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Abstraction at a Distance

Angel Musician, 2011 by Ficre Ghebreyesus. *(Courtesy of Galerie Lelong)*

It was a little unnerving, I'll admit, to venture into the Manhattan galleries again, to finally see some new art after six months of abstinence. It was a return for some of the art, too. Kara Walker's exhibition "Drawings" opened briefly in March before the gallery doors had to close. Luckily, it was still there when Sikkema Jenkins & Co. reopened in September for a three-week extension. Even that seemed hardly enough time for anyone to fully grasp this immense gathering of work: hundreds upon hundreds of works on paper made between the 1990s and this year. Some have been executed on a grand scale and to a considerable degree of finish. Among a quartet of six-foot-tall allegories featuring the figure of Barack Obama made in 2019, two have been left in a fairly sketchy state—*Barack Obama Tormented Saint Anthony Putting Up With the Whole "Birther" Conspiracy* and *Barack Obama as "an African" With a Fat Pig (by Kara Walker)*—but two others, *Allegory of the Obama Years by Kara E. Walker* and *Barack Obama as Othello "the Moor" With the Severed*

Head of Iago in a New and Revised Ending by Kara E. Walker, are dense with detail.

In case it's not evident from those titles alone that Walker's way of expressing her seriousness of intent is usually by way of a scathing sense of humor, I should probably point out that the head of Iago in the Othello piece is that of Obama's successor to the presidency. And the bilious wit hits out in all directions: The work implies that it's just as absurd and pathetic that we ever imagined Obama could be our savior as it is that a savior is what desperately seems to be needed now. What I like about these Obama images is the way they intimate that, even if Walker is a diehard pessimist who always knew American history was too poisonous for any one man to rescue from its own contradictions, she was clearly beguiled enough by the hope that a handsome and intelligent hero just might be able to slay the beasts that assail us. Make no mistake, that hope is a vulnerability—and it's her not-quite-successfully concealed vulnerability that gives Walker's caustic stance its true force and depth.

In any case, the heart of this exhibition was not in a handful of grand-scale showstoppers. Walker's effacement of the distinction between writing and drawing made the whole show feel like being trapped inside someone's diary, and if the entries are undated—well, that's because any of these feelings could have been felt at almost any time. The show worked by crowding you, overwhelming you, almost wearing you down through its sheer inexhaustibility, the multitudes of small works in serried ranks on the walls and chockablock in all the vitrines. These seemed to amount to a half-written, half-pictorial journal chronicling a thousand points of distress and anger, moments in which one is pushed over the edge of reason and in which acting out, or rather lashing out, transmutes into a kind of dire, self-reflective magnificence.

Another of the largest pieces in the show, dated 2020 and mainly in charcoal, was dominated by the written declaration—dark-gray block lettering outlined in white pastel—"I AM NOT MY NEGRO." Of course, this is a riff on James Baldwin and the title of Raoul Peck's 2016 documentary film about his life. Presumably Walker knows that the title is a bowdlerization, that Baldwin himself very specifically did not use the word "Negro" when he spoke the sentence. In her drawing, what might at first look like atmospheric abstract markings resolve, at times, into ghostly figures haunting the nebulous space behind the inscription. The intangibility, the seeming unknowability of these personages is eerie, and apparently the "I" of the title is just as enigmatic. If identity means a thorough transparency of oneself to oneself, then it's clearly not on offer here. I may be a problem for you, a mystery you'll never be able to solve, Walker seems to say, but I'm no less of a conundrum for myself.

Walter Price might best be seen as an abstract painter who puts roadblocks in the way of his abstraction by using representation—and text, too. Or maybe that's just my bias for abstraction speaking. Someone else would call him a figurative painter who uses abstraction to make trouble for representation. His work has been developing quickly

since it first began gaining attention in 2016, when he had one-person exhibitions in New York and Glasgow. Born in 1989 in Macon, Ga., he took an AA degree at what was then Central Georgia College and served four years in the Navy before arriving in New York.

Price's recent show at Greene Naftali, "Pearl Lines"—a title he's used for most of his exhibitions so far and that will also be used for a show in London in 2021—was a big one: 17 paintings made between 2017 and this year as well as about 70 drawings, giving a sense of how substantial his achievement is already. The paintings can be disorienting; they invite the viewer to see them as illustrating a narrative while at the same time frustrating that attempt. Then you realize that what they show, most directly, is the incompleteness of representation. The images that occur and recur in the paintings—a male figure running to the left (and if "forward" or the future is always to the right, as in the Western alphabet or Western painting, then that means he is running away, perhaps taking refuge in the past), a car, an overstuffed armchair—are rarely if ever whole. As full of energy and life as these paintings are, the things pictured in them are ghostly or trail away into nothing. The same is true of the writing that appears in many of them. When paintings have words in them, we have a propensity to read first, look afterward—and a propensity, too, to think the words will establish the import and significance of what we'll see when we've stopped reading. In other words, it's hard to avoid taking words, in the vicinity of images, as captions. Price, though, puts his words on the same level as his abstract marks and half-formed images. Only half there, his lettering is hard to read, even completely illegible.

And the places—that is, the fields of color in which Price sets these things: *are* they even places? Is the frozen movement of the material substance of paint itself the only place? Or can the implicit space evoked by color and texture alone be enough to give a meaningful local habitation to these scattered shards of imagery? Price may be throwing such questions in the viewer's lap, but because one senses that he has thought long and hard about them, it's difficult to begrudge him the lack of resolution. We're thinking through these problems together, the paintings seem to say, and in that togetherness, rather than in the relief offered by a proposed answer, resides the work's generosity. No points are docked for messiness, amorphousness, or self-contradiction.

Consider Price's 2018 painting *Psychological acceleration*. The ground, distinctly landscape-y for all its discontinuities, is adumbrated mainly in red and earth tones—cinnabar, rust, brick. Even the sky and sun blaze crimson-pink, as if from some poisonously polluted sunset. You can make out a little house in outline, the kind of thing a kid might draw, and there are some trees, maybe palms—all blue, some of them too small to make sense in the same painting as the biggest of them, and one seems half effaced with another slather of blue. In the foreground, a car rides in from the right, its rear end blurring into the landscape; facing it on the left is a blue armchair. Like the tree above, the chair has been partly erased, painted over with a darker blue, the same shade as in a gridded sequence of marks that appear to have been made by pressing some rectangular paint-covered surface onto the canvas and then pulling it off—a sort of indirect mark-making that occurs in

many of Price's paintings, and that counterpoints his deft, expressive draftsmanship with a less manageable, even deliberately clumsy facture. Also half wiped out is some lettering across the painting's bottom left—one can just make out a phrase that recurs in several of the paintings: "SAVE YOURSELF." There seems to be some writing in red against blue near the upper right as well, but it's impossible to make out what it says (I even asked the gallery attendant, but he couldn't read it either), though just below the illegible inscription, almost like a shadow, are some ghostly letters: "SAVE Y."

It's always dangerous to ask a painting: What are you saying? Painting has more to do with not-saying. Yet when the painting bears an inscription, the temptation to see it as saying what the inscription seems to say becomes almost irresistible. If *Psychological acceleration* is saying anything, though, it's something self-contradictory, maybe self-canceling: Don't think you'll get far by reading me. *Save yourself the trouble*. If the concerted experiences of color, line, surface, and fragments of imagery offered by a painting feel like not enough for you, maybe it's really because, instead, they are too much, excessive. And if seeing isn't experience enough, try tasting them—this is not eye candy. There is sweetness in Price's palette, but bitterness too. As the art historian Darby English writes in an online text for the show, what Price offers is "a vague aboutness, deeply trustful of loose connection, preferred to landing." This art is comfortable with its own volatility. It knows danger—"SAVE YOURSELF"—and suspects that the best way to handle it is to avoid pinning yourself down. Be ready to run.

Price, like Walker, is African American. A generation apart, both exemplify a moment in which the work of Black artists is not only flourishing but at long last gaining concomitant recognition and reward. In particular, as Tomashi Jackson, an up-and-coming Black artist whose work is fundamentally abstract, recently complained to the critic Seph Rodney, "What I see in the market is a desire for black figuration, blunt and blatant figuration." Price and Walker, by contrast, refuse to present the figure straightforwardly; they endow it with dissonant nuances rather than an easy familiarity. Their imagery evokes stories that may not be specified and that put viewers on the spot to decide: Where do I fit into the narrative? In doing so, they brush against the grain of a culture in which, as William Deresiewicz observed in his recent diagnosis of the ills of contemporary culture, ominously titled *The Death of the Artist*, "You sell your work today by selling your story, your personality—by selling, in essence, yourself."

Ficre Ghebreyesus, who had more story to him than any dozen other artists I can think of, seems never to have wanted to capitalize on it. He was born in 1962 in Asmara, Eritrea, which had just asserted its independence from Ethiopia. The three decades of civil war that followed were only at about their midpoint when the then-16-year-old Ghebreyesus became a refugee, making his way to Sudan, then to Europe, before finding his way to the United States—first to New York and finally settling in New Haven, where he became a chef in a restaurant he owned with his brothers.

A typical immigrant success story—but Ghebreyesus had other dreams, other stories in mind. In New York he'd begun painting, taking classes at the Art Students League. "My tiny kitchen table immediately became my studio table," he later recalled. In 2000, at age 38, he enrolled in the Yale School of Art, obtaining his MFA (and a prize for excellence in painting) two years later. But he kept cooking and hardly ever exhibited his paintings.

Thus the ingratiating headline over a recent *New York Times* article on him: "The Inventive Chef Who Kept His 700 Paintings Hidden." Only in 2008 did Ghebreyesus finally devote himself to his art full-time, but he died four years later, struck down by a heart attack just after his 50th birthday. The recent exhibition "Ficre Ghebreyesus: Gate to the Blue," at Galerie Lelong, was the first show of his work in New York, and a revelation.

The closest thing to a public statement Ghebreyesus ever made about his art was in his application to art school. There he defined painting as an "act of defiance through which I exorcised the pain and reclaimed my sense of place, my moral compass, and my love for life." It represented not an escape from the harshness of existence and the anxieties of displacement but rather a catharsis that made healing possible. His work demands to be perceived with a twofold awareness, emerging both from the visual world he imbibed in his childhood and youth and from the modernist sophistication of the middle-age art school graduate; echoes of Braque and Matisse find answering vibrations in memories of Coptic Christian church art. He strove to give form to a present that makes space for multiple pasts.

One of the most haunting works in the exhibition was *Gate to the Compound*, circa 2006. (The dates of almost all the pieces in the show are merely approximate; apparently Ghebreyesus rarely bothered to record them.) The approximately four-foot-square canvas presents a landscape that, rather than stretching back into a distance, seems to tilt up toward the picture plane at the top, Cubist-style. In the extreme foreground, a greensward and a single bare tree; then a wide blue river runs by, like a moat, smack up against a high white fence with the gate incongruously open onto the water. A ways behind that, we glimpse a cluster of buildings and, very small, a couple of vehicles and some shadowy figures of armed men. Yes, this might be a memory of something glimpsed during the years of civil war, though it could just as easily have been inspired by contemporary news reports—after all, in 2006 as in every other year, armed men in compounds were busy doing their thing just about everywhere. To my mind, the river is the flux of imagination, of dreams, and here it seems to separate us, far more effectively than the fence with its open gate, from the sinister realm of dark memories. The tree may be bare, but it is still alive, nourished by the water that mixes things together and washes them away eventually.

The dialectic between flows that connect and boundaries that separate seems to have been a constant in Ghebreyesus's sense of form. *Angel and Musician* circa 2011, is another four-foot square, this time formed of two abutted horizontal canvases. The musician's body and his instrument, known as a krar, are seen on the low his head and that of the winged being floating above him, who stares out a challenge at the viewer, not watching over the musician (perhaps an implicit self-portrait?—for with good reason, Ghebreyesus's fellow painter Julie Mehretu described him as a practitioner of "painting as incantation"). The two figures are enveloped in swirls of color—as often in Ghebreyesus's work, at once rich and somber—mostly abstract, though there are floral sprig patterns scratched into the paint here and there, some eyes, and toward the upper entirely discontinuous from one canvas to the other, the gap between the two adjoined canvases functioning as a collage-like cut. The only element of continuity: the musician's neck, as if to say what gives the man a sense of wholeness—and a sense that his world, with all its contradictions, can also be experienced as a whole—is not the spiritual realm above him but the connection between his body and his head, implicitly through his art, his music. This was a reflection on what Ghebreyesus knew implicitly. In painting, he said, he felt himself "accompanied by dissonances, syncopations," but found a "moral order."

Unlike Price or Walker, Ghebreyesus did not have much use for words in his art. It's all the more striking, then, that one small painting in the Lelong show, a loosely geometrical composition that might be a Matissean view out the window or a pure abstraction, dated circa 2007-2011, features the legend "Tis Time to Seek Asylum." This artist knew in a very literal sense what it meant to need and seek asylum, but he also knew, I think, that everyone needs to find an inviolable place within oneself, and that art can give a glimpse of it.