

The Visioning of the Loss

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Adam Straus: Small Memorials for a Great Loss

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Adam Straus: Small Memorials for a Great Loss
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by Mark Daniel Cohen

Ideas gravitate to the burgeoning mind. They coagulate out of the interior mists of the keener, vaguer, more liquid sensibilities. They form like precipitate in the mental air. They drop upon us like a sparing rain. They come by intimations. Whence they arrive is not out of the architecture of prior ideas—our core ideas cannot, for without a first thought, we would be captured forever in the infinite regress. Something must emerge, and a first thought must emerge from something not thought, else the distinction is naught. As we are in fact not caught in the endlessness of retrenchment, intuitive instigations and inklings along the skin must congeal into assertions, propositions, opinions, articles of faith: intellectual quantities that are distinguished from formal ideas by their lack of intellectual genealogy. They seem *causa sui*, but in fact they possess a background, a lineage: they come from configurations, postures, attitudes inclined in our suppler impressions of the immediate contact with the affairs of life—in short, from the pre-conscious.

Thinking arises in response to an impulse for answers, a requirement to solve that presupposes and thus indicates the existence of anterior disturbances: matters wanting of solution. We are intimate to puzzlements, given to apprehensions of dislocation, intrigue, disruption, and difficulty, and we feel the need to propose—for that reason alone, we do. There are, for there must be, appreciations of irreconcilability that call our meditations to the bar. We think because we are awash in the aura of some distress—we breath the phosphorescent atmosphere of felt alarm.

Art has its many reasons, its several purposes, for there is more than one, and of them, one is to capture and convey that which precedes and makes requisite verbalization—that which causes us to think, and when thinking lifts to its most adept and ambitious, to philosophize. The density in the air of awareness, the humidity of perspicacity and inclination that presses the mind to the cool clarity of rumination, possesses formulations, configurations of its flow, that are capable of imposing themselves onto aesthetic conception. Art is at its strength, at its most indispensable, when it gives us what we cannot have by other means. Prior to ideas, the mind is pristine, directly responsive to the touch of the real, and our only possibility of such expression is art. Art can convey better than problems to address and solutions to our crises—it can deliver us the reasons we should care.

There is something in the air. There is an exhibition at the Nohra Haime Gallery in New York that appears to mark a turning in the artistic imagination we witness around us. In a small gallery room set to one side, Adam Straus has an exhibition of recent paintings that memorialize American soldiers fallen

in Iraq. “Small Memorials for a Great Loss” consists of eight oil paintings executed on Xerox transfer laid on lead and on wood. The works themselves are small: the largest of them measuring only 30 inches by 24 and a half and the smallest only seven and an eighth inches by three and a half. All the works bear the same anonymous title, *Untitled Memorial*, are distinguished only by numbers running from one to eight, and are dated either 2006-07 and 2007. All but one work displays one or several portraits, of soldiers who have died in Iraq, either faintly rendered, darkened, or obscured in some other way, matched in either horizontal or vertical diptychs with the second panel an image of a candle or candles. In some of the paintings, the faces are whited over, as if they were emerging from or falling away into calcified mists, or disappearing into them. In others, the faces are darkened to near obscurity, the candlelight catching them only faintly, only enough for us to know a face is there. In one painting, the soldier’s face is opaqued by pure light, as if it were a luminous source, as if it were the candle flame. In another, three barely perceptible faces line up in the bottom half of a vertical diptych, and in the top half, three flames without their candles give off columns of black smoke. And in one work—*Untitled Memorial #8*, 2007, the smallest painting—there is nothing but a single candle burning: the once living person now completely erased. (It must be noted that, according to the press materials, a portion of the proceeds from the exhibition will be donated to a disabled veteran’s organization.)

Every face we observe here, when they are here to be observed, is seen as through a glass darkly. They seem to knell visually, to sound like silent calls from another world, impresses of an urgency that is as distant as memory and yet as immediate as mystery. They seem to be calling to us from a realm that is drawing them away. It is a tactile awareness of the distress, of something terribly wrong: Straus’s highly tangible handling of paint, the evident brush stokes in his laying on of the white glazes that overwrite the vanishing portraits and in the dark fogs that close to swallow the almost pleading but stolid eyes, runs these works along the skin of the viewer, making vision what it must be with authentic art: a full-body experience. And the result is the imperative, the appreciation of the weight of what has resulted from all this, the understanding of what has occurred—the artistic visioning of the loss.

This exhibition is clearly a moment, a significance in time. One feels it immediately upon entering the small gallery room—one is taken by an inner breathlessness. An immediacy is here. One knows this fact better, more surely, upon discovering that these works are a departure for Straus, as if he had been taken by something, as if something had come upon him to command his doing a thing that must be done. His works over the years, and specifically his paintings in the two exhibitions at the gallery prior to this one, have been very different in subject and technique. There, his works were vistas of distinctly and remarkably polished technique and often deliberately ironic implication: beaches, snow and ice fields, mountaintops, country roads. In particular, his paintings of mountain peaks are astonishingly accomplished, breathtakingly real, like a clarity of morning light, for their precision and sheer



massiveness of vision. Anyone interested in the possibilities of painting and the contemporary will to wield them should travel to the gallery and ask to see this work.

Straus is a powerful and adept painter who has worked consistently since the 1980s and, though he has achieved some serious success, has never acquired the recognition he deserves. Here, however, he is something more than that. Here, he has become something akin to a voice, an envisioned voice, crying out in the wilderness, capable of nothing beyond the hope of being heard. And yet, not hoping at all, for there is a sense in this that Straus is not struggling to be attended, to get his message across, to have a goal achieved beyond the creating of what he has set himself to create. There is the sense that this is a man doing what he has found he must do, and that the rest is left up to others—the rest is left up to us.

Surely, enough is achieved in this work, for here we are made witness to the weight and import of the paramount event of our moment. It is our good fortune that Straus has not given us polemics and political postures. He has given us instead the imperative that must underlie political positions and political actions. He has given us what must be anterior to and precede coherent ideas and effective and purposive thought—he has given us a sense of the cost of things as they are, he has shown us what is at stake. He has made us feel the understanding of the moment, and that is the business of the artist. He has given us the reason we should care.

Adam Straus, *Untitled Memorial (#6)*, 2007
Oil on Xerox and lead, 10 x 16 x 1 1/2 inches

There is something in the air. Just a few days ago, I received a notice of an exhibition soon to open at The Print Center in Philadelphia. The exhibition, titled “Abu Ghraib Detainee Interview Project: Daniel Heyman,” is announced to consist of two editions of prints—portraits of former detainees at Abu Ghraib, which resulted from meetings with them that required Heyman travel to the Middle East. Not yet having opened at the time of this writing, the specifics of that exhibition are outside the range of this brief essay. What is within the span of its concerns is the sense that something is stirring. Beyond the polemical reactions, beyond the inevitable expressions of resentment and betrayal, wrapped in the setting of the also inevitable, superfluous experiments in form, it may be we are beginning to see authentic artistic delvings toward a deep understanding. Among Straus and possibly Heyman, and possibly others shortly to arrive, we may be granted a vision of the loss, a human understanding, one not fading into another realm but precipitating out of the mists of intimate awareness. The rest will be up to us.

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