Patrick Graham: Waiting for the Silence

John Handley

Art really is a religious notion. And the function of art is to redeem us in some way, whereas nowadays, we reduce everything.¹

Patrick Graham

For several decades Patrick Graham has created meditations in the form of ethereal landscapes and iconic imagery that touch upon questions pertaining to reality, the meaning of life, and the search for faith in a world of diminishing absolutes. You have not really seen a work by Graham until you have stood right up close to it, taking in the experience of pure looking. This is what I discovered while previewing his work at the Jack Rutberg Gallery in Los Angeles several months prior to this exhibition. During that visit, I lost all sense of time as I sat on the storeroom floor, staring at numerous pieces for hours on end, observing and experiencing what no photograph of his work can reproduce or convey. The minitua of detail, the torn-paper hills in the background, and the intentional texture of surface wrinkles all disappear under the flash of the camera (though we try our best). Works like Graham, to recall Walter Benjamin, were never intended for reproduction.

There is a rawness to Graham’s methods—the way he makes those barely discernible little markings alongside his grand, bold imagery—that simply knock the breath out of any pretentious self-importance or ego that the artist might want to convey about himself. Graham, who in my opinion most poignantly mourns a lost Catholicism, is dead serious and speaks in a most sensitive voice about the Irish religious experience. And, without taking away anything from Graham’s intention, his work has universal appeal, particularly to those who struggle with issues of identity, freedom, or faith.

Graham has often referred to his early ability to easily render the human form in remarkable detail. As a child, he realized he possessed a natural facility to draw—a skill that needed little development. As an adult, he came to the painful and deep realization that art was more than imitation. He sought to abandon this natural “facility,” looking beyond mere skill and hoping to plumb the depths of life for something more profound and meaningful. And he succeeded. Yet to suggest that Graham’s shift resulted in a downright rejection of his natural skill cannot be supported when one sees his beautiful and sensitively

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rendered bodies and forms. They exist like phantoms in our dreams, appearing and disappearing before our eyes; we cannot find them and yet we see them in his work. Graham has taken his exquisite ability to draw to a level few artists achieve, creating an ongoing and shifting exchange between the artist and the viewer.

Leaving behind his reliance on pure skill alone meant that Graham had to turn inward to his interior life and let emerge from this vulnerable place the forms and landscapes of his art. There is a distinct redemptive quality to Graham’s creative process. He describes it in poetic and mystical terms of abandonment, emptiness, silence, and above all, the willingness to surrender the need for certainty:

In this world of silence, no truth exists, there is the abandonment of power that truth manifestly becomes in that other world of dogma, ideology and aesthetic certainty.

The silence becomes the painting, the painting comes from silence. It is the moment when painting is no longer an act of doing or making but of receiving. There is no ego shape here, no facilitative reply to aesthetic notions, whether historical or contemporary, there is only that desperate faith of the abandoned and... there is the discovery and rediscovery of ‘Art’ which is exhilarating.  

T.S. Eliot, in his Four Quartets, describes this same essence of waiting, of the visionary move of the spirit in terms of silence and abandonment in psychic darkness. For both Eliot and Graham, faith and perseverance are central to the creative process which entails an inevitable period of surrender:

I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant
Panorama
And the bold imposing façade are all being rolled away...

I said to my soul, be still and wait without hope
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love
For love would be love for the wrong thing; there is yet faith
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.  

2. From an address Graham gave at the Pasadena Community College, April 1991.

3. Eliot, T.S. Four Quartets.
Graham often speaks about the power that emerges from this silent waiting as being redemptive in his life. “To be an artist, you have to have no art in you, to be able to let go of what you learned otherwise you can’t hear or see anything.”

“I have to empty myself. I walk into a wall of loathing again, praying for the emptiness where art comes from.”

What emerges from this place are remarkable and elusive images, like that found in his diptych, Cold and Fatal Heros (1988, Figure 1). Dark and rather mysterious, the surface of this painting /drawing /collage is scarred and battered, appearing like an artifact or ancient reliquary that has survived the ages. Across the top of the left panel appears the phrase, “Contemporary Heros, Love is Colder than Death.” Immediately below, the simplified form of a drummer marches forward underneath an arch containing the words “Tin Drum.” Below the drummer appear five horizontal snapshots of a pastoral landscape, their succession reminiscent of a film strip, hinting at the passage of time. This panel captures a sense of depth and motion, as if some important story is being retold.

The right side of the diptych shows what is easily misread as a Madonna and Child. Rather than a mother-son relationship, Graham has given us a self-portrait: a father and son. The child has been simplified to an essential form, helpless but glowing in bright pinks and reds (the colors of birth), and a golden iridescent halo caressing his head. The words “Robin Gr...,” his son’s name, is written on the collar. The father lovingly embraces his son, pressing his face...
against the child’s head in a gesture familiar in the icons of mother-child imagery over the centuries. Both figures are shrouded in an aura of bright, luminous light, and enclosed in an overarching niche, built up of applied and painted elements.

The diptych format was highly developed as Catholic devotional art in the Medieval and Renaissance periods. The two panels were hinged in the center and often depicted images of patrons or saints on one side and the Crucifixion or Madonna and Child on the other. Increasingly in the 20th century the iconography of the religious imagery found in these early devotional pieces have been reinterpreted by other artists. The Crucifixion, in which a female figure hangs in place of the crucified Christ as the eternal woman bearing the sins of humanity, is a common example. Graham has taken religious iconography and reinvented it, giving us a familiar and sacred image of the Madonna and Child and recasting it to depict the tender bond that also exists between father and son. The tin drum, of course, is a symbol of masculinity and military victory; it is also a favorite toy of childhood, and as such, imparts a sense of innocence, play, and make-believe. But I would suggest there is more. Graham is also bringing to light the intense dichotomy facing fatherhood and manhood: the desire for tenderness offset by the demands of masculine duty. Men are expected to raise and encourage their sons to become warriors and fighters when duty calls, yet they as fathers they love their sons and worry about their fate.

Hans Hofmann, one of the most influential writers and thinkers on art and the creative process in the twentieth century, emphasized that the religious dimensions of modern art must not fall into the trap of religious dogmatic interpretation, but rather be understood in terms of pure spirit, concern, and encounter. Graham has intuitively taken hold of this reality and reinterprets religious iconography in a way that allows for the artist and the viewer to reencounter deeply religious experience in terms of what matters in everyday life. As such, his work has the ability to cut through dogmatic rhetoric and focus on the sacredness of human relationships as God-given and essential to the realm of the spirit.

Ten years after Cold and Fatal Heros (1988, Figure 1), Graham created Dead Swan Captain’s Hill (1998-99, Figure 2). In this large diptych, an endless series of hills dotted with little crosses is plummeted by bombs, dropped by airplanes at night (with one plane dropping the Magen David or Stars of David in lieu of bombs), while unsuspecting sheep graze below. The two panels read more as a single image than conjoined images, the right side featuring a prominent hill, labeled like a strategic military position that must be conquered

Pieta is image-laden. By its very name, it brings to mind Michelangelo’s Pieta, one of the most famous sculptures in the western world. Yet with Michelangelo’s interpretation—the serene Madonna cradling the limp body of her adult son—it is easy to miss the tragedy of the moment. Michelangelo has

6. It can be noted that Graham has accomplished this very thing in the work titled Lough Owell, 1986, where a woman appears in the center of the canvas in a cruciform pasture.
sanitized the iconography of a crucified man by removing practically all reference to the tortured, bloody body that the Virgin would have beheld, giving us instead a greeting card version of Christ’s death. And perhaps this is what Graham is doing here as well. At the place where these two war zones meet, the word is depicted as a doublet in building-block type letters, “P I E T A,” in bright colors and spanning both canvases.

This is a picture of the reality of war and its desolation. A place where bombs fall indiscriminately on innocent animals and graves and where mothers await the return of their sons’ dead bodies. It is all rendered as if done by a child, naive and straightforward, and rather painless in its cartoon likeness. There is a kind of tenderness, as well, in this child-like quality, most poignantly exemplified by the small prayers planted in script that run diagonally (and one horizontally at top right) with phrases such as “for a good harvest,” “for an illness in the family,” “for the gift of a son,” “for a daughter away” and “for a favor received.” These notations are reminiscent of the hand-written prayers left by those at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem and at religious shrines throughout Ireland.

Lough Owell is a lake near to where Graham grew up, a locale known for its wildlife and where blackbirds, among others, thrive. It is a curious picture, with all those little cross grave markers, sheep, and Magen Davids, under the twice-written Pieta. It is also a landscape so loaded with religious connotation that one simply has to stand back and wonder.

Figure 2. Dead Swan Captain’s Hill, 1998. Oil and mixed media on canvas.
Graham refers to the landscape of Mullingar, Ireland, where he grew up as having a continual effect on his art:

The landscape has influenced my work right up to the present, particularly the low horizon; and that great vista where you can encounter space, and figures in it, in all kinds of ways. It’s a desolate notion of space: rural poverty, with lots of husbands having to leave in war-time. An empty desolation, populated mostly by women. Silences. No conversations. A looking-in, rather than a lived experience. That ‘looking-in on things’ has stayed with me: a self-contained art.7

In his large diptych entitled Wreath (2005-2006, Figure 3), Graham returns again to this landscape theme. As in the previous diptych, Wreath (2005-2006, Figure 3) reads as a single image rather than two separate adjoining panels. In the distance to the left is a hill, barren and dotted with tombstones. A dark cloud looms over the top of the hill while below, red paint, spattered and dripping, evokes the imagery of blood. Words again play an important part in the image Graham has created. Across the top of the two canvases appear the words “House,” “King,” and “Of Tyre,” while at the lower left, running vertically up the side, appears the word “Ezekiel.” In large and imposing letters the word “Wreath” appears twice, nearly stacked one above the other across the top of both canvases, while in the lower right—and in fact dominating the piece as a focal point—is the image of a red wreath, pounded and beaten, barely recognizable as such. The entire surface of the two canvases bears the marks of desolation and violence, as if to suggest that this is the site where a great battle has been fought and lost.

There is a story about the ancient city of Tyre in the Old Testament Book of Ezekiel where the Prophet announces the judgment of God upon the city: “[The Babylonians] will break down your walls and destroy your pleasant houses. Your stones and timber and soil they will cast into the midst of the waters. And I will stop the music of your songs, and the sound of your lyres shall be heard no more.”8

Ezekiel’s words came to pass when in 332 B.C. Tyre was conquered by Alexander the Great and its people massacred. In the 12th century, it was again seized and occupied by the Crusaders, making it part of the Kingdom of Jerusalem—a religiously occupied state. Wreath (2005-2006, Figure 3) is in all likelihood the retelling of this religious oppression, occupation, and destruction of life and liberty through the eyes of an Irish artist who has lived his life in an occupied country. The title, words, and depiction of a wreath speak symbolically to the site of tragedy and memorial. As Jack Rutberg pointed out to me, the wreath symbolically honors or memorializes, and in this painting we are also offered a hint of yet another aspect of the painting’s intent. In the writing at the top, one finds the words: “For H.B.”


The reference is to the artist Hans Burkhardt (1904-1994), whom Graham befriended in the mid 80s, and for whom he held great admiration, as did Burkhardt for Graham. Burkhardt had devoted much of his life and art to the protest of war. Like Graham, Burkhardt’s remarkable paintings stood apart from the prevailing art world and academic landscape, and therefore *Wreath* is as much a reference to that struggle as it is about the futility of war.

As we have seen, there are frequent references to the Judeo-Christian tradition throughout Graham’s work, and this is by no means accidental. The use of diptychs, titles such as “Deposition” or “Requiem,” all hint at this intentionality. But even more interesting are his small preparatory sketches where the word, *ruah*, frequently appears. *Ruah* is the Hebrew term denoting breath or spirit of God, found also in humans and even in animals. It is presented in the Old Testament as the invisible force necessary for life, something that is given, but also taken away (Psalm 104:29-30). As such, it is an interesting word to meditate upon—this very essence of life that is here one moment and gone the next—something which Graham is very much in touch with and is an underlying presence in much of his art.

A wonderful example is a finished piece not included in the exhibition (2001, *Ruah - Breath: Odalisque Series*). In this remarkable drawing Graham has created for us a vision, a performance, or a ritual underway. At the center, a male figure is caught up in a mystical dance, swooping to one side, his back to us. As he dances mid-air, his arms and legs dissolve, while a small pair of wings on his shoulder blades flutter away. Who this figure might be is not immediately clear, but his importance is suggested by the halo that shimmers around his head.
Here again we see the merging of image and word. Across the top of the picture appears the word breath, and below this, the Hebrew word ruah. It is important to pay attention to how Graham inscribes his works. The words truly become part of the overall composition, not only as signifiers, but as part of his mark-making process. Therefore, a single word might be scribbled across the entire length of his work, making it difficult to read as a single noun or verb.

His figure hovers above a large rectangular plane where Graham has written two words, The ALTER (written partly in reverse), as both an amusing interplay and a play on words. In other works, Graham has depicted a religious altar, a place of sacramental transformation. Here, however, hovering over an altar, he suggests that this figure is being altered—that is, changed. The butterfly has often been used as a metaphor for Christ and the resurrection—the larva, which seals itself up in its tomb-like cocoon or chrysalis, only to reemerge as a transformed winged being. During this process, the caterpillar’s body literally dissolves or melts before morphing into a butterfly. It is as if Graham has drawn this dancing figure at a critical stage of his own metamorphosis—partly morphing, partly whole. And while this takes place, he is flanked by hearts, a universal symbol of love.
Across the front of this altar is written “The World.” On the left side of the picture plane, written vertically, we discover the word “Resurrection,” while beneath the figure are the words “Dancing,” “Jumping,” and “Leaping.” If, at times, we are tempted to believe that Graham’s work dwells only on the dark side of reality, here we have proof that this is simply not so. This is a joyful piece, one infused with the belief that a great hope and future awaits us, one where spirit and resurrection are met with love, dancing, and leaping.

Graham’s work, then, has much to do about the loss of hope, despair, and the rediscovery of hope. In an interview with John Hutchinson in 1989, he said this despair is the result of continued loss, resulting in a “kind of resurrection.” “When I speak of absolute surrender in relation to my work, it can seem like a horrendous notion, but a loss of self-will, combined with an awesome sense of—for want of better words—some sort of ‘God experience,’ is what I’m trying to achieve. When you succeed you either die or you experience an alternative reality.” His work, though certainly autobiographical in one sense, reaches beyond personal experience alone as he strives to make sense of the past, the present, and the future. His work addresses the timelessness of time, the repetition of history, and the continuous cyclical nature of silence, abandonment, and redemption in the creative process.

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