

Keats in Korea



Digital painting, Iris glicee print, 74 x 110 cms. 1999

Keats in Korea is a work that is suffused with a charge of magic realism. Twelve years ago my friend Helen loaned me an envelope of small black-and-white photos taken of and by her father, a young Scottish soldier, while he was in combat during the Korean war. Like so much of the work, these images percolated, submerged, and resurfaced at just the right moment. Aware that I should do the decent thing and return them, I pored through them with heightened attention to select one to work with. As Helen's father had died less than ten years after the war, when she was still an infant, I was moved by the tenuous fragility and sorrow of his short life and felt compelled to pay homage. After coming upon a catalogue of famous death masks, I selected the masks of the poet Keats, the composer Mendelssohn, the naturalist Audubon, and the plaster visage of that hard-headed fact-monger Isaac Newton. These were subtly merged with the faces they strangely seemed to fit to produce the haunting confluence. I am both unnerved and inspired by the suggestion that all moments exist in not only the present moment but in all other moments past and still to come. This painting is similar in energy to *Camus's Wake* (also in the exhibition) in which Gandhi and Dreyfus dwell in the wake of the wave of Albert Camus's absurd demise. In my mind no one can truly say that Keats was not in Korea.

I Have This One Afternoon



Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass, 115 x 293 cms., 1999

Afternoon springs from a daydream about simultaneity I would dwell on during my year in combat during the Vietnam war. It seemed more than curious to me, that while we were engaged in such a dehumanising, brutal, and wasteful enterprise, the rest of the world went on with “normality,” washing cars, reading daily papers, fretting at the dentist’s office, leaving for vacation. Sometimes at night under bombardment or waiting beneath the cold stars to spring some terrible trap, I would ponder the vision of a family unpacking lunch at Jones Beach in the bright Eastern seaboard sun on the opposite face of this strange planet. This musing was a fusion of despair and hope and worked to place the absurdity of our situation in sharp relief. A few years ago I found an encyclopedia image of a New York beach dated from the year of 1967, which triggered this memory, and I decided to make a simple image with a small photo of myself in Vietnam interjected into this colourful beach scene. Along the way I became rather obsessed and continued to work the image for two months, transforming it into both allegory and personal dream narrative. The work took on a life of its own and in a mysterious way I was forced to keep up. Memories of the tragedy of my own war commandeered the lazy beach reverie. The dreamer is clearly the image of myself in the bottom right corner marked “Me 19.” I found this image twenty-five years after the war in a book entitled *War Without Heroes* by David Douglas Duncan, who had travelled with our company for a few weeks along the DMZ. He had admonished me sharply at the time, when I had moved out of his frame during an artillery bombardment, saying “Marine, when you’re in my picture you stay in my picture....” I’m still not certain what he meant.

There is much to uncover in the image, shards and reflections of my Bohemian family and the passion and folly of the historical, personal, and often posited ultimate dimension. Another paradox of the work is advanced by the gulf in meaning created by the contradictions apparent in the lip service we have often paid to equality and our primordial demiurge to destroy the other. The title is taken from the first line of my poem “Afternoon.”

Fountain of Grieving Water



Digital painting, Iris glicee print, 76 x 100 cms., 1999

Grieving Water is a spontaneous and deeply felt elegy for the great gift of Federico Garcia Lorca to the spiritual and poetic life of our past century. It is also a recognition that his casual murder by the forces of reaction serves as a symbol for all the “rivers of blood streaming past the bedrooms of the suburbs.” As a homosexual and poet, Lorca was among the first to be taken out and shot at the edge of Granada when the Spanish fascists began their struggle for power.

In this painting I have constructed a bodyscape using graphic images from a turn-of-the-century German medical text book, which are the repository for the fleeting images of Lorca’s brief but brilliant dream of life.

Angelus



Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass, 107 x 120 cms., 1997

Angelus borrows its title from two silhouetted figures in the collapsed foreground extracted from Millet's famous painting of the same name. In the original this peasant couple are meant to be offering prayers in the grain fields at the sound of the morning angelus bells. The inspiration for the work comes directly from a set of 1930s toddlers' blocks I came upon in a Dordogne antique market in France. Each of the six sides features a tableau of cherubim-like children at play in the fields of industry, war, commerce, agriculture, film-making and education. Dreamed up in the inter-war years, when the memory of the phantasmagoric slaughter of the Great War should still have been permeating the air, one side contains a bizarre illustration of babes manning a battleship. I was so mesmerized by the immense naiveté and wrong-headedness of the image that I began to weave a scenario exploring French Colonialism, popular ideas about race and world demographics in the decades before the second world war, and my own memories of post-World War II play prior to my involvement in Vietnam as an 18 year old Marine. This image has been reworked to include a Mao-Buddha in reclining parinirvana pose to mark that place where all contradictions might be reconciled, "when all views, both right and erroneous are discarded" in the words of the sixth Chinese patriarch. To this day I find war play to be deeply disturbing, be it paint ball shenanigans or Frances Ford Coppola spending billions to act out his not-knowing. When a child points his finger at me and goes "Bang you're dead," I can almost feel the clods falling on my body bag.

The Bride Stripped Bear



Digital painting, Iris glicee print, 31 x 110 cms., 1999

The Bride Stripped Bear is, with any luck, devoid of a single obvious or reductive meaning. During the process I realized that I was working toward evoking the longing and mystery of the chimerical alchemy of marriage. Some years ago I bought a large packet of Brownie snapshots and negatives belonging to an apparently well off Scottish lady who took hundreds of photos during the 1920s as she traveled about the world. This is a union of two such snapshots, one of herself in front of cathedral ruins, looking down at the ground and somewhat lost, and another of a man looking into the distance while posing at the moat of a captive polar bear. There was a certain solitude and forlornness in most of the images of the lady wherever she appeared, and the man, although aloof, seemed to be scanning the edge of the play for something that had so far eluded him. In this painting I have tried to arrange a marriage for them under the warm glow of Mars to no avail. Although the tiger cannot be truly tamed, fear outweighs longing as Adam and Eve break and run from the garden.

Camus's Wake



Digital painting, Iris glicee print, 47.5 x 110 cms., 1997

In *Camus's Wake* the bewildering silence of the destroyed liminal zone of No Man's Land from the Somme battlefield of the first world war becomes the stage for the metaphysical funeral of Albert Camus, here represented by the slightly levitated remains of the demolished Citroen he died in. It is said that Camus was convinced to forgo the train by the driver of the car, his publisher, as he would get back to Paris much sooner. His tickets were still in his breast pocket in the smoldering wreck. Camus's world was shaped by the loss of his father in the first world war when he was an infant, so I felt it was fitting to create an appropriate vessel for his passionate life, where two outsiders who had gone before him could serve as guides. It has been said that sudden death can leave the soul in a lost and confused state. Here, Gandhi stands serene just moments before his assassination and Dreyfus is seen just after his epaulettes were torn off, before being transported to Devil's Island. I believe that most of what we pass off as history is rather watery soup served up to keep us content and compliant. Real events can be unearthed in the hearts of poet-philosophers like Albert Camus.

Apotheosis



Digital painting, Iris glicee print 53 x 110 cms., 1998-2001

Apotheosis is a carefully constructed historical dreamscape populated by the heroes, perpetrators, victims and bystanders of the 20th century narrative stream. In this impossible crowd, poetry and imagination are allied in witness to counter the powerful forces of commerce, science and logic. The emotive vanishing point is provided by the young Jewish boy surrendering to the Gestapo in Warsaw and the intense dignity of a condemned man. The head of Descartes is shown grafted onto the body of a Southern lynch mob member, while Walt Whitman, Rosa Luxembour, Anna Akhmatova, Jean Cocteau, Charles Baudelaire, and many others lend their spiritual presence to the allegory. In Czeslaw Milosz's poem "Child of Europe," written in 1946, he writes that "our malignant wisdom has no like on this planet." Many years later at Lourdes he writes that "we have seen on our way and fallen in love with the world that will pass in a twinkling." In his words he unveils a vast tension formed by the colliding forces of the will for dominion and the Dionysian urge to reclaim beauty, which has shaped our historical dimension. Visceral and intuitive in its approach, *Apotheosis* was constructed over a period of years to chart the gulf suggested by this split in sensibilities.

Unusual Moment



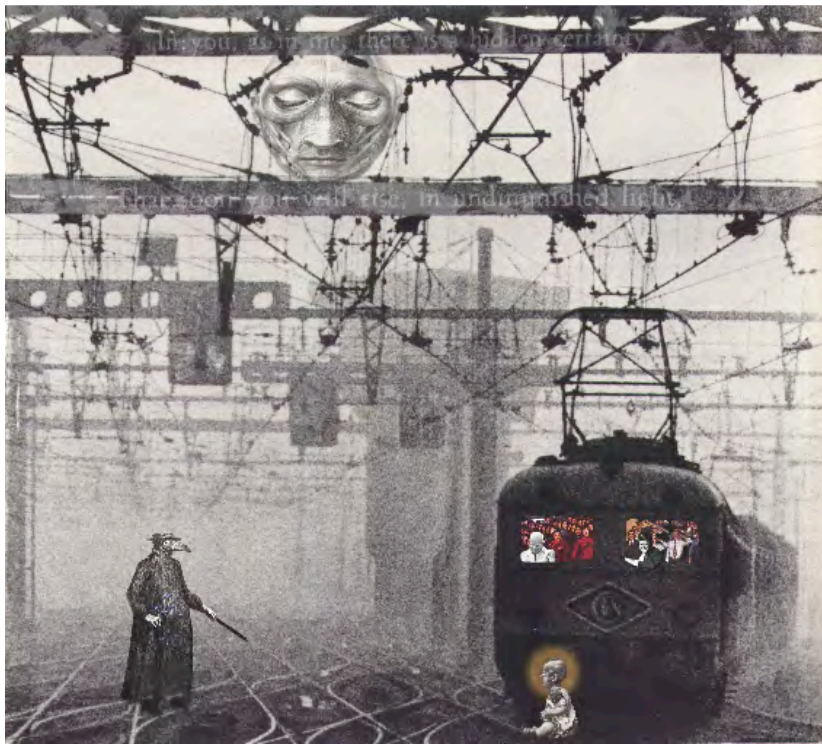
Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass 120 x 63 cms.

Moment and *Light*, approach the same paradoxical dilemma from somewhat different perspectives. Both paintings deal with a sharp sense that I have lived with all my life, that that which passes for order, social justice and progress, indeed, all societal norms, are often imbued with the madness of doublespeak inherent in such Orwellian phrases as “mutually assured destruction.” This twisted reasoning is particularly evident in the Faustian logic pronounced by an Army officer during the Viet Nam War who claimed that in a media interview “we had to destroy the village in order to save it.” Stanley Kubrick’s wicked and brilliant film *Dr. Strangelove* presents a certain twisted aspect of these fierce contradictions.

This perverse logic seems to pervade much of our thinking as we continue to market weapons anywhere and everywhere, with capital gain being the sole criteria.

We sell them to “friendlies” who a short time later are wanted dead or alive. We sell them to countries who cannot afford to feed their children with no thought of the consequences. We reap the hidden losses as we continue to dwell in astronomical denial about our habits of consumption which plunder the planet for profit and distorted levels of comfort. These contradictions became evident to me when I was a child growing up in Washington, DC, from the advent of the Cold War through the terrifying days of the Cuban Missile Crisis. How many times did we have to

Undiminished Light



Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass 93 x 120 cms.

dive under our flimsy wooden school desks before this grandiose folly was revealed? In so many ways it has appeared to me that maturation is a process of growing saner in a world where insanity

is the order of the day. Both *Moment* and *Light* stream out of the crucible of uncertainty that was an element of my nurturing. *Unusual Moment* incorporates a drawing I made as a first grade parochial student beneath the figure of Yamantaka, a wrathful Tibetan deity, who glides from above on a model of a thermonuclear device. Both titles are on loan from the brilliant heart of the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz.

Shenandoah Canto

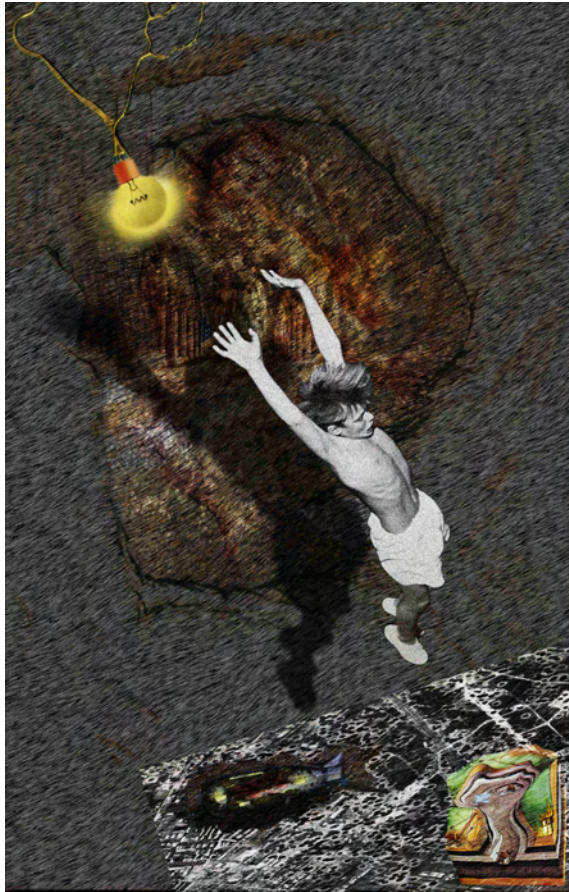


Digital Painting, Lambda print bonded to glass, 120 x 270 cms., 2000

Shenandoah Canto is one of an ongoing series of paintings that have evolved from a fusion of found family snapshots and reproductions of historical death masks. In this case the casual snapshots were gathered in Virginia during a working visit there. The tripartite matrix of the work is constructed from three photographs that are bound together forming a seamless group portrait. I am always moved and inspired by the poignant simplicity and direct power of such discarded personal images. They speak to a time that is beyond time and yet still present in our collective memory; a lost time reemerging through the alchemy of transformation. Although disparate and collected from various family sources, these photographs seem to suggest a contiguous whole that can transcend time and space and which allows me to create a kind of existential tableau of immediacy and connectedness. The young woman smiling in front of the Steam Heat sign, the girl descending the school steps, and the couple in the park, all come together to inhabit a fresh space existing beyond or above the historical dimension. The other figures that populate the painting are gathered from similar and perhaps related photographs and lend their presence to the mystery of what might have been. All of the faces have been benevolently

transmogrified with the energies and auras of the diverse countenances of such figures as Amedeo Modigliana, Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Johnson, and others.

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus



Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass 120 x 76 cms. 2001

Landscape with the Fall of Icarus, in contrast to the Bruegel painting from which the title is borrowed, displays a completely inverted figure-ground relationship. In the original, as evoked in a poem by William Carlos Williams, Icarus becomes no more than a forlorn footnote in the composition. Williams writes:

“unsignificantly
off the coast
there was
a splash quite unnoticed...
this was
Icarus drowning “

Here in contrast Icarus is the very center of a terribly foreshortened cosmos where the landscape floats like a truncated confection, a Lilliputian fragment of data turf to which he may conceivably never arrive. The image of the falling youth appeared earlier for me in my 1995 film "Obsessive Becoming." In the closing passage of that work, a boy in a white choir gown falls out of the bomb bay doors of a B-29 bomber and tumbles through space above the ruined cities of Europe.

In Woods of God Realization



Digital painting, Lambda print bonded to glass, 120 x 287 cms., 2000-2001

In Woods of God Realization takes its title from a five volume set of books that I bought in India in 1978. In them, Swami Rama Tirth - who drowned at an early age in the Ganges - explains Vedantic thought through a series of engaging parables and stories. In this painting the mysteries and myths of our exile from innocence are explored. While the soul dominating shadows of science, religion and ideology reign unbounded on the right side of the panel, the denouement of Eve and Adam is revealed through the curious gaze of the children whose faces we never see. The prevailing myths of eternal banishment from our true nature and the aberrant distortions of dogma unfold in the columns of the towering tree-line around them. When I consider childhood I sense that if we are fortunate, we seem to have a brief flashing interlude of garden time before the onslaught of normalcy. This painting is the most technically complex to date with a resolution achieved for mural size reproduction.