

‘Arshile Gorky: A Retrospective’

Issues of Identity and Camouflage

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Visually stunning, timely and provocative, the recent retrospective of the work of Arshile Gorky curated by Michael R. Taylor, the Muriel and Philip Berman Curator of Modern art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, ranks as one of the most visually enjoyable exhibitions I’ve attended in recent years. “Arshile Gorky, A Retrospective,” was on exhibit at the PMA from October 21, 2009 to January 10, 2010; it traveled to the Tate Modern from February 10-May 3 and ended at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles from June 6-September 20, 2010. The excellent catalogue contains essays by Harry Cooper, Jody Patterson, Robert Storr, Michael Taylor, and Kim Servart Theriault.

It was truly a beautiful show. The light touch of the installation emphasized the aesthetic power of the work. The exception appeared in the climactic room, halfway through the exhibition, devoted to the “breakthrough” period of the early ‘40s, where the geometrically painted walls evoked Frederick Kiesler’s design for the 1947 “Bloodflames” exhibition at Alexanderr Iolas’s Hugo Gallery in New York. This striking recreation could easily have overshadowed the work, but it did not, offering proof that the white box can be jazzed up. However, I was glad that most of the rooms presented a more modernist simplicity. What the exhibition offered was a journey through artistic process. The viewer follows the artist as he works through various sources, assimilates new ideas, and strives for a modern visual language which, however infused with personal expression and symbolic meaning, remains elastic and open to viewers. Gorky emerges as an artist serious in his commitment to understanding the complex visual languages of modernism. His quest is illumi-

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nating for students, scholars and general audiences alike. Kudos should be given to the PMA for their decision to not to make an extra admissions charge for the show, which made it accessible to students and expanded the audience for abstract art. This decision, of course, also points to the fact that Gorky lacks the star quality and accessible realism of Frida Kahlo, another subject of a recent PMA exhibition. Yet, he offers an equally compelling story and personal charisma. He engenders similar viewer empathy as an unconventionally trained artist haunted by personal trauma. Like Kahlo, he negotiates a position between cultures; he also benefited from an association with international Surrealism.

The timeliness of the show emerges from the publication of three recent biographies of Gorky by Nouritza Matossian, Matthew Spender, and Hayden Herrera, who also completed a well-known biography of Kahlo. The first of these authors, Matossian, found evidence that many of the letters relied on by past scholars were in fact authored by Gorky's nephew. While the new biographies take into account this discovery and offer new perspectives on the artist, this is the first exhibition to fully benefit from this new scholarship. It also profited from the inclusion of previously un-exhibited works from the artist's estate, and from new critical studies such as Kim Servart Theriault's. It fits nicely into current reconsiderations of the terms "modernist" and "post-modernist." While the exhibition layout does give some credence to the traditional narrative of an artist subsumed for many years under the styles of his artistic fathers before finally achieving his "original" style, it also adds post-modern elements, such as the evocation of the historical gallery design. Moreover, the show implicitly challenges older categories, trajectories and assumptions including the modernist perspective which privileges originality and aligns Gorky with the early development of Abstract Expressionism. In this exhibition, we see Gorky not so much as a talented copyist with a final breakthrough style, but as an accomplished and respectful student who absorbs, assimilates and recreates. Taylor argues that Gorky's exposure to Surrealism acted as more than just a catalyst, forming the stylistic and theoretical underpinnings of his mature art. By highlighting Gorky's embrace of Surrealism as the crucial factor in his "breakout period," Taylor situates him more firmly within the orbit of the European group. In general, the Gorky that emerges from this show is a more nuanced and complex artist than previously understood.

The exhibition catalogue serves as a testimony to this complexity. Each author tackles the problem of Gorky's long apprenticeship to various modernist masters and his predilection for copying in different but equally persuasive ways. Taylor introduces Gorky as a consummate student who explored the copy as a traditional way of learning his craft. Theriault focuses on Gorky as an exile, who uses the copy as a means to craft a new identity. Cooper's engaging formalist analysis of a single

work presents Gorky's copying as a dialogue with his sources. While Theriault, Cooper and Patterson all view Gorky as a modernist working within different contexts, Taylor defines Gorky as a Surrealist, and Storr, as a post-modernist. Why is this artist so elastic? Viewed as a master copyist, we end with the irony of his own originality as a modernist devoted to the copy as part of his creative method. His uniqueness resides in this ambivalent space he occupies, beyond divisions such as original/copy, Surrealism/Abstraction, American/European.

Gorky reminds one of a chameleon, a creature whose identity rests on the ability to mimic, to dissemble, to camouflage. In this sense, I agree with Taylor that Gorky embraces and enacts many of the ideas promoted by the Surrealists in the 1940s. Both Andre Breton and Max Ernst, influenced by the writings of Roger Caillois on mimetic animals, explored the theoretical implications of mimicry and camouflage. Caillois defined mimetism as a loss of individual boundaries, a dissolution of the self into its surroundings and connected it to various psychic states such as neurasthenia and hysteria, as well as to animism and magic. This type of self-transformation resonated for the émigré Surrealists. In the case of Max Ernst, he attempted to mimic the powers of a Native American shaman, employing mimetic magic to construct a new identity. As an earlier émigré, Gorky had already proved adept at adaptive mimicry and self-transformation. Comparing Gorky's landscapes of the 1940s to those created by Ernst during the same period, there are some interesting similarities. Both work in series, copying and reworking their own compositions. Both engage in over-painting and layering, often effacing the original images with a kind of censorship, confusing the relationship between figure and ground. Both create hybrid forms, animal and vegetal, as if the visionary projections of the artist literally animate the natural world. In each case, they perform types of visual camouflage as part of the process and content of their work.

I find it fascinating that Gorky taught a course on camouflage during World War Two. He did this as a service to painters more than to the war effort, as work in the camouflage division functioned as a good way to avoid being drafted into combat (Herrera, 367). In his 1940 course description he wrote, "What the enemy would destroy, however, he must first see. To confuse and paralyze this vision is the role of camouflage." This might also be the role Gorky assumed in both his life and in his art.

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