

Michal Sagar: What Remains

Frenchy Lunning

To enter *What Remains* – the work of three years of the artist’s contemplation on the central mysteries of human life – is to enter an ancient shrine from a primordial moment when seas covered the earth, and the beginning of life emerged from the smell of sea and salt, and the deafening movements of an ancient ocean; that now – after eons of receding seas – lies uncovered on a silent sandy ground.

Arranged in the sacred symmetry of all such spiritual places, the observer enters as if an archeologist, viewing the exhibit from the back – to face an altar whose dynamic center holds a large work titled “Into the Balance,” created from various earthen materials that visually vibrates between rose petals – that expand outward in vibratory waves – but are held in place by the teethlike forms that also suggest the hard phallic bodies of long-dead humans, to form a grid of contrasting elements that merge in shuddering embryotic heat waves. The center of the rose – and of the work – is positioned above the only clear indication of human form, in the articulation of buttocks that secures the rose as the center not only of the composition of the work, but as the center of a human radiance.



Into the Balance

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice, wax, oil paint on paper
60" x 40"

Surrounding this portrait, are six clay sculptures that though constructed as a combination of the teeth forms and the rose, yet clearly indicate the vaginal form; delicate, open, they act as shrine maidens – or even more literally, as the back molars of this somatic opening – and thus supporting the pivoting indications that twinkle between the elements that support the open rose of the painting. We are compelled inward toward this center, that is highly detailed, yet abstract. Though primarily articulated in the greys and blacks of charcoal, yet daubs of pink oil paint and pastel rise volumetrically from the petals, forming fleshy dimensions that reiterate their bodily indications. As the artist hints, “everyone comes through the pink,” securing the sense of an erotic and sensual meaning. The altar is framed by white silk drapery, titled “Archeology of Time,” that delicately drifts from either side of the altar, to a central position in front of the painting. Strewn on that ground, are several clay “petals” that in “falling from the membrane,” they have in fact, fallen into dimension and into realist hardened forms, as if they were shells that have held the tender center of the work.



Archeology of Time

Ceramic sculptures with pastel and graphite
16" x 6" x 3"



Archeology of Time (installation)

Silk and ceramic

And just as in many medieval churches, the “life of” works – supplying the historical and cultural context to the altar’s central figure, are displayed on either side of the gallery. Beginning as most people tend to do, looking to the right side of the room, one discovers two paired sets of images. The first pair holds two works; above is a work titled “Invitation,” and is a portrait of the artist’s granddaughter as a child. In the midst of drifting abstract swirls, that resemble the form of roses, the young girl seems to be tending a garden of line-drawn flower-like forms and in particular, a strong pink – an indicator of youth as a ripened rose, “generating energy and beauty.” The second work below “Invitation,” is a work titled “In the Wake,” and is a portrait of the artist’s deceased mother, who requested that her body be tossed into the ocean unincinerated. As the waves pound above her, the drawing of the mother resembles an ancient Greek statue, long left to the power of the sea, and secured in her grave of sand. The first set then, sets up the life and death of the key females of the artist’s family, but more meaningfully, the feminine in general.



Invitation

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice, wax, oil paint on paper
40” x 60”



In the Wake

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice, wax, oil paint on paper
40” x 60”

The second set of two works set next to the altar wall, give the viewer more information. Again, the works are positioned in a vertical plan, the topmost work, titled 'Aperture,' clearly resembles a dental x-ray view of teeth. For the artist, this view – a negative in both understandings of the term – speaks to “what we do to survive...how people come to terms with the question of life and death,” and act as gates to the inner body. Below, the work titled “Serpentine Line of Beauty,” is in response to the x-ray view of teeth above, in that as the mouth opens – as indeed with other openings of the body – the tender pink of the inner body is revealed, the color of the mysterious inner self. Juxtaposed as opposites, they generate and represent the mystery of life – a life that ages and dies. This central mystery is the artist's central concept of this exhibit.



Aperture

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice wax, oil paint on paper
40" x 60"



Serpentine Line of Beauty

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice wax, oil paint on paper
40" x 60"

On the left side of the gallery, as one pivots toward the left from the altar, there are two more works, but in vertical positions to each other. Is it an afterthought once you have beheld the altar? Or is it a further commentary on the contradictions so prevalent in embodied beings? The artist presents “Close to the Bone,” an image that returns to the dental x-ray, but the teeth have evolved into bent human bodies, as if in deep bows signalling the humility that our dependence on these fragile, but cleverly designed bags in which our complicated and ever-troublesome inner lives must depend; and yet, made structurally sound through the bones that hold us in place. We imagine those inner selves as being unique and solitary, although we are similarly constructed as are all living beings – vibrant inner lives held together by bones and skins. The final work, at the end of the exhibit – which is also, of course, the beginning – is the work called “Generation.”



Close to the Bone

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice, wax, oil paint on paper
40" x 60"

This is certainly the artist's song, one of love, passion, femininity, and age. It is sung in this work as three roses whose petals revolve with the skin, bones, and genitala of the memories and movements that is the stuff of generation. She looks back at the contradictory processes of our inner selves as we move and age through desire and torment, love and loss, exultation and disappointment – all as time is coursing through this wet, tender body that grows more complicated and difficult with age. The altar, set as the turnstyle of this experience – the Balance that she articulates – becomes an orgasmic navel for her discourse between the inner and outer life, the dynamic that this planet's living beings must all contend with. And for this artist, this woman who draws as if her life depended on it, the drawing is what she has used to sing this song. As she notes,

“it’s all about drawing – a response to the sentient body, the ever-weakening body,” that is the connective tissue that pulls it altogether.



Generation

graphite, charcoal, conté, pastel, sand, pumice, wax, oil paint on paper

40” x 60”

And, it is in fact, this ancient song that remains; but picked by all generations as they emerge and flow, live and die. It is enshrined as art, and read as art. It is indeed, the essence of art.

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