

“The Art of Justinian B.”

by J. W. McKechnie

The first time I encountered Justinian’s wonderful paintings, quite by chance - or perhaps by ‘synchronicity’ as he might say - I instantly knew I was looking at something very special. Here is an artist who is quite aware of his relationship to the huge role Surrealism has had to play in Painting, Literature, and Poetry; as well as other high-art forms commencing with the late 19th C., and someone totally self-aware of how he positions himself with regard to his adoration and respect for that genre, as well as other specialized peculiarities and particulars that interest him. Others include Flemish Painting and artists who are more autodidactic (a great strength here), Eastern Orthodox religious Icons and painting technique, which he learned from a Russian Orthodox monk in Paris (egg tempera employed in the past by artists like Andrei Rublev, whom he admires); and for subject matter: the personal, the Universal, the Fantastical and Hermetic, the Alchemical and Mystical, as they all sometimes appear in Dreams – and by extension the creative life, inspirations and visual output of an Artist. The themes, motifs, allegories, and metaphors, show up in his highly meditative and mindful works as pockets of content, specialized story, personal speculation, grand visions and mystical potentialities. It is also clear he must derive a great deal of pleasure in making these works. One does not sense a tortured soul in his artworks, rather they are easy on the eyes and sensitivities. We are presented with observations of visual and intellectual harmony in his work echoed by the balance of opposites, such as the themes he imparts to the viewer.

To this end his works utilize a specialized iconography of symbols, metaphors, and reference points while creating a personal visual language, as some artists do within their work by reincorporating the same image details and symbols throughout their lives, done to convey meaning that is specific to them and speaks of visual information perhaps only they know and can further illuminate. The deeper we go with their pictures the clearer the narratives. It is remarkable how this ‘trick of the trade’ does not shut out the viewer or audience from interpretation of a more Universal experience of his paintings, keeping in mind the layered and stacked narrative structures and functions of Eastern Orthodox icon paintings. In fact the specific choices and subject matter become quite relatable given the attention of his skill and focus. For him it is the Egg, the Cross, the Tree, Rivers and Lakes, the Otherworldly landscape, the Holy Mother; or sometimes The King and Queen of Heaven – an alchemical union known in certain mystery schools as ‘The Coniunctio’. The recombining of elements with alternating tropes creates a through-line for his entire body of work which allows it to stand outside of Time. They are neither paintings of the past, nor are they works that function as visions of the future. Instead, these anachronistic allegories, sagas, myths, personal narratives and ideas exist beyond Time as ‘timeless’ chronicles arranged to imply states of awareness like dreaming that are unlike linear experiences of ‘sequential-time’; all very Surrealist motifs and concerns, and a most pleasing way to delight in symbolism and story.

As representational images which contain narrative structure, they often tell story on many levels, they are not however illustrative of, or meant to match up with, specific texts or stories. Through the circuitous nature of the visual format and the compositions, by direct nods to familiar symbols and signage (for example his most often called upon symbol and dear icon, the ‘Egg’) he makes a host of emblematic, allegorical, and parabolic meanings available to the viewer for decoding and enjoyment. Although, sometimes there are quasi-direct references to literature such as Rimbaud’s Ophelia from the poem “La blanche Ophélie”, characters from the Bible, Folklore, and Mythology – not to mention personal story. They are like Rauschenberg’s ‘*Combines*’, stories reconfigured, synthesized, and adjusted for the purpose of the nature of Painting, to communicate information and meaning.

However one does not sense that these are moralizing pictures, rather they're as open-ended and calm, as at peace with their place in the world, as the gentle soul himself who has produced them. It's clear how the artist places himself in the narrative structure and relates to the imagery and content, just as we the audience are invited to interpret his paintings alongside his own magnificent preoccupations. Fascinations that result in outstanding visual gems of a modest scale with a huge presence and hypnotic power to entrance. That is not case with a lot of artists, and it is not an easy thing to do in Painting. Often we see contemporary art that feels rather detached and impersonal, or disregards the viewer. Not these paintings. It is also quite generous of an artist, which I believe must have a lot to do with the subject matter he chooses. On occasion he places himself in the paintings, and looking to us the observer, asking the same questions of himself that we all ask of the Universe we inhabit, thereby creating a delightful psychological dynamic while adding deeper meaning to his work – the personal makes them that much more relatable. They possess the same attention to the viewer that religious icons do in that they are works that are 'aware' of the viewer, so to speak, establish ongoing dialogue – therefore his paintings generate conversations about Aesthetics, Psychology, the Spiritual, Art History, and more.

Often you will see that the way he describes a certain type of object or person, like a tree, or a woman's hair – that these particulars are painted in the same style from painting to painting, with the same level of description - like vines spreading out across the painting's surface. One could just as much stand in for the other, which makes scale shifts occur. Some figures appear quite gigantic compared to trees, or crosses and other details of the landscape like rivers, streams and pools of water. Naturally, the 'vine' has many references in this type of art, coupled with the trees, crosses, eggs, water symbolism and the mystical implications of levitating figures, the references are less obvious than suggested. Periodically he populates his paintings with characters who resemble other-worldly beings from folklore, or figures who resemble monks, priests and Saints. Where some artists take a more objective or subjective approach to depicting imagery – there is a distancing in his work that allows for multiple readings from the objective point of view of an observer and the subjective inner world of the artist, all of which is evident on the surface of the paintings. Two excellent examples of the elements which repeat in his tableaux are "Mystic Garden" 2021, and "La Blanche Ophelia" 2019, which was made in part as a response to Arthur Rimbaud's poem of the same title. He mentioned the last line of the poem as significant to him and his work, "*The white Ophelia floats like a large lily // La blanche Ophélie flotte, comme un grand lys.*" Taken in the context of symbolism and the adjunct imagery it is no doubt a nod to 'the Lily' being a sign of 'resurrection' and 'purity', as well as a surrogate for a number of themes throughout European History, Mythology, and Religious cults. He has placed her hovering over the birth of monks from a few of his fantastical, regenerative 'eggs', and next to what appears to be a Christ-like figure performing this act of levitation through a sacred blessing. He quite literally 'raises' the question for the viewer about the nature of ascension, resurrection, the host vines, and the metaphors we are all familiar with from our studies of the bible, mythology and literature. Therefore the pictures themselves are a rich confluence of signs and meaning readymade to create dialogue and exchange with viewers, and for those who know the references, a source of great pleasure. To know the meaning of the stories is to be able to distinguish the Universal - it is a very lovely visual-magic-trick to be sure – for while our time on earth may be brief, the stories we share, and sometimes the paintings we make continue on long after we do. Cycles, circuits, the Hero's Journey, the Grail Quest, it's all here in his work.

Another aspect of his work that heightens the quality and sophistication of the paintings is the palette and technique. Over the years he has employed various old master methods for composing paintings, from oil glazing to egg tempera, facilitating their extraordinary surfaces. Some appear to almost glow from within, enhancing the beauty of the imagery and ideas. He no longer works in egg tempera like his earliest works, instead these days focusing on painting with oil on wood panels and stretched canvases. The shifts in light and dark occur mainly through changes in tone rather than by adding white or black paint to the colours, providing for a rich palette of generally saturated colour that heightens the intensity of the imagery and the other-worldly quality reminiscent of dreams and other types of

vision. The saturation of colour and vibrancy is a great strength of his work, a stand out feature that both pulls us in and holds our attention, and then adds poignancy to the subject matter. It is something I very much like about his work, the ability of colour to inform story and meaning, the subtleties. Rather than making severe or abrupt visual shifts, this is not what his work does, nor what his ideas are about, so the techniques and style are in alignment with the subject – enabling us the viewer to enter the dreamscape so the stories and images can wash over us like one of his refreshing waterfalls or streams of healing waters; those he includes in the paintings to signify the miraculous healing powers of water and the profound spiritual dimensions associated with ‘Water’. They are quiet pictures, stealth, almost like giant sea shells that the closer you get the more you ‘hear’ – in this case ‘see’ - they speak of hidden things revealed, and revelations once hidden, but they do not end up in the category of ‘apocalyptic-art’ that we see so often in the art world. They are hopeful pictures, there is a lot of light and new growth eliminating the fanciful decay and rot shown in some of the pictures. In the place of the old and dying or dead he has placed new growth; younger, healthy, vibrant characters that drive home his ideas and visions consistently ‘hatched from eggs’, they are ‘birthed’ into new and identifiable forms, or individualistic expressions of being. There are always signs of ‘grace’ in his ideas, paintings and narratives. As such *“the Eternal Return”* is a major theme that repeats in his work, perhaps the dominant one.

When I asked Justinian about the special significance of Ophelia within his work as a symbol, he said that along with Arthur Rimbaud’s poem, and the Shakespeare reference as it shows up in paintings from Art History - - and I quote his own words here to get it exactly correct:

“the painting “Ophelia” by John Everett Millais is one of my favourite paintings, because, for me, it represents with sketchy beauty, the border between life and death (which has always fascinated me).”

It is indeed a phenomenal painting and how fitting that he would mention an artwork from History that speaks to the liminal, Symbolist painters, and analogously to the format of painting existing in an indeterminate state of life and death, the dominant themes of art and literature. The painting “Ophelia” by Millais is known to have had an influence on Surrealists like Dali, and later contemporary artists like Ruscha, and then of course Justinian himself. It’s always interesting to hear what fascinates other artists. It is a painting that continues to captivate and enliven for many viewers, to remind us that Art is not just about ‘Art’, decoration, or even ‘the beautiful’. Great Paintings can hold our attention so we observe our thoughts and can contemplate, or possibly understand the meaning and intentionality behind certain themes, like that moment of infinite possibility at the border of Life and Death that he spoke of in the above quote. We can recognize that the comprehension can also be beautiful. The spectacular paintings of Justinian B function in this way - this work fascinates, commands presence, and slows us down to consider what we are looking at beyond the surface of the picture to the ideas and subtexts. And if the audience is lucky, when viewers pay close attention to his work, they are permitted to step outside of Time and bear witness to the Timeless. Years after first seeing his beautiful work they always amaze and thrill, just as the earliest works continue to raise new questions to consider. That is exceptional art indeed.