

JUDITH GODWIN: An Artist Out of Time

"Art history" as a discipline began, not coincidentally, with the development of what was later (and in another context) called the "cult of personality" around certain artists of the Italian Renaissance, particularly Michelangelo. Georgio Vasari's Lives of the Artists catered to a popular notion of artists as "set apart" (the original meaning of "holy"), preternaturally gifted individuals touched by God, but usually discovered and brought into the fold by older geniuses, all belonging to a small fraternity of superbeings (in those days, of course, all male) existing above and beyond the rank and file of humanity. Ignoring the actual system of workshops and apprenticeships, each genius was assumed to have been discovered and brought to flower by the preceding genius of the community.

This view of the artist as 'idiot savant' gathered strength with the Romantic movement of the 19th Century, and lives in the legends of the artists who either were tormented and misunderstood (Vincent Van Gogh, perhaps Jackson Pollock) or were Romantically assumed to have been, like Rembrandt in the Charles Laughton movie. This point of view is harmless enough on the surface but it leaves out, of course, practically every artist who ever lived, and contributes to the gap between "fine art" and everyday life that has persisted since the Renaissance and has widened dramatically in the 20th Century.

The "real" artist, by and large, is and always has been working in the service of a larger truth, not satisfactorily expressed in words. Such truths are not served by the ebbs and flows of fashion. When Baroque imagery switched from the painterly style of Rubens to the dry Classicism of Poussin, Rembrandt himself did not, and is regarded by some as the greatest of all painters. An even more pertinent example of that was Vermeer who pursued

a vision suggested by the subject matter of other artists, quietly and with minimal encouragement of the material sort, to a level that has never been equalled.

An artist in this tradition is, I believe, Judith Godwin who entered the New York art scene at a time when the classic period of the New York School was at its apex, shining its brightest light immediately prior to exploding into a multitude of contradictory isms, each trying to nail down its part of the elephant and all a direct reaction to and/or against Abstract Expressionism. Pop, Op, and Color Field begat Photo-Realism, Conceptualism, Minimalism, and Site-Specific (Earth) Art. The polemicists of each trend sought to negate everything that had preceded it, until at 186,000 revolutions per second the barriers of space and time were broken and we arrived, and remain, at a point where anything goes. The "Post-Modern" artist is a time traveler, reliving some aspect or other of Modernism that was explored prior to 1920, but is now covered by a knowing veneer of irony and cultural conditioning.

Where does Judith Godwin fit into all this? Quite simply, she is at once of it and apart from it. She came out of a completely different regional and social background from most of the New York artists whose work provided her with initial inspiration. Further, she was younger and, of course, a woman in a field dominated by macho individuals who were churning out their creations in a mighty Hemmingwayish spasm of self destructive psychic purgation, each making a valiant but doomed statement in the face of an indifferent, even hostile, cosmos.

Judith Godwin's cosmic view seems quite different, emerging as it has from a background of Southern gentility, historic preservation, and perhaps most significant, an interest in gardening. The essentially cyclic view of the universe that comes from planting and nurturing a garden made the artist most amenable to the even larger cycles characteristic of Asian thought,

particularly Buddhism and its offshoot, the "way of liberation" known as Zen.

For a young Southern woman to travel alone to New York in the early 1950s, was an undertaking more daunting than might be understood today. Godwin, nevertheless, enrolled at the Art Students' League and then the Hans Hofmann School in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Hofmann was at the time the oldest avatar of Abstract Expressionism, as well as the only practitioner who was primarily a teacher. Among the advance guard of American art, Abstract Expressionism was very much in the air at the time, and the young artist ranged throughout the art community soaking up what she could put to use in synthesizing her own aesthetic.

Finding little to nurture her ideas in the posturings of the denizens of the Cedar Bar, Godwin nevertheless befriended two individuals whose ideas were helpful to her: Franz Kline, and Kenzo Okada, a Japanese expatriate who reinforced her existing affinities for Eastern thought and eventually introduced her to another teacher whose writings had already been important to her, the premier exponent of Zen Buddhism in the West, D. T. Suzuki.

Suzuki, like Okada and Hofmann, was a foreigner dealing with a synthesis of his own ideas in a radically different society. Also, like Hofmann, Suzuki was keenly aware of the problems inherent in sharing new ideas with people of a younger and more materialistic culture. Hofmann's ideas tended to be expressed in terms of tension - the "push/pull" of colors and shapes on the canvas - while Suzuki saw the sublime in the most mundane things and looked for the flash of sudden enlightenment - satori - which forever eludes linear thinking. Implicit in both approaches is the discovery of harmony amid various levels of tension. In her own way, Judith Godwin could internalize the "alien" condition that

her teachers experienced and allow it to take the process of painting in different directions from those of the Action painters.

In this way, taking the basic forms and techniques of more flamboyant careerists in a more profound direction, Godwin most resembles an artist like Vermeer (or, for that matter, Rembrandt). While most of her older male contemporaries burned themselves out in an enormously bright flash, Godwin has been content to work in her own garden for decades, creating a body of work that serves to illuminate a clearly personal vision, but one with implications to all who have eyes to see. Like signposts on a road of discovery the paintings, lovely and spontaneously evocative by themselves, are a series of illuminations ignited at intervals along a darkened path when viewed as a group.

A painting like Nest Egg (1995) serves as a metaphor for Godwin's place in the "art world." While wittily incorporating non-painterly objects into the canvas neo-Dada fashion, the piece retains Godwin's characteristic palette, forms, and harmonies, rendered with a sureness of execution that by this time is in no wise beholden to any artistic predecessor. In particular, Godwin's most characteristic form, the broken circle, is formed by actual pennies, glued three-fourths of the way around a conventionally solid painted form. To one viewer's eye, this illustrates both the journey to enlightenment and its assured fulfillment. The pennies may also be seen as representing the relatively meager value of material success, when weighed against the immeasurably greater reward that awaits the seeker at the end of a slow, but properly conducted, quest.

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