The self is unintegrated, unmirrored, unknown to itself. If we think of all psychoanalytic theory, all sorts of splits occur. We are alienated from our libinal and aggressive selves, from our capacity for love and assertion, from our aspirations. We see ourselves through others' eyes, through archaic superego eyes.

Red is the color of the heart, of blood, of love and aggression. We wear red at St. Valentine's Day, we wave red flags in front of a bull to induce a bull to charge. The devil in a red dress is a seductress. The devil, "a man of wealth and taste," is red. "My love is like a red, red rose, that's newly sprung in June."

Burickson's paintings give us all our libidinal and aggressive associations with red, all the dynamic tensions of a vertical split, and all the focus and introspection of our diamond heart. Her sacred meditations become our internal psychic realities.

Further, since the diamond heart teaching emphasizes that enlightenment is passed from mind to mind, and that there is a heart-mind connection between teacher and disciple, we can recognize in this image some aspect of the analyst-analysand relationship. Self-understanding, a form of enlightenment, occurs in the intersubjective encounter. And certainly there is a heart-mind connection between analyst and analysand, even if the analytic relationship is not analogous to the teacher-disciple relationship.



*"Lord Have Mercy"*  
oil with mixed media  
48" x 36"

As we enter the gallery, a work of Burickson's, not part of the "Separations in the Silence" sequence, is in the entry hall. "Lord Have Mercy", 48" long by 36" wide, oil with mixed media, is a witty riff on Michelangelo's Adam and God. Between the extended hands and fingers of Adam and God is the word "Google," with a pair of eyes where the "o's" are in the word, which light up when an electric switch attached to the painting like a mouse on a computer is pressed. The Google switch says "Search," and lights up as well. Press "Search," "Google" God, and perhaps, just perhaps, God will make contact with Adam, and if Adam is Everyman, and you press the switch and search, perhaps God will make contact with you. Burickson invites us to "look," as all artists do. What do you search for when you encounter a work of art?

I search for myself.

And for the other.

The work of art is an object relationship potential....

Antoinette Procacci shows 10 of her "Recent Works" in her show, four oil landscapes, one oil study of a male head, one nupastel figure study, and three graphite portraits. Both her landscapes and her portraiture are "traditional" in technique and style, and psychologically resonant.



*"Sunrise on the Bay, Bayville"*  
14 X 16 oil on canvas.

The four landscapes, "Hell Gate Bridge, Astoria Park," "Winter Afternoon, Astoria Park," "Snow Scene, Astoria Park," and "Sunrise on the Bay, Bayville," are infused with winter light, a cool, blue winter light. The three Astoria Park landscapes are both bucolic and urban, lovely park settings with urban skylines in the distance. Two of them have no human figures, while "Hell Gate Bridge" has five figures seated on two park benches just above the lower right hand corner, overpowered by the looming arc of the bridge in the upper left hand corner. There is a subdued sense of threat, of anomie. The winter light is clear and cool, but the shape of the bridge and its dominant position seems to shadow the hapless humans. "Sunrise on the Bay" is pure landscape, with a red-streaked, light infused horizon line, and a heavy overcast cloudbank overhead. All promise of light and warmth seems compromised by the clouds. The coloration is clear, delicate, inviting, and the clouds are intimidating nonetheless. The psychological dimension is one of the encounter between delicate beauty and brute nature, between hopeful expectation and brooding presence.



"Kenny"  
8" X 10" graphite portrait

The portraiture evokes the "classic question" inherent in portraiture. The four studies of men, "Kenny," a watercolor; "Kenny," graphite; "Victor," graphite; and "Male Head Study," graphite, and the two of women, "Figure Study," nupastel; and "Female Head," graphite, all raise the question, do the subjects want to be known? In the portraits, the subjects gaze straight at the artist/viewer, with an unresponsive, blank, almost defiant expression. The "classic question" has a usual answer, "yes" and "no," ambivalence as always. Certainly in some portraiture the facial expression can be engaging, conciliatory, charming, collaborative, even collusive. The subject often seems eager to engage, and in that eagerness, willing to be known, at least in part. And certainly in some portraiture the subject seems belligerent, or blank, or bored, warding off the viewer's gaze. The subject then seems unwilling to engage, and therefore unwilling to be known. The viewer is left with an uncanny knowledge nonetheless, a sense that the subject may be defiant, or paranoid, or terrified. We seem to know too much about the subject who does not want to engage.

Procacci's subjects seem to want to be loved, in their warding off blankness. They seem to want not to be seen, if being seen means being known, and despised, and taken advantage of, and dismissed, and sneered at. Yet a desire to be accepted, valued, loved, seems to lurk beneath the impassive facial expressions.

We meet similar attitudes in our clinical work. How does a 'subject' respond to being looked at, seen, addressed, recognized? Certainly we may believe that an analysand has a powerful desire to be truly known, to have a true self finally acknowledged and encouraged. Yet we know that we need to avoid intruding, to avoid premature interpretation, to forestall narcissistic injury. We know that a "true self" often shelters behind the mask of a "false self" for the sake of safety.

John Berger, in Ways of Seeing, 1972, The Viking Press, offered a study of the cultural impact of Western oil painting traditions, exploring ideas of subjectivity and objectivity, and possession and ownership, and particularly the impact of the male gaze upon a female form, particularly the naked female. A female nude implies a male presence, he postulated, and that the act of observing captures and possesses that which is looked at. The person being painted has no subjectivity, but rather is an object contemplated by a desiring subject.

Procacci offers a “female” gaze, viewing male and females posing for her. Is her female gaze different from the traditional male gaze? And is all “male gaze” possessive? Can any gaze, male or female, be empathic, or understanding? Can any gaze acknowledge the subjectivity of the person being looked at?

I once had an uncanny experience in a session. My long-term countertransference feeling with the analysand was that I was being looked at as if I were contemptible, ridiculous, a lower life form. I felt inadequate. And suddenly my analysand blurted out, “Stop looking at me as if I were a monkey in a cage?” And the analysis opened up.

Procacci does not look upon her subjects as if they were objects. They are not monkeys in a cage. I believe that were she painting monkeys in a cage, she would not look upon them as if they were less than human, in or out of a cage. I believe she would see their monkeyhood, as she sees the humanity of her subjects. Her portraits are psychologically resonant, alive.

So often psychoanalysts speak of “the gaze.” We speak of selfhood being conferred by the intimacy of an acknowledging gaze. Does the artist confer selfhood through portraiture? Or perhaps even does the artist evoke and confer the essence, the selfhood, of a landscape?

Procacci gives resonance and depth to her landscapes and to her portraits. We see something of the essence of winter in her cool blue winter light, in her urban park land. And perhaps we see something of the essence of winter in the sullen, defiant facial expressions of those in her portraits. In this sense there is a spiritual force underlying her work, a recognition of the connection between nature and humankind. We find in Chinese philosophy the concept “as above, so below,” a resonance between macrocosm and microcosm. Procacci finds the resonance between nature and humankind in her landscapes and her portraits. If the essence of winter is found in her portraits, and humans live in an interface of nature and urban architecture, then the psychological dimension of relationship in her work also is a spiritual force.

Merle Molofsky