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**RITA ACKERMANN IN CONVERSATION WITH BRIAN DEGRW**

I made it upstate and sat down to focus on the art of Brian DeGraw, to see the deep roots that are above and beyond the speakable, that intervene behind and underneath of all of his creations. The Simone Weil quote that he'd sent to me in starting our dialog about this project is indeed necessary in this case to speak of Grace and Gravity.

The unconscious drifter is cured mainly through melody, the ten categories of songs. The drifter is weary and faint because of his sins. He is held captive by evil forces and shot with ten poisonous arrows. Only the great sages (who were like angels) have the power to enter every place where the wanderer's soul has fallen and remove all ten arrows from him. In order to heal the patient the sage must be able to discern all ten types of pulse beat. He must know all ten categories of song, for his main cure is through melody and joy.

Taking this as a clue, we can understand the story of Brian's deeds through medium and melody. To use it as a means of returning to G\_d in truth. For the main thing is not study but deeds. The other day I came upon a book from 1956 on Sign Language for boys and girls, for the youth. The book has a short introduction and then it goes straight into the drawings of a Native American signing the meanings of words by hand gestures. Either the introduction or the drawings switched the light bulb in my head to relate them with immediacy to Brian's visual works.

The book speaks of six tribes sitting in a large teepee in silence passing around the pipe. They were foreign to each other in terms of the spoken word but with the graceful motions of the hands and fingers they understood each other perfectly. These American Indians were wanderers, never camping long enough together in one place to learn each other's language. Sign language became the universal language for the Indigenous American tribes. The book attempts to draw interest for the American youth to revisit the necessity of a language beyond the spoken word, or to be used when it is more convenient to talk silently—on nature hikes, for instance, sign language could be a great help. It is a great skill that one can develop and an ancient art that one can use to communicate in silence.—Rita Ackermann

**Rita Ackermann:** Brian, do these works of yours have the means to communicate like the ancient American Indian sign language?

**Brian DeGraw:** Y'know, I have been thinking lately about how we absorb information and how our basic biological senses are capable of converting the material into the spiritual. It is really just incredible to think about that interaction.

Oftentimes when I am at a museum I find myself just as moved by observing a stranger looking at a painting as I do from looking at the painting itself. How is it that from the simple act of standing in front of a work of art hanging silently on a wall we surrender ourselves to this completely ceremonious alchemy? I think of paintings and drawings almost like tanning beds, but instead of bronze skin we are receiving this infinite lineage of ancient information, emotion, and experience. The eye is the portal, both inward and outward, the tunnel through which this exchange most commonly occurs.

Sign language is also such a beautiful silent exchange of information but it seems much more defined in the sense that it is alphabetically constructed with very precise positions and motions which relay very specific meanings. That's what makes it an actual language. So I think signing is more of a silent verbal exchange whereas when we stand in front of a painting we create more of a telepathic bridge between less defined energies. It's very vast and much less verbal.

To answer your question—I suppose my hope is that my work involves a bit of both of these types of exchanges. If it functions as sign language, though, my wish is that it does so in the manner in which you mentioned in the forest... inhabiting a place where we have chosen to be silent rather than out of necessity.

Signing is so beautiful in the way that it exists as motion. Have you seen that Ukrainian film *The Tribe*? The only language in the film is sign language but the director chose not to include subtitles, so apart from anyone who knows how to sign the narrative is left to be carried by the image alone. And it works perfectly. There's no reliance on the language whatsoever. I think my goal, as with many artists, is to be able to communicate with my work in this way. Although narrative doesn't concern me. I just mean in terms of the respect for silence and in giving the viewer little more than a mirror in which they can either find themselves or smash it to bits... or both.

**RA:** I agree with you that it is fascinating how a piece of art communicates and how it has the freedom of not necessarily following any clues of signs or times, but simply turning on the light switch in people's soul. Do you find it difficult to speak about your visual works? Is it easier for you to speak about making music?

The other day a big thunderstorm was about to hit the city when the sky turned dark gray and people started rushing for cover. I saw this Native American guy with long black hair dressed in a black suit limping slowly down Fifth Avenue. He was three feet taller than everybody. He held up a yellow umbrella in one hand and a black sack in the other. When I got closer I could detect his magical height that caused the dragging of his feet—he wore two-foot tall platforms carefully hidden under his suit pants. The weirdest thing of all about this mysterious appearance was that nobody paid any attention to his phenomenon. Indeed it was the most beautiful and devastating performance at once.

This is the case with almost all the greatest art, don't you think?

**BDG:** I barely even understand the concept of talking about my visual work or music. Unless an artist is doing something with a very overt message or a process that begs for explanation, I think most of the discussion should be among the minds of the audience. I am only slightly more aware of where my work is coming from than the viewer. I don't think I would make art if this weren't the case. The mystery of how and why images arise within me is really what inspires me to keep making things. Mystery is so important. All of my favorite artists are those who leave questions unanswered and allow their work off of the leash.

If you have this sort of mental umbilical cord through which your constantly force-feeding intention to your work it becomes harder and harder to let it live a life of its own. I struggle with it all the time in everything I make both visually and musically. The work will always be your blood but until you cut that cord you are denying it the ability to live its own life and form its own thoughts and to finally begin to feed itself. Art has to feed itself.

I love this image of this tall man in black under the storm cloud, what a beautiful sight that must have been. We are lucky to live in New York where the streets are filled with cinematic visions. Is that why no one bothered to notice this man? Because we are so desensitized to all this daily cinematic eye candy? A few years ago I was walking around the North Woods section of Central Park all day in a trance, getting oxygenated, looking at birds. I had never really explored that section of the park before and was happily getting lost in it. I re-entered the streets by walking through the Conservatory Garden, which I had also never been to. The flowers were mind-blowing and the big expanses of perfectly manicured lawns... everything felt so fantastical and colorful.

I was on my way to a little Baptist chapel in Harlem to look at a piano. From the moment I left the gardens to the moment I arrived at the chapel was one of the most cinematic chain of images I've ever seen. Within a 10 block distance I saw a man walking a giant turtle on a leash, two 7 foot tall twins dressed in identical bathrobes and slippers walking up Malcolm X Boulevard, a guy doing plank exercises in the middle of oncoming traffic, a woman wearing an elaborate crown of crystal geodes, a kid resting in a big cardboard box filled with bags of popcorn... and all of these moments existing inside the constant smoke and scent from the incense stands. It just kept going and going and I was sure that I had been dosed with LSD or something. It was incredible. This man you mentioned reminds me very much of this day.

Yeah, I guess truly great art often gets absorbed into ambient realms and unfortunately a lot people are blind to it unless they are being told they should look, but what can we really do? Those who notice all this unsung beauty are blessed to be tuned in to that frequency and the artists who exist without recognition or agenda, just living as art, they are real life angels.

Somewhere recently I heard someone use the term *cryptic freedom* and I found that combination of words so unbelievably perfect. That's what so much of art is about for me—this feeling of total freedom through not being able to decipher exactly what things are or how they came to be. It's very opposite from other areas of life where the inability to define something has the power to enslave your mind and become a source of frustration whereas with art this lack of definition is so liberating! I think a puzzle vaporizing into thin air is so much more satisfying than a puzzle solved.

I'm sure you can relate. That's why I always like talking about art with you.... Because it's about abnormally tall men with yellow umbrellas.

**RA:** Amen. We probably should finish our discussion right here but there is something I always wanted to ask you... what's up with those cats?

Your cat, Maurice has been a mystical partner in your daily wonders. Our cat, Smokey is a prince of the domestic harmony. How did they make it into your paintings?

**BDG:** I'm so glad Smokey came into your life! He is a very dignified prince, a wide-eyed wonder of the world. My very first cat as a child was also named Smokey and looked very similar, maybe a bit less royal. My relationship to cats started with my Smokey. I've always been around cats even though I'm allergic. It's worth it to me to suffer the allergies in order to be near to their energy.

Maurice is really something else. He was a stray who was living in this very narrow alley between a chain link fence and the outer wall of Rob Pruitt's old studio in Gowanus. My friend Raina worked for Rob and everyday she went to work she would visit Maurice and the rest of his tuxedo family in the alley. They lived in these little styrofoam boxes that people had put there for them to survive the winters. Maurice's clan was pretty large, of maybe five others, but he must have been the runt because he was getting horribly beat up. He was covered in wounds and very sick with respiratory issues.

One day he had finally had enough and he sort of approached Raina and begged to be saved. She took him to a vet and got him medication for his infections and then I told her I would take him in. I slowly gained his trust after months of him hiding in the basement of my house in Woodstock where I was living at the time. Now he has grown to become the friendliest and most charming cat you will ever meet. He has really transformed a lot of cat haters with his magic. Everyone that meets him is completely taken by him, always remarking on how extraordinary he is.

Anyhow, the cats started appearing in my drawings from time to time just out of my general reverence for their spirit and physical form. I was learning a lot from the randomness of the patterns in their fur and that was giving me a lot of inspiration in terms of letting go of my natural impulse for symmetry which is a habit I despise in myself. More recently they began to become more of a consistent focal point. I had been going through a spell

of feeling very confused and empty emotionally to the point where it caused a void that was keeping me from working. I just felt there was nothing to drive any of it. This of course led me to attempts at going deeper inward and trying to force ideas and inspiration, which really only broadened that void.

I couldn't figure out what I cared about anymore or what was left to say or feel about anything at all in a world so overly saturated with ideas and information and images and politics and opinions coming from every angle. At some point this all peaked into a sort of Nihilistic meltdown of numbness and I just thought in the most simple terms: "What is the most simple element of my life that genuinely makes me *feel*?" And of course the answer was Maurice. I began to think about how and why he was the one thing I could still really feel connected to.

Why is there a deep solace there? So I just started playing with more and more images of cats in order to find an answer.

This led me to gathering information on the effects that cats have on the human mind, body, and spirit. The frequency range they emit can alter our bodies very directly, reducing stress and even promoting bone and tissue growth. Just this path of information opened up a whole can of worms for me and most of what I'm working on right now is tangentially inspired by these connections with animal frequencies. So the cats in my paintings aren't Maurice per se but he is most definitely the driving force and my teacher.

I think it's also worth mentioning here that my favorite possession is that drawing you made of me and Maurice. I get so much joy from that every single day. Thank you, Rita.

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