

Cultural Daily

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A Rejuvenating Visit with Sculptor Tanya Ragir

Michael Newberry · Wednesday, April 4th, 2018

Mourning

A few weeks ago a man from St. Louis came to visit me in my Idyllwild studio. He said that my name came to him in a dream. It turns out he was mourning the loss of his 20-year-old son. He stayed for wine and dinner and we chatted about family, art, and life. And we discussed the possibility of painting a memorial portrait. I have not done a commission in 40 years, because, frankly, I only do projects that excite me. Days later he sent lots of reference photos of his son. Impish, confident, intelligent, thoughtful, handsome and in later images, just starting to be a man. I said “Yes” to doing the portrait.

To say this portrait is daunting is an understatement. How to do justice to this young man I didn’t know? How to make the characterization feel real to the father? Deep down I was excited by the empathy I had for the situation, and bubbling up were very clear visuals of what the painting would look like. A few days into the painting I started crying: this young subject was just starting his life. Had he made love yet? Did he want to be a dad? What were his dreams of the future?

While painting I made a bad mark, and for a moment I wondered if I could do this. Immediately I fixed the mistake and the painting resumed its flow. As days of painting passed, an odd thing happened, and I started to sleep a lot. The project was absorbing a huge amount of spiritual energy, and I would have episodes during the day of feeling empty. I was sensing I needed to take extremely good care of myself.

Tanya Ragir

Over the last two years I have developed a friendship with sculptor Tanya Ragir, a well-known artist in Southern California. Recently, I visited her in her art compound. She is a contemporary romanticist and she honors human nature through her drawings, reliefs, and free-standing figures. A feeling I get from many of her works is a delicious ache of how tender and beautiful our humanity is. Her high-ceilinged, rectangular studio is separate from her home and neatly (for an artist) loaded with tools, molds, studies, and ongoing works. Her current series is fragmented female figures, with pieces of real wood branches piercing or growing out of the figures’ fissures. We talked until early morning and at the high point, in a rich mezzo voice, she read to me a quote by Rumi, “The wound is the place where the light enters you.”



Tanya Ragir, Hard Wisdom 3, 2017, Ceramic clay, found sycamore wood, concrete, india ink,

underglaze, birch leaves, raw pigments, 26.5 x 14 x 11.5 inches, photo by Michael Newberry

Humanity vs Art?

Back in my studio and painting in a zen-like way, I thought about my early art education and the kind of art one can see now in the heavily promoted museums of contemporary art. Cold abstract paintings have so little to say about the human condition, it is like they are candy wrappers showing off confections. Or an installation of Polka Dots? How the hell does that say anything other than how trite and stupid humanity is? But I rebuked those thoughts, not because they are wrong, but because they are insignificant in comparison to the nobility of Tanya's sculptures.

How does art have any future if it doesn't address our hopes and fears? If it doesn't show us coping seriously with love, life, and death? Is the nature of art to be regulated to mere decoration or is it time for it to take its place as the unique medium to convey the sublimity of humankind?

Warriors of the Spirit

There is a thriving and large segment of unacknowledged and passionate figurative artists that have made it through the brutality of postmodern education. They are the real challengers of the status quo, of testing the limits of our humanity, of seeing and feeling the real world and transcribing those sensations into meaningful subjects. And they are doing for humanity what Tanya Ragir's work did for me: it restored my faith in goodness.

Now, I feel energised and relish the opportunity to make this portrait. I don't see how it can heal the father's heart, what could, but maybe it can serve as a point of light that enters the wound.

You can see more of Tanya's works at <https://www.tanyaragir.com/>



Tanya Ragir, *Doubt Kills the Warrior*, 2012, ed of 5, cast stone with concrete base, 8.5 x 4.6 feet, photo by Michael Newberry

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