

Studio Beat, 2022

After a recent bout of living in New York homeless shelters, the authorities suddenly dumped me into a new subsidized apartment in Brooklyn along with a prison bed and my duffle bag, a few steps from a big lake and 30,000 trees. Almost none of the homeless women I lived with for a year and a half escaped shelter living---there was a minuscule quantity of low-income housing for the demand.

The after-shocks of the preceding few years continued to knock me around. Perhaps because I'm aged, not mentally ill or a drug addict, I rebounded from my economic death---a precarious, failed way of life. Slowly, I settled into my new home where in May and June the park's flowering trees perfumed my bedroom and in winter, I snuggled naked under a duvet fort next to the window inched open, shards of icy air splashing the night. The city's pulse beat with ruthless and predatory businesses, wandering violent psychiatric cases, and pockets of gun-toting gangs. Stepping out the door in the morning there was no predicting what fellow humans would be up to or what creative outfits they might have devised to wear--orange slacks, a yellow print shirt set off with purple nitrile gloves, for instance. Many types of civic benevolence were also present such as plentiful neighborhood libraries, YMCAs, parks, mass transit, and my apartment. Around the corner, charitable neighbors stocked a refrigerator installed on the sidewalk for anyone in need, and I received vegetables at the St. Ann's food pantry, one of a reported 535 pantries in the City. There were also a lot of other artists in Brooklyn but none that I knew in this neighborhood of apartments, big free standing old houses, and no lofts.

The bunker-like, brutalist one-bedroom gradually turned into an art studio, replacing a large live-work space in Dumbo with a 17-foot ceiling, where I was a tenant for twenty-five years until my day job failed and the nineteenth century warehouse district was overcome by developers. To survive and work, I had long cultivated inner silence, states of trance. Now, after so many decades of practicing meditation, my mind didn't offer stiff resistance to becoming quiet. With ego melted down, I started my own techno music playlist. A repetitive beat slapped the sound onward, shot with metallic ringing tones conjuring its origin, the Bergain night club housed in an old Stalinist factory, Berlin 2004. The music skirted doom by maintaining tension between tribal drumming and a world of sinister, threatening machinery. The insistent beat supported a light trance, a state where everything radiates its own being. Jim Morrison of The Doors sang of opening to this expanded state of consciousness.

*I found an island in your arms,
a country in your eyes,
arms that chain, eyes that lie.
Break on through to the other side.*

Culled from the basement refuse room, the studio's materials were a big pile of clean junk assembled in a corner, primarily styrofoam, long stalks

of bamboo, newspaper, and cardboard shipping boxes. To begin, I need a skeleton structure for my life-sized figures and an anchor to the floor. One was already constructed, I might start another one, or begin a wall mask. Another, unique component of the sculpture is previously prepared newspapers laminated by rice paste into thick rippling sheets that can form light, hollow, organic shapes---- an alternative to clay. A sketch rested in the back of my mind, but everything was up in the air. On purpose there is no system, unleashing a welcome to the unknown.

Simultaneously in the Berlin Club and the Brooklyn bunker, the music seduced my body off the couch to bounce, nod, and playfully jerk around by its rhythm and color. Masking tape and the prepared laminated newspaper skittered off the black granite kitchen counter and onto the existing sculpture anchor, a dairy pail loaded with cement. Sharp scissors cut into Real Estate and demolished Business. A sheet rock knife stabbed into a shape. I bobbed and shook my shoulders to the rhythm in silly ways for a 78-year-old, but I was out of sight and inside the joy of free movement. Recently refrigerated, the cold, snot-like rice paste smeared over the paper laminate. Steadily, more form arrived from papers tacked with masking tape and pasted.

Time purred by. Feeling happy.

Glancing out the window to the wide courtyard, container-planted cypress trees bowed, rustled and rocked in a snowstorm that stacked quivering white columns on their needles. The snow collected in drifts on the window sills and billowed around in wild swirls. A neighbor across the way had jammed a canvas cloth serving as a curtain into the top of the window. Now, its outside edges flapped stiffly in the cold air. Cloth, trees, snow, body, mind, paper and junk moved and shook together while the rising sculpture evolved. A new beat syncopated, inviting improvisation by its unexpected emphasis. After some hours, I grew tired and stopped.

The next studio day was stalled. To awaken new thoughts I browsed an archive of favorite art collected from the internet, a personally curated miniature museum printed in sets of thumbnails. Joined at the hip with the pleasure of these tiny images, the god Eros and I roved and halted at a painting in the Utah desert made at least a thousand years ago on a rock face with vermilion earth lines. The artist of Fremont people casually yet deliberately denoted three figures, without relation to an enclosed border or depicted depth, contrasting with Western art conventions. Within the large rock surface three bodies were shaped as very long rectangles with a globe at the head, and small arms and feet. Two of them sprouted threads of energy with a streaming arc over the head of the largest one. A third, smaller figure seemed alarmed or ecstatic in the presence of the two streaming people. Myself, the sculpture, and painted rock figures flowed together within a spirit field.

Newly energized and now in the kitchen, I gessoed a large sculpted head, three times life-size, brushing its paper surface with a mixture of white glue and pulverized limestone, forming a thin but hard shell when dry. On the countertop now a worktable, its head is thrown back with a scream that boiled out in all directions from its scalp in knobby protrusions, shadowing a figure from Picasso's *Guerenica* or someone just driving alone down the interstate. This fragment of a figure might be collaged onto the existing leg-base or on a new one, its ultimate story unknown for now. Rummaging through the junk, nothing attracted.

In an open void I sat on a low bench before *Crow Totem*, now rising in space but unfinished. The shapes were largely geometric styrofoam plucked from their previous job of sheltering flat screen TVs, wine bottles, and grapes during world travel from farms, factories and people we never see or think of. These human efforts remained as plastic ghosts, now transforming from box linings cut apart and stacked in a narrow column of large and small cavities, repeating baffles, factory-precise oval holes and letters. Their planes intersected with wavy, wrinkled sections of paper, the geometric butting against the organic. Its base was anchored by a metal pail and cement, while at the crown a crow head looked in opposite directions with prominent cone-shaped eyes. The entire totem was unified by a white paper coating followed by a creamy mixture of powdered white limestone and glue, an ancient finishing plaster. Gazing from mid-level I turned it, scanning slowly for blocks in the flow that would make every view equally important, settled, and leading to the next one. When the Japanese hand saw cut off a small chunk, it spun plastic crumbs around the room.

The sculpture's presence in my living space all evening and the days ahead might seem minor but isn't. The slow process, one that shades the rational into a startling blast from the unknown, needs a large patch of simple viewing. Degrees of the mundane, spirit, and reason threaded a circuit through every moment, act, and thought from sketches, selecting the junk, cooking quarts of rice paste, making the laminate papers, looking at the old streaming rock people, and gazing at the unfinished art. This way of seeing put a world chopped into fragments back together in new ways, to enable the art to speak without words. Avoiding permanent damage, I scraped away gesso accidents from the counter and swept bits of styrofoam, paper, and cardboard into the trash.

Days passed clotted with complex grocery shopping trips searching out the most delicious bang for the buck, a medical biopsy, housekeeping, writing, and the secretarial tasks of art life--- inventory, photo documentation, grant applications, and rebuilding a website. Now a time was open for studio work again. Like dreams, nothing is clear about the process except that the ego will block it, and the streamed energies are not automatically aesthetic. Undeterred, I went to *Crow Totem* intent on coaxing the most visual pleasure from its shapes, contrasts, holes, surfaces, edges, and lines--- all constructed from mere trash, capped by an emblem of nature, the prominent bird head. I tweaked it with small adjustments that added up. To confirm I can't make it any better, I took a photo on my phone and by its flattening and distancing effect saw formal flaws previously unnoticed. The supporting structure of the sculpture is part of its meaning and engages a conversation with the flesh, a dialogue that is never predictable or concluded, symbolizing the mythic mind and its relation to living.

While moving the new archaic lady sculpture, the structure broke and must be entirely rebuilt. Still, there's nothing I'd rather be doing and recognize how privileged I am to live in this dynamic city next to almost 600 acres of parkland and to make art, to uncover purpose. My social security income supported a steady, bare survival allowing me to live in a rare ease, with some comforts, and time, for now.

In the stillness of night, a vivid cinematic dream blazed through my sleeping mind, a bolt from the unknown. Astonished awake by its impact, I

felt affronted by its shocking puzzles that seemed to sit on me in the darkness. Patiently tuning in to its language, the dream gradually revealed a reflection of the previous day's feelings and events, taking an opposite stance. I thanked it for its brilliant creativity. By mid-morning its power had faded, but it launched a final spear into the daylight hours--- the question of how long I might have to live. Relatively long or short, my invisible inner companions were there, noting every thought, feeling, and event, performing a visual commentary in the darkness of night. We met in a luminous zone of truth that I could neither evade or nail down, a respite and silent theater where life and its emotions, art, and dream images mingled and communicated with each other.

A different companion smirked from the studio wall, the sculpted *Skull*, a flattened head comically shaped like a fleshy pizza pie, cackling silently, toothily, toward my final breath.

The sky sent down a cold drizzle blackening the tree bark and melting the snow. I slipped on a new linen work smock, a recent gift, and eased into the new studio day. Nudging *Crow Totem* into alignment, it continued to list one way, then another, so I applied a remedy of thin cloth glued over its fault lines for strength. The *Totem's* profiles zig and zag within the vertical, something like Herzog and de Meuron's 56 Leonard Street, a favorite high rise residential building notable for its shifting off-set floors that by challenging the balance point, dare to remain standing like a very tall stack of children's blocks.

The prehistoric-like figure, still unnamed and undefined, advanced now that it had a steady lower body. I have no idea what I'm doing, my mind a blank. It took a long time to come to this, the risk of letting the unconscious lead. I pulled out a drawing from its purple folder, a sketch dated six years ago showing a favorite curvaceous shape. Although I've made a few versions of it, I'm still drawn to its sensual extravagance, reminding me of the golden era of Detroit cars in my youth when swoops, chrome details, and colors seemed playful, wild and free. It will dry overnight.

Life in the studio is nested within a national politics stuck in hypocrisy and corruption, fomenting widespread numbness, rage, and dread where the few control the lives of the many. Nested inside that, the small New York contemporary art world behaves like an urban Plain of Jars, a war zone littered with hidden explosives ready to detonate at each step over competition for power and position. Art provokes an enormous amount of hostility from some and stark indifference from the rest, while its vitality and talent pitched into steady decline when a perverse system of market monopoly, constructed around profit, distraction, and entertainment, sprang into existence in the 1980s. My sculpture is made to stand in a public world of humans, who can move around it bodily, slowly, sensuously and silently glide into surprising places in the mind. Freakish and under the boot, my ambition might look insanely irrational after forty-five years of anonymity and effort, but represents the ongoing hope of finding an audience, political resistance, and a way to live.

I have lived in and witnessed three New York artists's neighborhoods, LES, Soho, and Dumbo, destroyed by developers and gentrification. Technology has supplied the flawed compensation of Instagram, functioning as a free public forum of visual art within the limitations of a small screen and absence of the physical art object. Aggrieved, I'm forced to compromise and participate in it every day, so I took a photo of my new sculpture. In

Photoshop I adjusted the lighting, deleted background clutter, changed the photo shape to the required square, and tap, tap, tap---my posted image instantly appeared across the North America, Europe, and Asia on tiny, flat phone screens. Far-flung people respond to it, sometimes make comments, while I interact with their art as well. My art has adjusted to the actions of photography that flatten and trivialize it, but it keeps reserves for real life viewing. Instagram is a real but severely limited form of community.

Browsing in a book, I discovered inspiration in a Jackson Pollock painting made the year I was born, 1943, and new to me called *The She-Wolf*. Its energetic, whole arm brush work formed a harsh impression of snarling faces, threaded together with largely white and black lines and bits of red, ochre and grey, a striking image even when lacking the smell, touch, texture, and scale of the original. Its subject she-wolf might refer to an ancient myth where a wolf nurtured two abandoned boys who went on to found Rome, a Rome that become a war empire and whose law became the basis of our own legal system. The painting used emphatic, reduced visual means to suspend the mind and feeling from the mundane world and toward a mythic realm, pressing together two opposite states of being--- nurture and killing.

Mid-morning I walked to the Brooklyn Botanic Garden a block down Flatbush Avenue with a community ticket on my phone. Aggravated and vigilant of the intense traffic, I crossed an intersection of three strands of multiple lanes whose drivers commonly press their two tons of steel within inches of pedestrians, angry and impatient at the human bodies requiring them to lift the pedal from the metal. I made it across in one piece through a site of ninety collisions in 2016, putting it on the city's list of most dangerous intersections.

Slipping inside the iron gates, the living collection of trees and plants created in 1911 exquisitely unfolded. Despite the winter cold two large paper bushes were amazingly in bloom, releasing their thick-sweet, musky perfume from hundreds of small white flowers squeezed tightly shut. Like the rest of New York City, the Garden was once the land of the Lenape people long before European settlers arrived in the 1600s. Like many Indigenous people, they lived with a vision that the earth, plants, and animals are all alive and connected, an attitude that promotes stewardship of the planet and cooperative relationships.

Now in a safe, historical, and even holy place scented despite the cold with flowers, earth and trees, I was free to commune with this perspective and ambled down a path, savoring surprises. Few other people were out. A clump of shingle oak trees retained all their dull, ochre-colored leaves that dryly rustled and clacked in the wind. Up ahead on a pergola, knotted with bare, tangled and twisting vines, a few shriveled kiwi fruit still clung to their stems. A nearby dove tree had shed large quantities of oval pebbly nuts, and from a high branch a scarlet cardinal trilled. I passed a plant whose signage read, Possumhaw.

The pond's thin ice thawed from a weakly shining sun, its surface wavering in a slight breeze while distant flat white clouds streaked the pale blue sky. Fuzzy pink, black, and white willow buds, tiny snow bells, and spidery witch hazel flowers foretold the coming spring. On the far bank a large crowd of Canada geese industriously plucked grass from the Empress Tree lawn and spread out a continuous blanket of dung over their many days of grazing. Harsh honking calls from an empty sky soon revealed newly

arriving squadrons in V-shaped formations who spiraled down to land. At last, the Garden employed a German Shepherd and handler to motivate the mob of geese to find another forage spot.

The Botanic Garden sits on a 10,000 year old glacial deposit, its rock garden arranged with stones and boulders gathered from all over the premises. I came upon a boulder glittering with mica to sit and take in the sunshine. A mourning dove called. Tall pines whispered, then howled on the rising wind. Further along the path, the herb garden that also grows vegetables and fruit, lay mounded with a fine yellow straw for the winter rest, the stone fountain dry. Dwelling here, the inner stillness and flow of the nighttime spread into the day. Together the plants, trees, and myself were invisibly dying, decomposing, rebuilding, and growing in the aliveness of the moment.

Back in the studio and refreshed, I made the day's rice paste. Now knee deep in construction, the lady sculpture began to reveal herself. At this moment her head was a big, wrinkly triangular volume with a giant raptor's beak jutting forward into space. It was made almost a year ago waiting for its moment. Later, the raptor head became its own tabletop sculpture, *Hawkman* and the Lady became *Cyberman*. In the afternoon the sun broke into an intense, cool slant of luminosity on the rough, new work. For a passing moment, euphoria banished the loneliness, tedium, uncertainty, and failure of the previous days.