

ART REVIEW OF INSCRIPTIONS II: THE ELOQUENT BRUSH, PAINTINGS BY YALE EPSTEIN AT THE ALBERT SHAHINIAN FINE ART GALLERY, HUDSON, NEW YORK, JUNE 22—SEPTEMBER, 2009

GESTURE, SYMBOLISM, AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

Yale Epstein's oils and watercolors are exquisitely colored, intensely communicative, elegant depictions of stories that are not the stories you first believe you are seeing. The immediate impact of his calligraphic imagery is that one is viewing traditional scrolls and mystical myth-telling, rendered in saturated yet delicate hues, evoking ancient mandalas and promising ancient wisdom. As purely aesthetic objects for contemplation, they are compelling and revelatory. They invite introspection and yielding to the invitation to beauty of meaning.

"My hope is that the viewer's own experience, history, and aesthetic associations, will serve to imbue the works with a significance that is unique and personal." Yale Epstein, exhibition catalogue.

The calligraphic imagery, the suggestion of meaning through investment in gesture, that is the essence of Epstein's work, is an invitation to free association in the fullest sense of the word. None of the calligraphy has a verbal equivalent. The calligraphy is a gesture toward suggestion, imitating the appearance of written language, but meaning only what we see and associate to. Once we realize that there are no words to know, no verbal language to be deciphered, we are invited to experience and interpret visual gesture with our own knowledge. "Not knowing" becomes "knowing," the "unthought known" of Christopher Bollas becomes the awakening of "visual knowing," free association in the aesthetic realm.

Bollas (1977) described the ongoing quest for aesthetic experience as a quest for a transformational object, in which "unintegrations of self find integrations through the form provided by the maternal object" (p. 386). His understanding of how infant's develop a sense of form that develops into a personal aesthetic is that the "mother's idiom of care and the infant's experience of this handling is the first human aesthetic" (p. 386). Epstein's gestural inscriptions function as a holding environment, a promise of meaning that already exists but which needs to be re-discovered by the viewer, just as the security of a maternal holding environment allows an infant to claim perception and meaning as his or her own.

Because Epstein gives us a remarkable aesthetic experience, a holding environment of beauty, his invitation is to allow us to provide our own reading of the symbols found in his imagery, an opportunity to be fully integrated, to achieve separation and individuation in that we are not bound to pre-set symbolism. We begin to realize that the scrolls and mandalas and sacred objects that compel our attention are mirrors of our own minds,

and the function of the mirror is to allow response rather than fixation. Rather than fixating on “reading” the meaning of the calligraphic gesture, we yield to finding our own internal gesture. As Epstein “imitates” calligraphy from multiple cultures without replicating it, we imitate the gesture internally, allowing for identification, internalization, and empathic emotional connection as we search for our own meanings.

Epstein explores the mystery of “text” and the mystery of discovering the Other, the Mother, with Mother meaning the matrix of potential personal meaning, as infants discover Other and Self, selfobject, through voice, language, touch, and gesture, a “moving toward.”

To address Epstein’s work authentically, I have to share the associations Epstein speaks about in his comments in the exhibition catalogue. I was particularly taken with the contrasts between works of ‘accident’ and works of “control.” His works of “accident” involve imagery that appears to be accidental, delicately blotchy gestures.



“Winedance” (watercolor and ink, 16” x 22”), resembles a diptych, in that it is evenly divided into two parts, the one on the left comprised of two red areas against a grey-pink background, the one on the right “calligraphy” with translucent rose-colored blotches resembling hunched-over human figures, at least to my associative process, with some small red blotches. The hunched-over figures resemble wine stains, and seem to be engaged in a shamanistic dance. The vertical red areas on the left evoke for me tall hooded figures, or doorways, or vaginal openings. My associations therefore suggest to

me a shamanistic invocation that leads us on a spiritual path toward rebirth, toward new opportunity.



In "Birdstory IV" (monotype, ink, pastel, 16" x 19"), I also experience accidents of meaning, grey-black "smears" against three vertical rectangles, the outer two rectangles predominantly orange-ish and yellow, the internal rectangle, "supported" by the outer "sun-lit" rectangles, predominantly green and blue, with red-orange calligraphic gesture overlaid. The grey-black "smears" seem to accidentally resemble birds in flight, and the three rectangles then come to suggest the natural safety zone of birds, a sun-lit day, the pattern of green leaves against blue sky when seen from within a tree, the sheltering sky, the sheltering world.



“Lumina Poem” (oil, ink, varnishes on birch, 27” x 27”), offers rectangles within rectangles, mandala-like, a harmony of blues in the background rectangle, and an inner rectangle with an ivory border, and inner imagery of gestural calligraphy and what could be read as a meadow and sunlight. “Lumina Poem” offers a multiplicity of visual textural excitement in a bounded, calm, grounded setting. We are given texture, gesture, text, mandala openings within openings, light-infused and yet grounded. The boundedness of rectangle offers a sense of safety and control.

Contrasts of accident and safety in Epstein’s work mirror freedom and safety. Looseness of gesture leads us to the freedom of birds in flight, freedom of mind in flight, and containment in formal structures leads to the safety of caretaking and the holding environment. We can be free not only in gestural beauty but also in aesthetically appealing “mess,” and safe without being constricted.

In my essay, “Aloneness with Aesthetic Pleasure” (2002), I postulate that the experience of aloneness with aesthetic pleasure is a developmental step crucial to the separation-

individuation process, involving a shift in object relatedness and libidinal cathexes, originating in infancy following the sequence of experiences comprising the capacity to be alone in the presence of the mother (Winnicott1958). Following Winnicott, I assumed that in aesthetic pleasure, the world becomes a world of ongoing transitional space. Epstein's evocation of freedom and safety, of aesthetic pleasure and the discovery of self and the capacity to create meaning, affirms this. When Epstein offers images of spiritual transformation, he offers transitional space in which we discover the potential of interactive transformation, through art and through the psychoanalytic situation. "To participate in the psychoanalytic situation is to participate in an aesthetic co-creation" (Molofsky, p. 237). Epstein offers co-created spiritual transformation.

As I write my associations to these three works, I am conscious of what Epstein said he hoped would imbue the works with significance, that is my own experience and history. Of course, as a result of that experience and history, that is, my own psychoanalysis and my 30 years of clinical practice, I am perfectly capable of depth interpretation of my associations, quite conscious that my readers will be able to make depth interpretations of my psyche from my associations, and conscious as well of my drive toward transparency and my wish to be seen and known. My great hope is that my enthusiasm for the spiritual resonance and physical beauty of Epstein's work will lead others to their own experience of Epstein's offerings, of his gesture toward being transparent and seen and known. His invitation to the viewer to experience and remember and associate has empathic resonance. His spiritual artwork is a mirror of our souls.

The day I saw this show I later attended a concert at the gallery given by Baird Hersey and Prana, spiritual chanting using harmonic overtones. The synergy between the sacred imagery and the sacred music created a memorable ecstatic experience. I am grateful to gallery owner Albert Shahinian for his creating the opportunity to experience art and music in such a profound and resonant way.

Merle Molofsky
August 7, 2009

REFERENCES:

BOLLAS, C. (1977). The aesthetic moment and the search for transformation. *The Annual of Psychoanalysis* (Vol. 6). New York: International Universities Press.

MOLOFSKY, M. (2002). Aloneness with aesthetic pleasure: a developmental step reflected in memory and dream. *The Psychoanalytic Review* (Vol. 89, No. 2).

WINNICOTT, D.W.. (1958). The capacity to be alone. In *The maturational processes and the facilitating environment*. New York: International Universities Press, 1965.