

## The Same Proportions as Your Own Life

When I first saw Robert Baras' paintings, they reminded me of a line that John Berger wrote in 1971. The field that you are standing before appears to have the same proportions as your own life. There were several reasons this sentence came to mind. Many of the paintings have a pastoral sensibility. And since Baras died several years ago, that first encounter was colored by considering the posthumous body of work: that which is complete, already proportioned. But most of all, I was drawn to a spatial ambivalence. The word I hang on is appears. The paintings seemed both limitless, and closed off. Much as a country estate, if viewed from the center, could appear endless, even if the highway is just over that hedge.

From the outside, the body of work is sealed. From within, amongst his different series—trees blowing in the wind, birds, geometric abstraction, and all variety of cross-pollination—it couldn't be more expansive. Through his constant reiterations and versions of his subject matter, nothing is final. There is something in their selfdistancing, how they command in scale, form and brushwork, yet are nevertheless elusive. And then there is another binary of out versus in that should be addressed. Because even though Baras' paintings speak directly to the history of painting over the past 150 years—from Monet up through Mondrian, and even through Mitchell—he was not in the world. In fact, he was very much outside of it. He took qualities of the academy, and that of the self-taught, outsider tradition, and came away with something new, and old. Something entrenched and vital.

After an initial career in the textile business, Baras dedicated himself to painting. First he studied at the Art Students League, and then at the School of Visual Arts. Upon graduating in the early '80s, he found himself in a rare conundrum. He was not forced to participate in the business of art—the mercantilism of it. With no obligation to show, to sell, he didn't. Baras just painted: in New York City, Long Island, Connecticut, and Tourrettes-sur-Loup, minutes from the Matisse Chapel. And these locales make their way into the work, perhaps none more so than the windy hills of southern France.

Though Baras had a catholic, roving mind for subject matter, he returned again and again to a single image: a lone tree, caught in the wind. The dramatic gust blows the branches and leaves straight to the side, creating a dynamic right angle that nearly spins the painting on its center. He repeated this image over the years, rendering the branches with different degrees of abstraction; flipping the tree on its side, upside down. The palette changes each time, but it is always the same tree, blowing in the same void. (Here, I must clarify: the voids are always different as well. They are painterly voids, brimming with life in the form of meticulously massed brush strokes.) The composition is a bird in flight: singular, indescribable. Always different, and yet, the same.

Elsewhere, there are actual birds. Effete, thin-legged things. They reminded Baras of ballet dancers. Like the trees, they float above a heavily tilled ground. A terroir both fecund and fallow. In other rooms of his house: studies and sketches, works cussing on self-portraiture, on some proto-linguistic dance of gestures and glyphs. All contribute to the whole. This is the beautiful, terrifying truth of artmaking—evident always, but most visible after the artist has passed. Everything finds its way in.

It is thrilling to come across an entire body of work, after the fact. There's a bareness to its completion. As if, instead of offering its hand, it is caught emerging from the bath. And with that, a sadness. The outward sprawl of a life in the making is turned in on itself, and we are left to content ourselves with explication, ekphrasis. There will be nothing else, but within, there is always more. Baras painted across a variety of modes, but each contains the DNA of the rest. This refusal to limit himself, to lower the blinders, appears after the fact as open-endedness. Half of the pleasure in this work exists in jumping from one series to the next. Stacking retinal burns: from the geometric to the pastoral, the figurative to the color field.

Some are obliged to paint. Baras had to. In the thirty years of his working life—the paintings slowed as his illness progressed, coming to a halt around 2010—he painted constantly. He gave some to friends, but kept most. The work, while derived from necessity, a deep-set creative automatism, does not feel compulsive in the least. His versions are not rehearsals. They do not lead to something more final than themselves. Each contains the opening notes of a Goldberg Variation. The ending notes as well. So often we navigate new territory by naming familiar shores. And here, our coordinates could include Gottlieb, Clemente, De Keyser, Gottlieb, Klein, Matisse, and Rothenberg. But to what end? To prove that Baras went to college? That he knew how to read, to look? That he understood artmaking, no matter how solitary its conditions of creation, to be finally a communal act: of production and reception? It's a process of validation by proxy that you often see deployed on "outsider" artists, wherein a curator/collector/scholar horse-trades authenticity for awareness, as if these were ever at odds.

The mechanisms of inclusion and validation are fraught. The lines at customs long, paperwork lost or written in a foreign tongue. Gatekeepers risk misinterpretation, misattribution. Yet usually this gets bundled into a larger conversation about class and inequity. Are the stakes lowered or raised when one considers the case of Robert Baras: educated, affluent, travelled, connected. Does his choice to remain apart from the crowd, to cleave the art from the world, pose a problem for the audience which will soon come to his work? I think it's a question that ceases to be relevant as soon as you step inside Baras' paintings.

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