

Ron Gorchov: Intimate Immensity (2,196 words)

"I am not concerned that I have no place; I am concerned how I may fit myself for one. I am not concerned that I am known; I seek to be worthy to be known."¹

—Confucius, Analects, bk, iv, c. xiv

Confucius's words are a commentary on meekness. Yet, if one imagines these thoughts associated with a particular place and space, many potential meanings emerge and take shape.

I first saw Ron Gorchov's work in 1990 at Jack Tilton Gallery. I remember being struck by the fact that the painted images—despite the undeniable physical presence of the idiosyncratic saddle stretchers being simultaneously concave and convex—were of a determinedly metaphysical nature. I significantly prolonged my next viewing of his work, and became fascinated by how Gorchov established spatial and pictorial harmony between the two-dimensional surfaces with painted images and the three-dimensional structures of the painting objects. I was curious how the two sides of the stretchers were left exposed to show their untreated wood surfaces, which seemed to me, while accentuating the disparity between the painted (unnatural) and the unpainted (natural), to also amplify the precarious relationship between the unstable, delicate surface on top and the solid structure below. Each painting displayed different binaries: pushing and pulling, rejecting and embracing the painted linen surface, which barely stretched across the edges.

I was taken, yet perplexed by these paintings. As I have continued to confront them over the years, they have never ceased to evoke the same feeling. Why am I so compelled by them? Perhaps a better question would be, given their dualistic nature—lightness coupled with weightiness, two-dimensionality with three-dimensionality, painterliness with sculptural form, familiar with unfamiliar, even the past with the present—why have they never once appeared either passive and fatigued or, conversely, aggressive in asserting their unique appearance?

I wish to speak of Gorchov's attraction to both the language of gesture and language, more conventionally, as words; his titles habitually refer to mythology, religion, history or popular culture: "Adonis" (2011), "Diotima" (2006), "Chevalie d'Eon" (2008), "Noli Me Tangere" (2011), "Chase Street Lounge" (2011) or "Heartbreak Hotel" (2009), among other examples. When asked by an interviewer whether his images might in some ways relate to his mentor and friend John Graham's landmark depiction of women (and occasionally Graham's own self-portraits) with crossed eyes and puncture wounds, Gorchov answered, "Graham claimed he was using wounds formally as punctuation, and that the crossed-eyes were a way of trapping space."² (See fig. 1.) This response invites two distinct readings. It refers, of course, to the function of language. It also reveals a centralized focus, which is the space being trapped in-between. (With the elimination of ninety-degree corners, which has posed so many pictorial problems in Western painting ever since the invention of portable painting, Gorchov was able to focus solely on the

equilibrium of the image and its variation.) Both of these readings are detectable in any of his paintings.

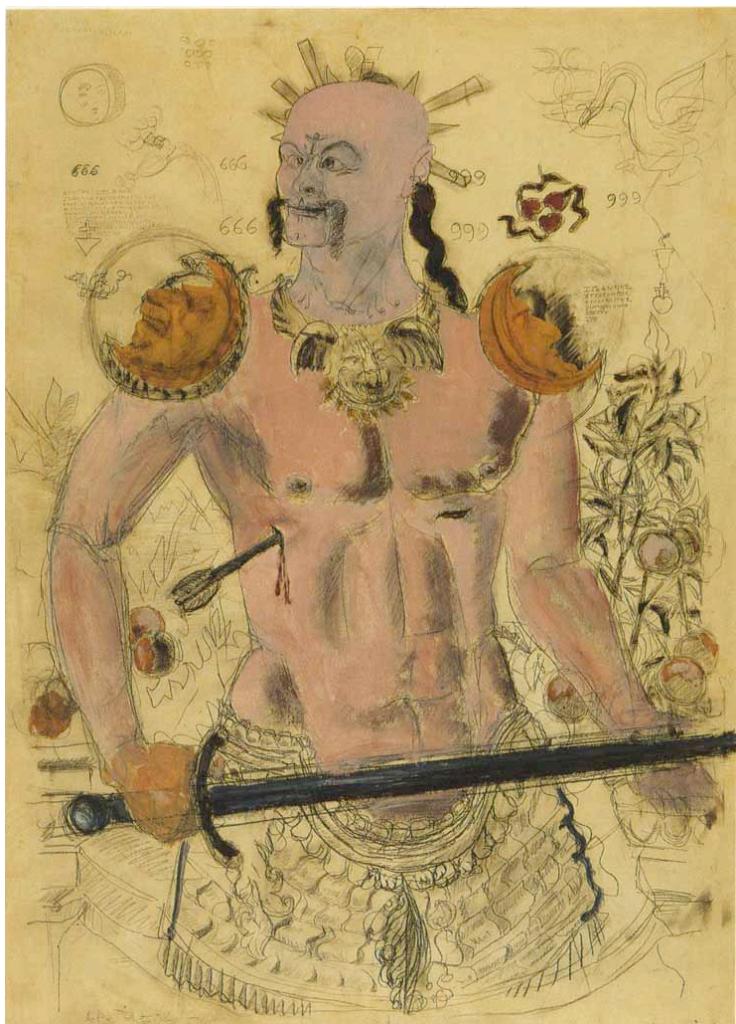


Fig.1. John Graham, *Apothesis*, 1955 – 57, oil, pencil, and stumping on paper, 49 x 35 ½ inches.

Collection of Mrs. Edwin A. Bergman, Chicago



Fig.2. Giotto, (Detail) Judas Kissing the Lord, Arena Chapel

Following the thread of the crossed-eye-space, consider Giotto's dramatic portrayal of Christ and Judas in "Judas Kissing the Lord," (see fig. 2) which depicts the poignant, intense confrontation of two dissimilar profiles. Facial perspective—whether profile, full-frontal, or three-quarter—served as an important signifier in medieval art. Profile indicated an asymmetrical, sharply-featured face—the face of a flawed being—in contrast to the ideal roundness and symmetry offered by a full-frontal view. The profiled face belongs to a body in action, a body that is lacking, while the full-view face belongs to a figure that is whole and satisfied (see fig. 3). It seems to me that Gorlov has invented a structure that embraces both presentations, yet simultaneously repudiates their legibility.



Noli Me Tangere, Basilique Saint-Andoche, Saulieu

It's interesting to note that the art-historical progression of the three decades during which Gorchov formed, sustained, and gained from his personal experience: the '50s established the dominance of New York School painting, the '60s gave rise to pop art, minimalism, and conceptual art, and by the '70s, coinciding with post-structuralism and post-minimalism, the preponderance of which marginalized painting, sculpture became the dominant medium. The period from late '60s to mid '70s, however, proved unequivocally productive and fruitful to the growth of painting. While many of Gorchov's peers, including Lynda Benglis, Richard Tuttle, Ralph Humphrey, Mary

Heilman, Lee Lozano, and others, were preoccupied with expanding the medium beyond Greenbergian formalism while contending with minimalism's geometric reduction in both painting and sculpture, Gorchov was able to achieve an unusual degree of pictorial unity. Having invested in John Graham's notion of modern art as the synthesis of all arts, past and present, and having digested the language of surrealism's biomorphism and the geometric reduction of minimalism, Gorchov deferred to the language of gestures that were once elemental and essential to the painted image. Like the medieval frontal face, Gorchov's repertoire of images is legible and loaded with innumerable associations and implications. They never lose their initial primitiveness, perhaps because, as Gaston Bachalard observed, "An image that is worked over loses its initial virtues."³



Ron Gorchov, "Noli Me Tangere" (2011), 44.5 x 36 x 10 inches. Oil on Linen

“Noli Me Tangere”—both the image and its title, which translates to “Touch Me Not”—recalls the complex relationship between Mary Magdalene and Christ. The legendary encounter of the risen but not yet ascended Christ’s encounter with Mary Magdalene has famously been painted by Giotto, Fra Angelico, Titian, Correggio, Caravaggio, and many other Renaissance and baroque masters. Various interpretations of Mary Magdalene, one of the most popular saints of the middle ages—whose image educes sinfulness as readily as it does devotion to Christ—are offered in Scripture. The Gospel of Matthew’s version tells of how Christ, after his resurrection, appears to Mary Magdalene and another Mary—assumed by most scholars to be Mary of Nazareth—and greets them with the traditional “All Hail,” upon which the women take hold of his feet and worship him (28:9). The Gospel of John offers an enigmatic variant in which a weeping “Mary”—not precisely identified as Mary Magdalene until later in the passage—peers into the tomb of the recently slain Christ, only to find two angels; she tells them she weeps because she does not know where they have put her Lord. She then turns around to find herself face to face with the resurrected Christ, although she does not recognize him until he speaks her name, at which point he tells her: “Touch me not, for I am not yet ascended to my father” (20:17).⁴ Whichever version of this encounter artists choose to represent, the moment is always charged with emotional tension between Christ and Mary Magdalene. Gorchov’s version, however, evokes a memory image rather than abstracting from or literally depicting the events as described in text. This so-called “memory image,” I suspect, is most readily attained when, as Bachelard has said, “the mind sees and continues to see objects, while the spirit finds the rest of immensity in an object.”⁵ Gorchov has said that his paintings are “almost made from reverie and luck,” which is to say they belong to the

philosophical category of daydream.⁶ Daydream, or shall we say the state of being pleasantly lost in one's thoughts, is a described condition of reverie. Reverie, intimate immensity, which can only occur when one is motionless, in a state of complete silence, is the still condition before ascent.



“Chase Street Lounge” (2011), 43 x 36 x 9.25 inches. Oil on linen

The thin, overlapping layers of reddish brown paint in “Noli Me Tangere” peer beneath a veil of cobalt blue, painted in irregular, thin patches and dripped and rubbed areas, which generate a field that essentially pushes the negative space inward to create the two forms, which mirror each others’ vertical presence. They are set below the central axis of the

canvas. The image as a whole evokes the erotic—Mary Magdalene’s sensual love for Christ—and the carnal—the two wounds on his feet, which she held in her hands. Like his other paintings, it has a quality that is at the same time extraordinary and utterly commonplace. “Chase Street Lounge,” named after a local jazz lounge at the border of Chicago and Evanston where Gorchov worked as an in-house artist when he was 18, shares this quality of the remarkable yet everyday. At the lounge he used to make caricatures of the regulars on sheets of paper placed above a projector so that the projected screen revealed the movement of his hand and the process of the drawing from start to finish. It was some sort of performance, and Gorchov happily made five bucks per drawing. The sentiment of “Chase Street Lounge,” unlike “Noli Me Tangere,” is squarely within the domain of pop culture. It has snap. The dissimilar pairing of the two red forms is severely pronounced; the left one resembles a bowling pin, the right, a large, kidney-like form. The forms’ edges are sharp and their surfaces flat. While they appear to be more or less in the center of the vertical field, they are in fact painted off of the center, creating a sense of movement, moving to the left horizontally. The forms seem to be in transit, quite unlike to the static shimmering in “Noli Me Tangere.” There is a definite sense of gaiety, of festivity, which expresses the multipliable variations between Gorchov’s words and memory images: his repertoire is impressive. “Chase Street Lounge” is a Proustian reverie, as Proust himself would have relished living vicariously through Chardin, whose still lifes revealed harmony and quiet beauty in the most everyday of objects. Perhaps this is a condition of topophilia.

Each of Gorchov's paintings, to begin with, requires the structure provided by the stretchers, which in turn requires a new conception of the dynamics of the painted image. The result: a hard-won harmonious spatial condition. Each image appears to be in spatial harmony with its restricted field and structure, and yet Gorchov has never been interested in allowing the image to accumulate or gets built up with extraneous amount of paint. He resolutely favors the slow and gradual application of thin layers until the image begins to invoke that feeling of reverie over labor. One suspects that he approaches each painting differently each time. "This is what exactly Ron Gorchov's paintings do," Robert Storr observed, "and do consistently in different proportions—near square but never square to near oval but never oval to near rectangular but never rectangular and all always bowed—and in different sizes—very small to very big—and in different orientations—vertical and horizontal."⁷ In addition to meddling—subtly or overtly—with the grid and loosening the boundaries of the forms, which springs from his previous experience as a gestural painter and his self-imposed minimalist constraints, Gorchov is able to endow each painting with a different process that unifies them with their preexisting structures. This may require many sessions of painting and repainting (in many cases after he applies an initial layer of paint, he strips or scrapes it back down to the essential white ground) or hours of staring at a blank canvas (perhaps in a perfect state of reverie) before putting down the first stroke. That stroke may be a matter of luck, or a result of an obstinate process of revision. Nevertheless, it's precisely through this diligent maintenance of such an unpredictable and treacherous balance that Gorchov heightens his ability to broaden his variations of intimate immensity.

Bachelard, in his chapter on miniature in *The Poetics of Space*, admits that he is “caught up in the perplexing dialectics of deep and large, of the infinitely diminished that deepens, or the large that extends beyond all limits.”⁸ Fitting in is neither a matter of jettisoning expectations of how a place or space should be ideally, nor of calculating how one may be most securely located within a given space. Actually, fitting in means not fitting in, or more explicitly, not even thinking about not fitting in. David Levi Strauss, observing Gorchov’s structure (the given space) and the painted image (yet to be determined), wrote, “Their force ultimately derives from what is not there.”⁹ On one hand one senses that the whole history of art is the history of a non-linear, timeless organism, which permits any one of us to correspond with any work of art from the distant or recent past. Yet, on the other hand, the desire to be relevant to one’s time is important to any ambitious artist. Gorchov’s dialectics have allowed him to take his time, knowing they would feed his work for a lifetime, and guide him to trust his inner ambition and fulfillment over external expectation and novelty. Logical argumentation proves to be barren without his imagination. And imagination, every time Gorchov confronts a new painting, “is like a drunk man who lost his watch,” and “must get drunk again to find it.”¹⁰

Phong Bui

2012

¹ *The Wisdom of Confucius, A Collection of Ethical Sayings of Confucius and His Disciples*, Edited by Miles Menander Dawson, LL.D. (Boston, International Pocket Library, 1932), pg. 29

² Ron Gorchov In Conversation with Robert Storr and Phong Bui (*The Brooklyn Rail*, September, 2006), pg. 24 – 26

³ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1994, chapter 10 The Phenomenology of Roundness), pg. 235

⁴ *Holy Bible. King James Bible* (Cambridge Edition)

⁵ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1994, chapter 8 Intimate Immensity), pg. 190

⁶ Ron Gorchov In Conversation with Robert Storr and Phong Bui (*The Brooklyn Rail*, September, 2006), pg. 24 – 26

⁷ Robert Storr, “Old Master Ron” (catalogue published by Nicholas Robinson Gallery in collaboration with Vito Schnabel, 2008), pg. 4

⁸ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Beacon Press, 1994, chapter 7 Miniature), pg. 180

⁹ Edited by Phong Bui On Ron Gorchov Robert Storr, David Levi Strauss, John Yau, Phong Bui (The Brooklyn Rail/Black Square Editions, 2008), pg. 32

¹⁰ Guy Davenport, *The Geography of Imagination* (Beacon Press, 1963), pg. 5