

BORTOLAMI

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DISCLOSURES

OPENING FRIDAY, MAY 3, 2013, 6 - 8 PM

MAY 3 - 30, 2013

BARBARA LEONIAK

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Disclosures, Text

I believe in believing – if only to stop the feeling of insecurity. My believing rejects any preached belief, any promise of reassurance or proof or guarantee. Also, I believe in trying – if only to stop the feeling of despair. I believe in seeking the truth.

Desires

“**Disclosures** is a cry to disrupt hierarchical relationships, to crush oppressive realities and to spread acts of solidarity.”

I wrote this when I began Disclosures. At that time I was ardent and vague. Soon I became composed and clear. The intensity of being composed was greater than the intensity of being ardent. I was devoting myself to a long and solitary endeavor.

My desires were grand. I wanted to challenge the conditions of how art is seen and produced – to disrupt conventions. As if making a collage, I aimed to rearrange familiar elements. I wanted to mount a show that would look traditional with its display of painting and sculpture. But it would not be a traditional show. The show would include two artists. But it would neither be a two-person show nor a solo show.

There were other strong but less defined desires. I wanted to address the market and its decadence. I wanted to address the art-world and its cynicism. I wanted to address gender and its inequality. I wanted to say NO to them.

I wanted to come closer to things as they are, not as they appear. I wanted to contribute to the common good.

The Plan

I planned to invite Barbara Leoniak, a sculptor and my first art mentor, to exhibit with me. Inviting Leoniak was an act of solidarity with another artist. It was also an act of subverting paternalism between teacher and student. Finally, the invitation was an act of faith – I believed in her work though I had seen little of it.

I planned to paint large canvases that would require time. This would test my artistic audacity. To push my skills as a painter to their limits was one aim, to push painting as a vehicle of critique was another.

I planned to write about the origin and the content of Disclosures. It was to be a part of my artwork rendered in the medium of language. I tried to write with simplicity to show the complexity and to avoid confusion.

Barbara Leoniak – the Mentor

Years ago, Barbara Leoniak introduced me to the art of art. It happened in her dingy atelier – a dark vault smelling of turpentine and mold filled with dissected props and sagging cobwebs. There, amid a few disciples, sometimes alone, I studied still lifes and live models. My mentor belonged in this gothic scenery. Her long dress was black and her long hair, red. Between scarlet lips was a lit cigarette. Ashes rolled and dropped. Her dark eyes moved in constant motion. She had a fine figure and refined features that radiated the ageless beauty of an experienced woman.

Leoniak taught by using precise gestures rather than eloquent words. “Check this!” Her index finger would point towards a particular spot in a drawing. Then her pinky and her thumb would spread to indicate the mistaken proportions or directions. “Pretty, but untrue,” she would snicker. Art like math was a tool to approach the truth. One had to look and think – to push oneself to search, not to express. Expression was a byproduct of investigation, never an aim in itself.

I had studied in Leoniak’s atelier for half a year. Since then, we have stayed in touch. With time, Leoniak exchanged her nocturnal gowns for multicolor outfits. She cut her hair and dyed it blond. She started smoking slims. The more art experts I met and the more texts

I read, the more I appreciated her for what she knew. A glance at a piece of art or a reproduction would be enough for her to deliver a pithy remark. Often, in disjointed sentences, she has shared with me her history of art – of masterpieces and of exhibitions that few have seen. I would talk about my work; she would never talk about hers. She destroyed most of her pieces, documenting few. Clearing out too many ateliers after her friends died made her less anxious about the survival of her own artwork.

Barbara Leoniak – the Artist

Barbara Leoniak sculpts in different materials, such as stone, wood, paper or metal.

To her, a sculpture begins with a subject. But, the subject is loosely followed.

Each stage of her process reveals new possibilities to be explored. Mostly, she begins with a realistic human figure. An abstract shape is the final form. She sees no borderline between figuration and abstraction.

To Leoniak, material never dominates. Often she forces material into a shape by cutting and twisting. The main quality of sculpture, she believes, is the relationship between interior and exterior space. Leoniak calls this quality the “displacement” of sculpture – displacement in the sense of a floating or a submerged body. Leoniak notes that the relationship between the interior and the exterior of a sculpture creates tension, and thus generates a tale.

The Sculptures

Leoniak accepted my invitation to exhibit with me. She decided to make sculptures related to the paintings I was about to paint. I sent her snapshots as my canvases developed. "Relationship of opposites" was how she interpreted them. She saw obvious opposites, such as present and past, death and life, form and content, abstraction and figuration, darkness and light, male and female, individual and society. She saw, as well, more specific art-historical opposites that she hinted at without elaboration. Leoniak described this relationship of opposites as a Mobius strip – a paradoxical object that conveys opposites as interrelated. The strip allows movement along both sides without ever crossing its edges. If properly cut, it becomes a longer strip or it produces strips entangled with each other.

The Mobius strip became a metaphor as well as a tool in the series of sculptures Leoniak made. In her head, she modeled the strip into sculptural forms. Then she explored them in sketches. As in a ritual of mummification, her technique of shaping cardboard strips soaked in resin developed. She would coil them into semi-abstract figures. She would paint them white and sand them smooth. Throughout this process, the sculptures, like skeletons of artistic expressions, came to life.

For Disclosures Leoniak made six sculptures. They are elaborate compositions to be viewed from different angles. In fragments and rolls of a strip, faces and figures appear. Some of them look as if they are yearning to free themselves from the mesh they are part of; others look peaceful.

My Approach

In my painting I deconstruct images to construct new ones. I vivisect images into fragments letting new connections and new contents appear. Then I arrange what I see, trying to enclose the chaos in a lasting picture.

Painting

I ordered my linen canvases with care. I remember when they arrived. Two men brought them up a narrow staircase. When alone, I tore off the wrapping. The smell of rabbit-skin glue permeated my studio. I felt ecstatic. Soon, the moment came for the first mark. At night, I traced dim projections with a pencil. From afar in the daylight the pencil lines remained obscure. I dipped my brush in dark paint. I filled the marks with under-paint. Stepping back, I perceived the crudeness of my action. I muttered:

"I love you and I shall always love you even if you try to sap my will." Then I drew the lines with a ruler. I mixed the paints on a pallet. I started painting.

Mostly I painted during the day using only the best light. I set upon being tenacious. All my attention was channeled towards the canvases. I could paint all day long without speaking or eating. Often I continued despite a sensation that working further could be harmful. It was hard to stop. If proud of my progress, I danced with a lunatic passion; if unsatisfied, I gasped with a heartbreaking melancholy. At other times,

I would just sit in silence.

Some days while painting, I listened to the reporters on the radio or to the classics on audio books. I lived in two parallel universes intrigued by the potential of my divided attention. I felt awkward doing two things at the same time since it implied doing neither well. Yet, there were days when the voices inside me spoke so loudly and so perplexingly that I could not paint unless I hushed them with a voice from the outside.

Some Side Effects of Painting

Sometimes overexcited, sometimes bone-weary, I was unable to sleep at night.

I experienced the life of a refrigerator, of a roach, of a ghost.

Sometimes, when painting, I suffered from panic attacks. I struggled to breathe.

Sometimes I felt a touch of intoxication. When mixing paints on my pallet, I smelled them. I would recall a scene from childhood when I had stood by the edge of a barrel sniffing petrol; the smell transported me into a spiral of multiplying rainbows. This recollection intensified the odor of the paint. I experienced a thrill. When it passed, I would finish mixing my paints. I had the impression of being in charge of the rainbow.

Paintings

For Disclosures I painted four paintings **The Kiss (1)**, **The Kiss (2)**, **Place** and **Work**.

I based my paintings on images. I transferred their outlines on canvas. Then I worked from palm-size prints. In each print I looked for divisions of contrasts, colors and forms. I marked these divisions on canvas by drawing straight lines. By doing so, I divided each canvas into simplified geometric fragments. Each fragment determined the others. Improving one fragment required improving the rest. The process was laborious.

The potential for improvement was infinite. I filled the fragments with oil paint, layer over layer. I painted thinly to obtain a flat surface, nearly as smooth as a printout. I averted painterly effects, such as brushstrokes, smudges or impastos.

I worked against painterly effects. Effects create immediate contrasts; contrasts immediately please. Effects make "effective" paintings. I wanted to make effective paintings without effects. That is the challenge. This process of painting is exhausting. But it is like any process in life that envisions a utopian ending. There are no shortcuts. Only through such a process does the vision become real.

The Kiss

The Kiss (1) and **The Kiss (2)** are based on a snapshot from the Internet that a young art historian sent to me. It depicts two older men kissing on the lips. The kiss appears friendly and strong, perhaps spontaneous as a gesture of camaraderie and affection. One of the men in the image is an acclaimed art historian and the other, an iconic artist. Both are considered masters of articulation for vanguard art – art that aims to challenge existing conventions. From the snapshot, I made two paintings to underline the importance of the image. I used the same composition. But one painting I abstracted

through diagonals, the other, through circles. I was curious what the two ways of abstracting would reveal. One revealed seriousness; the other, humor.

For me, the snapshot symbolizes a world where wise white men rule. It also symbolizes the danger of being marked by one's era - of being blinded by the conventions. I painted this image to call attention to this danger.

I feel the snapshot hides more meanings than I am able to name.

Place and Work

Place and **Work**, are based on reproductions of two works of art that, to me, disclose the truth about the past and the present.

One of the reproductions was **Potsdamer Platz**, a painting from 1914 by Ludwig Kirchner. His dramatic composition, painted in vivid colors and energetic brushstrokes, depicts what was then one of the busiest intersections in Europe. It is after midnight, as the clock in the background indicates, and the streetwalkers have come out to meet their clients. Two women, a young and an old prostitute, stand in the middle of a traffic island. They seem to be stepping out of the picture's framework. They create an impression of human presence that stands in opposition with the background of distorted shapes.

The second reproduction used was **Spitzenprodukte des Kapitalismus** (The Finest Products of Capitalism) a photomontage from 1932 by John Heartfield. An image made for a book by a Soviet author, praising socialism over capitalism, shows two figures. In the foreground is an unemployed man. Dressed in black, he wears a placard around his neck. It reads: "Nehme jede Arbeit an!" (Will take any work!). Heartfield photographed himself in order to represent this figure. A bride in the background wears a luxuriously laced wedding dress. This is a cut out from a fashion magazine. Staged against a black curtain, both figures contrast with each other in scale and in tone.

Potsdamer Platz and **Spitzenprodukte des Kapitalismus** are considered significant images of alienation and injustice in the modern era. They are said to depict relationships in a dehumanized world. War and money dominate. Exchange rules. Prostitutes and their clients, a bride and an unemployed man represent that world. Also they represent the unequal relations among genders, and the precarious relations of individual versus society. Kirchner and Heartfield are said to typify two different critical approaches in twentieth-century art, present in art still today. Kirchner seems to express the subjective world of emotions. Heartfield seems to present the objective conditions of reality. Many have written on these two approaches that depict the possibilities and the confines of protest and reform in and through art.

I call my paintings "Place" and "Work". In **Place** the two prostitutes partially dissolve into the background; their shapes merge with the landscape behind. Are they still there? I do not know. I wish they would disappear and I wish the world would change. I suspect that they represent Leoniak and me. They whisper the old indictment: all artists are prostitutes. I look at the figures in **Work** and here too I see myself. Am I to become the unemployed person or the lavishly dressed bride? I project myself on them not as the artist but as an individual marked by fear.

The Invitations

When working on **Disclosures**, I took a break from painting large canvases and writing this text, to develop a series of small compositions entitled **Invitations**.

The compositions came from my large canvases. They were meant as announcements to the **Disclosures** exhibition. They contain words painted, printed or collaged on them, such as "come," "show," "yes" and "disclosures." These short expressions are the words of invitation. I composed the series in acrylic and oil on gesso boards. On many pieces, I collaged prints. These prints were close-ups of elements in my paintings that I photographed and printed. The painted parts extended the prints. Thus, the difference between the collaged and the painted often seems indistinguishable. Invitations represent the infinite process of appropriating and reworking.

A Visit

One day a young art historian, a friend, visited my studio. He looked at my unfinished **Disclosures** paintings. He called them "The collision of changing oppositions".

Unknowingly, he echoed Barbara Leoniak's observations. He noticed that the cubist fragments in my paintings looked like shards of glass. We discussed how the idea of the transparency of glass had been visionary and how it became abused. We reflected on the paradoxes of reality.

We thought: Paradoxes are not meaningless confusions but meaningful oppositions. In reality, like in the Mobius strip, there are two sides – the inside and the outside. There are those who comply and those who do not. The places of transition between the sides can change but they cannot disappear. To be aware of this seems to be of the utmost importance.

The End

All artwork is vulnerable. It can be abused by wrong interpretations or simply abandoned. My artwork is especially vulnerable since vulnerability is its very aim. It is intricate and restrained. I seek strength in vulnerability to see and to feel more. If my actions are to be called paintings of a blind painter, then blindness is what I strive against.

I wanted to disclose as much as possible about **Disclosures**. Yet, does my writing protect or expose the vulnerability of the works in **Disclosures**? That I do not know. But I like the possible complexity of the answer.