



Seeking Memory's Phrases

Bt Kireilyn Barber

In commencing this essay on the work and solo exhibition by Vahe Berberian, I felt it would be appropriate to lead in with a short story; one from music history and concerning Erik Satie, the “Velvet Gentleman” of early 20th century Paris and its avant-garde community. The composer of the well-known Gymnopedies died in 1925 in Arcueil; bereaved friends went to his apartment (they had never been inside before) and discovered the spectacle of two grand pianos, one on top of the other, with the upper instrument used for letters, parcels and other personal items. His companions even discovered a long-lost composition he thought he had left on a bus and assumed gone forever. Such details of the composer’s personal space make clear how the man, his instrument and his life were essentially the same thing: one piano for composing, another for arranging day-to-day life, and Satie himself navigating amongst the two - the same yet different. When surveying Berberian’s varied artistic production one can quickly observe similar circumstances are present: the man, his creative energy and the history of his experience are a single force.

Familiarizing oneself with how and why Berberian’s creative output represents his immersion in all his media of choice - whether acting, writing, music or visual art - is to witness and experience not only a body of work but a body of life. As Vahe expressed with unpretentious simplicity, “ ... painting, music, acting ... it’s all part of the same thing.” From a childhood in Lebanon, to the free-spirited wanderings of a 17-year-old hippie/gypsy, to the trauma of the mid-1970s Lebanese Civil War, Vahe’s curiosity about and passion for writers, musicians, philosophers, creatives and those of action solidified his commitment to meaningful and sincere narrative, regardless of technique or method of delivery. As the depth and breadth of his practice becomes apparent, one is reminded of Jackson Pollock’s declarative words: “I don’t paint nature. I am nature.”

As is expected, the narrative, the story, and the narrator, the storyteller, need some way to get the story out there to an audience; to be processed, thought about, analyzed, questioned, considered. Berberian grants us his novels, his theater pieces and the wealth of his visual works, which are comprised of assemblage, works on paper, mixed media and paintings on canvas. Obsessed



with languages, Vahe sets about immortalizing family relics, personal items, memories and impressions in multiple formats, allowing them to continue for posterity. In his own words, “every memory has its language” - Berberian transcribes these memories into deep pools of painted layers, marks and materials where both surface and depth merge and separate.

Berberian identifies himself as an abstract artist. He perceives his visual art works as actual living things, and they do certainly pulse with a sense of dynamic substance. Several works from the last ten years such as *Forgive Me* (2012), *Nor* (2013), *Nuque* (2013), *Come With Me* (2015) and *September* (2016) are like

rooms or outdoor spaces full of figures, body parts and patterning: environments filled with movement, conversation, thoughts or purposeful intent. Fish and animals watch and move; figures speak, react and gesture. These prominent shapes and forms, many of them cohabiting Christian art from the earliest period of the religion are definitive signifiers, and not merely symbols. Along with Vahe’s prominent inclusion of letterforms, words and writing from various languages, these elements comprise the codex for his expression of personal and universal history.

Other recent works illustrate a transition to a less graphic and bold division of pictorial space to a stronger emphasis on layering, and the resultant mysteries contained within. *Dry Tears*, *When You Know* and *Barz*, all from 2019, bring the darker, heavy marks to a bare minimum, allowing more of the surface area of the canvas to begin to reveal its secrets to an observant viewer. Smudging, layering of various opacities and subtle details of tones and washes suggest a meditative, melancholy, cerebral slate of thoughts, emotions and memories. Then there are the works such as *Blue Whale*, *Sincerely* (both 2018) and *Alexandria* (2019). These soft, indistinct, dream-like expanses do indeed feel like limitless underwater spaces, or undefined atmospheres above gravity’s pull. In many ways they also suggest very old surfaces of the walls of an ancient inner city, older than time itself but now surrounded by endless urban build up. These are the quiet areas of large cities where cars can’t even reach, and only those on foot pass through. The walkways are narrow and uneven, so one might even hold



onto these walls to study their way. A gaze at these sentinel-like surfaces invites the observer into their deep, layered histories; Berberian's blended and textured canvases reveal similar depths and vistas with sincerity and nuanced affect.

To encounter Vahe's prolific creative authorship is akin to discovering the studio of a single person who is a cartographer, a cryptologist and an archivist all at the same time. Works as diverse as *Omen* (1994) and *Birth of a Smile* (2013) direct the viewer across and within numerous focal points of representation; on such points the viewer is locating the landmarks of a map for a psychological landscape. Assemblage pieces such as *Longing* (2018) and *Learning to Fly* (1996) are separated chronologically by 23 years; however, both feature heirloom photographs, intimate compartments, portals and creatures that move effortlessly within elements unattached to the earth. Each small detail summons the building of meaning: graceful clues and delicate tokens of a personal constellation suffused with the universal. Taken all together, Vahe Berberian's visual works both process and produce; they decipher, code and catalog a wealth of sources - the semiotics of life, memory, time and the humanity that imbues it all with meaning and significance.