

The Expressive Fragment

"We favor the simple expression of the complex thought. We are for the large shape because it has the impact of the unequivocal. We wish to reassert the picture plane. We are for flat forms because they destroy illusion and reveal truth." Just one of the seven points Adolph Gottlieb, Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman outlined in their "Brief manifesto" of 1943, these statements of painterly principles—penned as a response to a negative New York Times review—have inspired generations of American artists. Their message of tough-minded thinking and artistic self-reliance becomes especially instructive when assaying the canvases of the painter Robert Baras.

Baras' work, made over a span of thirty years between 1980 and 2010 in New York, Connecticut and Southern France, was largely the output of a tenacious autodidact. Born in New York in 1930 to immigrant parents, Baras was raised and schooled in the Bronx. After attending City College, he joined the family business—a modest textile firm that relations insisted he run. After selling the company at a profit in 1974, Baras embarked on art making full time. He enrolled at the School of Visual Arts in 1979, where he received a BFA with honors. A lifetime of uninterrupted painting followed. Its productive joys were eventually cut short by Alzheimer's, but not before the artist amassed a powerful body of pictographic canvases to rival those of art history's most allusive minimalists.

Among the hundreds of finished works Baras left in France and the U.S., an important number make a solid argument for painting as vehicle for cussedly concentrated expression that overflows the limits of language, critical, literary-poetic or otherwise. Baras' most successful paintings speak volumes via irreducible, quasiheraldic shapes that recall the forms that populate both ancient and modern cultures (think of cave paintings as well as the reliefs on architectural friezes). "My favorite symbols were those I didn't understand," Gottlieb once wrote. If it were possible to interview Baras today, he'd likely confess pretty much the same thing.

Baras worked mostly without exhibiting, a counterintuitive proposition in a modern art world defined by career making exhibitions, critical and commercial track records and their public appraisals. Like the Chicago photographer Vivian Meier, his work remained largely unknown throughout his lifetime. Like the playboy-vanguardist Francis Picabia, he did mostly what he wanted to, whenever he wanted to do it. Because he functioned largely as a free agent, Baras liberally adopted a host of contemporaneous intellectual and picture-making tropes to arrive at an artistic synthesis that was, at once, personal and plugged in.

Among these strategies were his use of minimalist shapes, post-minimal ambiguity, and his distrust of the epochal bluster associated with Neoexpressionism. What Baras did best was to pluck useful ideas from the air and get busy in the studio. Without recourse to Julian Schnabel's self-promotion or David Salle's cold-blooded stratagems, Baras arrived at the holy grail craved by every contemporary artist: a body of work that is compelling, formally crystalline and self-contained. Taken as a whole, the work is emblematic of what, in 2010, curator Francesco Bonami termed "self-modernism," which he pegged as "a search for a more intimate form of modernity."

Hovering between abstraction and figuration, Baras' mature style is nothing if not direct in its address. Featuring isolated forms like birds, trees, moons and insect-like shapes embedded within all-over, textured surfaces, his compositions remain straightforward presentations of cryptic symbols that suggest entire mythological and psychic universes. Like the painter Susan Rothenberg—a fashioner of bold, clunky horses that resemble emblems rather than descriptions—Baras is fundamentally a painter of the expressive fragment. In his canvases, signs operate like synecdoches. Among other segregated figures, shadowy birds, caterpillars and windblown trees don't just evoke forms in nature, they stand in directly for the quiddity of what pictures can hope to capture.

Glyph-like and iconic, Baras' images are not so much abstracted as pared down to their essential elements. Take his Windy Trees series, for instance. Hurrioned forms rendered in blood red, blue-purple, crimson, raw umber and black, and also as a welter of crayon-like lines, their repeated windblown shapes resemble human figures (trees always do), but also literalize the Sisyphean effort involved in representing things. Ditto for Baras' paintings of enigmatic centipedes. Figures escaped from an Alain Robbe-Grillet novel—La Jalousie comes specifically to mind—the latter appear to calmly await their smashing to take the form of immanent question marks.

Not surprisingly, Baras titled these paintings Glyph In Outline, Glyph 1 and Glyph 2. Other canvases that lean heavily toward the pictographic—that is to say, they primarily feature a picture or symbol representing a thing or an idea—are several the artist made of birds made in mid-flight. Presented starkly as black forms against a brushy white background and vice versa, Baras' phoenix-like apparitions directly invoke another powerful archetype. Titled simply Red Garuda, Black Garuda and Garuda in Black, each of these avian-themed paintings makes specific allusion to the legendary sunbird in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain mythology.

Baras' paintings, in fact, are as much about distilling the fundamental form of a given figure as a Giacometti sculpture. If his forms repeatedly propose things in movement—other works depict pecking birds, a striding buffalo and various instances of "alphabets" tumbling into cascades of babble or glossolalia—they do so in direct contrast to the nuanced and deliberate way his pictures are made. None of Baras' recognizable motifs are done from life, yet most of them achieve a hard-won veracity. Like sketches done from nature, his paintings exhibit an awkward insistence, while repeatedly encapsulating the hard work involved in representing objects in the world.

Painted in palettes that run from the lush to the earthy, Baras' best paintings retain a hard grip on the eye and an even harder, more ambiguous purchase on memory. His pictographs function as totemic, primitive symbols. More importantly, they also serve as formal elements through which the artist—a highly independent, industrious and largely self-educated fashioner of enigmatically fulsome symbols—plumbed the meaning, mechanics, and essence of painting.

Christian Viveros-Fauné
Brooklyn | 2019