Qui sème le vent récolte la tempête
He who sows the wind reaps the storm
—Old French Proverb

Weather or Not

The power of a painting like Robert Baras' Leveche lies in its subtlety, in its ability to achieve what it wants in a casual, sangfroid kind of way. Here, an amorphous shape dominates the picture plane. It rises up in bold strokes of wide-brushed black, while all around it, and within it, Baras lays down a warm, goldenrod hue. This lighter hueenvelopes its darker half; it bleeds into the margins of the blackness; it punctuates the shape with an uneven stitching, and several larger dabs too. The colors alone seem to achieve a subtle equilibrium (Baras was a great colorist), but there is more. This particular shape has deep roots in Baras' oeuvre. It resembles the painter's crucial Windy Tree series, where an abstracted, tree-like form appears swept to one side, its limbs congealed into three or four bundles, as if caught in a moment of gale-force winds. This shape became a leitmotif for Baras, a kind of reduced and simplified pictograph through which he could cultivate his distinct painterly practice and technique. Leveche repeats this form, only turned ninety degrees, which makes a certain sense. Leveche, after all, is the name for one of the famed Provençal winds—in this case a southernwind blowing off the Sahara Desert that delivers hot, dry air to the coasts of Spain and France. Incidentally, it also delivers a sandy dust not unlike the goldenrod hue that fills Leveche's pictorial field. Baras, a local resident of Tourrettes-sur-Loup, a small village tucked into the coastal mountains above Antibes, knew firsthand what it meant to feel this Springtime wind, and just how enormously important the Provençal Winds were to the people and the culture of this particular region.

I know a thing or two about these winds, too. I've spent a good deal of time in Tourrettes-sur-Loup's neighboring village, Juan-les-Pins, and anyone who frequents the region quickly learns just how integral the winds are to everyone's sense of being. I have no doubt that Baras recognized what I and every other longtime visitor and new resident has: that the locals are bound to their winds, and always have been; that they define the seasons, that they give a rhythm to life, not to mention a healthy dose of variety. There are an astonishing thirty-two Provençal Winds, each associated with a unique compass bearing. This is a cultural heritage that stresses a sensitivity to the climate the likes of which most outsiders can barely understand. It's not for nothing that every traditional farmhouse in the entire region (known as a mas) is built with its back to the mistral wind: the freezing winter scourge that wends its way down the Rhöne River Valley and cuts through these coastal towns. So of course they named them, personified them, apostrophized them—it needn't matter if you were a sailor, a farmer, a shepherd or a painter, the winds didn't swirl around your life, your life swirled around the winds. They could bring health, or death; prosperity, or ruin. And so Baras, the adopted child of this blustery land, simply took up the emblem of his people—their most important sign—and built an entire abstract language around it.

Whether it was arbitrary or not (I think not), Baras' prolonged meditation on wind constitutes one of the core components of his mature output. Like Josef Albers' interminable squares, or, even better, like Robert Motherwell's obsessively repeated Spanish Elegy, Baras chose wind, or air, as the jumping-off point for an abstract painterly practice. His Windy Tree series contains no less than eighteen finished works. Moreover, Baras made related paintings that he named after Provençal winds, like Leveche and Gregale. There are other very similar works too, such as Eurus and Crivetz. Eurus is not a Provençal wind and would seem a strange choice if it were not one of the Ancient Greek Anemoi or Wind-Gods (in this case, the god of the east wind) and hence the forebear of the Provençal system. Similarly, Crivetz would seem downright inexplicable if Baras were not the son of Romanian immigrants, and Crivetz, or Crivăț, were not the Romanian name for the cold north-eastern wind that defines that country's entire climate.

Speaking of Crivetz, it might be one of Baras' very best works. Boldly black and white like a grand Franz Kline (no doubt an influence on Baras), Crivetz rises up in the rigid columns that feather at their edges in a most delicate way. The subtle stitching reappears, as does the chromatic harmony that Leveche displays. These are powerful works, no less sophisticated than the output of many abstract expressionists. And one of the things that perhaps makesnthem even more interesting are Baras' sly, wind-based titles, as if these were his abstractions of a force that is, by definition, abstract, or at least invisible. That might be one satisfactory way to describe Baras' practice—making the invisible visible. Or at least creating abstractions that are greater than the sum of their parts, which, incidentally, winds often do as well. In both cases, energy aggregates, it builds towards something unified and powerful, something elemental. And when it works just right, you are left with a potent synthesis, and in that way the best works of Robert Baras are a lot like the old French proverb: Qui sème le vent récolte la tempête—He who sows the wind reaps the storm. Baras certainly reaped the gains of his delicate color and form-balances, just like he reaped the gains of his former textile business. What's more, I like to think that Baras, the second son of Tourrettes-sur-Loup, at least once heard this grand old proverb, which is still commonly snarled among the elder folks of Côte d'Azur, having particular significance to them and their windworshipping ways. I'm quite sure it would have tickled Baras, and not only because he was clearly fascinated with their pseudo-wind-mythology.

Baras' story is a near Horatio Alger one. Born of poor immigrants in the early twentieth century, they spent decades building their trade and their business in pursuit of the American dream, which happened to be in textiles. Baras was all but forced to take up the family business—the Inwood Knitting Mills—when he came of age, and he grew his parent's enterprise into a powerful industrial presence, which he later sold for a tidy sum. It was only then that Baras turned to painting, received a BFA from the School for Visual Arts, and began his aesthetic journey. In other words, if there was ever a family that reaped what it sowed, it was the Baras clan. Ironically, what they had spent decades sowing was, well, sewing.

It was sewing that built Baras' wealth, that allowed him to spend the second half of his life relentlessly painting. It was also sewing that brought him the largesse that allowed him to live in a bucolic French village. Bound up in this one queer phrase, then, is a testament to the artist's own hard work and success, but one cloaked in the metaphors of his favorite subject: the wind. And like his careful meditations on wind, Baras' professional knowledge of textiles and knitwear makes him unique among his peers. Painters might be inherently visual creatures, but not many could tell you the difference between a knit and a purl, a stockinette stitch and a double-seed stitch, a brocade and a damask, or a crinoline skirt and a cut on the bias. Baras' old friends remember his lifelong infatuation with textiles and how he would corner one of them when they were clad in some interesting pattern, and then proceed to cheerfully inspect their purchase. This was no dalliance. In fact, we should not underestimate theways that Baras' lifelong obsession with textiles and the fabric arts influenced his painting.

First, the business of textiles, and especially knitwear, is the business of understanding both patterning and a sort of interconnected construction, where every element is structurally integral to the work (less embroidery). But it's also the business of knowing how that woven plane will interact in three dimensions. Will it drape across the body, or will it cling? Will it lend itself to another shape, or will it resist? Will it stretch? Is it stiff? Can it breath? Will it shrink? A veritable lifetime of careful visual inquiries into such questions prepared Baras to develop a very particular worldview, and a very particular way of handling paint. Throughout Baras' oeuvre one notes a certain way that shapes and color collide, or as is often the case, don't collide. When we examine some works like the pseudo-alphabetical forms in Open Ended 8 or Alphabet 1, or the circles that dominate his great Signals series, we see how one shape's edges give way before its companion shape/color takes up. In other words, Baras has built tiny gaps and spaces into these composition. These in-between spaces are not losses, not lacunae, but the inevitable breaks in the plane. The places where the pictorial seams are pulled, so to speak, where a stitch is dropped, where a loose weave lets light, or flesh, shine through.

And that’s the thing about Baras’ paintings: figurative or abstract, the works are less representations of positive and negative space than the manifestationsof warps and wefts. Every shape and non-shape forms part of the same plane,the same integral fabric, as it were—interconnected, stitched together, or at least resting side by side, like, say, the independently built-up, but perfectly dovetailing forms that comprise a tapestry. These are seams, in the truest sense of the word. And even in the works that lack these sharp-edged breaks we still see Baras’ textile influence shine through. Skeins II, for instance, depicts abstract circles in loose, feathering strokes so that the effect not only rhymes with six skeins of yarn, but in its “fuzzy” depiction lends a sense of tactility too, namely a softness. Knitters and professionals like Baras refer to this characteristic as a yarn’s halo, and is that not the effect that Baras has so carefully adopted here? Baras, in other words, is less a painter than a weaver, really. A painter-weaver, one could say..

Like the modern industrial textile designer who must work within the limitations of his technology, and who in turn develops bold patterns and solid forms that are amenable to his machines, Baras developed a way of painting that effectively did the same. This is one reason why Baras’ later works on canvas regularly deny themselves access to that great variety of visual techniques developed throughout the history of Western painting, like shading, perspective, and chiaroscuro—all of which Baras would have learned at SVA. In other words, Robert Baras spent the second half of his life painting the way he spent the first half of his life weaving—with strong, solid shapes in strong, balanced compositions. Once you think about Baras as the great painter-weaver that he was, much of his work takes on a new dimension. The high contrast, sharp-edged border-ticking in works like Red Field, Dark Field, and Verdant Field now appear so clearly influenced by industrial textile design. Elsewhere, the solid color fields that define his birds and buffalos and simple yet elegant geometries, could easily be transferred to his old machines, or even a late-nineteenth-century Jacquard loom.

But for my money, the wind works are still the best, because they are both indicative of Baras’ unique painter-weaver style and self-reflexively perform this strange new weaving. In their blocky, jutting fingers, the wind works do perform a kind of stitching or braiding of one form into another. A work like Leveche is then much more complex than it seems. In fact, all throughout the Wind Series, Baras, the trickster, does something remarkable. He completes his transformation of that old French adage, where now he is no longer sowing wind, but sewing wind.

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