

**Michael Markowsky's Psycho Sites  
by Rosanna Albertini**

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The minds that swayed these seemingly fluid images had doubtless form,  
and those images seemed, as it were, mirrored in a living substance  
whose form is but change of form.

*William Butler Yeats*

It would be a great pity if Markowsky's driving drawings and paintings were to find attention only as the hosts of past experiences, and were defined vaguely as futurist fauve, or mechanical impressionism, as much as names can play –names adopted, in the modern past, to give an intellectual shelter to the art that was then considered young, and rebellious. New ideas do appear among younger artists, the great trouble today is not to let them wither before they bloom, for lack of, or too much, attention.

I look at Markowsky's art work as a common reader who does not believe there is progress in art, only a personal way of surrendering to tradition, and being renewed by the present while looking into the living density we still name, quite simply, life. Is tradition "a legend scrawled in a script we cannot read," as Wallace Stevens wonders? I'll try not to forget that we both, the artist and the reader, are driven by the same fragment of time despite different points of view, age, language and nationality. Will this help me to understand his art? Maybe, if some truths are freed from art history, professional specialization and intellectual frames, to be held on the surface of our working intelligence as ideas, visions we display for other people to come and see; meanwhile "we act our part on it like willing, convinced, devoted and voluptuous marionettes." (André Gide)

Michael Markowsky does not seem content to look at things, he needs to absorb them so intensely he drags them in, so that his hand, without being controlled by the eyes, can release them lighter than they have ever been, changed into images. Images flow from the tips of his fingers. Staring his models in the face for the time needed to draw a portrait, never taking his gaze away, his eyes process something similar, perhaps, to the enchantment Alberto Giacometti felt portraying his friends' faces: you are wonderful -he used to say- of course as wonderful as everybody else. We do not need to be reminded of the artists' struggle to transfigure natural poverty. Yet, it goes along with the undeniable satisfaction of delving into an imaginary journey through the shape of things for so long, so tightly, that the mind becomes a malleable looking glass: one could say the mind herself is sculpted by the intensity of the electromagnetic waves that are absorbed by the eyes. In fact, colors and forms out there are but energy that hits our senses; quantity from outside, quality from within.

Markowsky started his immersive journey diving into a book, *The Old Man and the Sea*. The book condensed in nine scenes. For nine days, nine hours a day, the artist forced his hands to trace visions on paper underneath the table, never looking at the outcome until the day of the exhibition. Around his body were the walls of an old Pasadena building, but unlikely he saw them, his pupils turned into the back of his mind seeking images, not a book or an environment. He probably turned himself into

the book, and unfolded narrative pictures, in color, from characters, actions, and places we can only imagine when we read about them, for they are vaporous as the steam we breath from a pot of stew: a volume of density spreading in the air the idea of flavors and taste. To give a visual form to a written story one has to abandon the idea that language is a locked door: it is not interesting if it is no more than illustration, if it does not give any existence to what is not, already, in the common reader. But a written art piece can make another artist sure that he is part of the chain: he can happen to speak, write, and draw for somebody else who picks up the flame, if there is fire in her.

*This is what death is, most of all: everything that has been seen, will have been seen for nothing. Mourning over what we have perceived.* (François Wahl, quoted by Roland Barthes)

Markowsky's feet splash in the Los Angeles River, between the concrete edges built in 1938. Frogs and cars underneath the freeway's bridge come and go with his voice. It's a radio play, performed and recorded by Markowsky in November 2002. The flood control channel becomes a magical no place, one of the boundless workrooms of the mind with ideas slipping through words and coming back into the skull, or vice-versa, who can tell? No center, no beginning, no ending. This geographical comedy sways between actual and imaginary facts, reflecting meaning on each other. A young man walks and talks into a microphone, describing his discovery of a new color he desperately craves for, wants to find it again, have his body touched by the color. When this finally happens he loses consciousness, taken by regret over what he had perceived. Once more, Markowsky jumped in a fictional space, where art and life feed each other, and disappear --his monotonous voice is charged with anxiety, the walking body of the artist seems to drown in the image of himself he had made out of hope, even more, of trust in a natural world that takes no part in his quest.

*Cette épaisseur et cette étrangeté du monde, c'est l'absurde.*  
*Such density, and strangeness of the world, is the absurd.*  
(Albert Camus)

This artist chases his own tale. He is almost thirty in 2006. He can't, really he cannot use two different tables, ideas on one table and the physicality of drawings and paintings on the other, as done by Marcel Duchamp. The French master was convinced that literature's power could annihilate the sensual appeal of painting, its "animal" consistency, so easily rewarded by the public sixty years ago, and still taking credit. So Duchamp said, and produced intellectual images. Markowsky seems to be rather involved in a "dynamic freedom", he is a permanent visitor of *sites aleatoires, non-lieux*, [undetermined sites, non-sites] to use Jean Dubuffet's usual terms. Because this is what painting has become: as flat as our mind can make it. She sees everything flat, she transfers on flatness the uncountable complexity of natural events. Everyone's mind flattens reality, the only way we have to partially, eventually, understand each other. Besides, verbal and visual textures have started to float on flat surfaces, unparallel to the visible world, at least since the beginning of the twentieth century. Which presupposes that linguistic signs of every kind meet and dance in a changeable place in between minds: not on the painted canvas – a surface of repose in a love triangle. No one can honestly put fingers or eyes on the way they take off.

Forgive the digression, but here lay the genes of Markowsky's *Driving Drawings*. They certainly are animals. Monsieur Marcel would not like them. They even become paintings, at times with reminiscences of Matisse, Seurat, Braque, Derain, Warhol, our contemporary vocabulary. I won't write what the *Driving Drawings* are or how they look. What counts is how they came to life. Their were born in a more than twenty year old, navy blue BMW. On the seat next to the driver, a small pile of papers. The speed changes, but the car never stops.

Let's let the artist start:

*The marks left on the page had an urgency, a kind of violence that I hadn't been able to produce before. These drawings looked like the product of a man on the run, someone anxiously scribbling his last will and testament on a piece of paper before he takes his final breathes. They contained a desperate and distracted quality, one I could not reproduce while sitting on the couch in the comfort of my home. Here I was, driving and drawing, putting my life in jeopardy in order to create a drawing. Never in my life had I imagined that making an artwork could be so thrilling.*

A page with marks, the notebook of a wanderer, of a man on the road taken by the flow; he may think something about risking his life, his lips are tight, the eyes steadily on the scene as if he were a living engine. The right hand knows what to do, the left one drives. Hands of a man on the run undergoing a super organized journey: size of the road, lanes, edges, directions, arrows, lights, driving rules, bushes and palm trees, -is life any different, off the road? - and not stopping the car to grab the landscape as many painters did in the past, from Henri Matisse to Edward Hopper. Some of their landscapes were framed by the car's front window. Markowsky keeps traveling over and over from Pasadena to Downtown Los Angeles, or crosses the Canadian solitudes.

His first act of drawing is a repetitive performance of the wheels on the asphalt, impetus of the car against its metallic inertia; the man and the freeway, like the man and the sea, the car and the human only one body. Taste or style is not the matter. Driving as an action makes the artist a particle of the cosmic whirl. Physical feelings rather than images, the vibrations produced by the unusual attention of the eyes fixed to the landscape put the drawing hand in movement. The outcome brings repetition, displacement of the lines, uncertainty, but not clumsiness. Each page is a "living substance whose form is but change of form."

Way before conceptual art was invented, a poet noticed that "the toil of the living is to free themselves from an endless sequence of objects, and that of the dead to free themselves from an endless sequence of thoughts. ... The soul can, indeed, change these objects built about us by the memory, as it may change its shape." Artists these days, after a century that burned its vanguards out, work their soul out: borrowing language and vocabulary from the tradition, they move to a state of mind beyond re-presentation, and ambivalent about optical contentment.

Either working outdoors or in the studio, Markowsky places himself and the artwork in a field of resonance, one could say of disturbance; his driving on the freeway is not that far from Yves Klein's

jump into the void. Death looks at him from the rear windows, shaking her head. One over the other, very quickly, his testament drawings fall on the floor: farewell to the refined object idolized by industrial religion. Neurons and muscles are the common roots of a physiological process, they give birth to the drawings as a wave of excited feelings passing along the nerves. Mind, hand and the waves of matter in which they are mechanically transported are inseparable. Such a chaotic crossing and sharing is about to be contained by each page. The author's individual self becomes a functional tool, not unlike the car. And yet, the artist is thrilled. He is physically learning "the prehistory of the visible", "the function as opposed to impression" (Paul Klee); whatever the images, they seem in agreement with the nature of a living thing.

*We use our heads even more impersonally than our hands*  
(Robert Musil)

When he paints, Markowsky wears gloves, the same rubber gloves as surgeons. Painting as brain surgery? Films of the drives are projected on a wall of the studio. Over one and a half years, colors have started to cover the geographical history of his journeys, the linen texture tense under the tactile quality of disembodied environments, his mind at play with a joyful palette. Still there is blindness to details, each painting like a map of detached blocks of perception, inevitably cut out from reality's continuous flux. His paintings are shaped by eyes swimming in our saturated visual field, trying to map their own change of form. Why fish for them with words? Art is a percept, not a concept, if Marshall McLuhan was right. But paintings are meant to last. Flatness and playfulness at stake, the same qualities pursued by the marketplace in order to seduce the buyers. It is not the beginning nor end of the art making, rather an obscure awareness that intellectual separations are not as clear as we thought for a long time; ideas themselves not rewarded anymore but not out of pessimism, for our classical, rational architecture of thoughts is drifting. New perceptions need human space, expanding the body. Wallace Stevens wrote that "the ideal is the actual become anemic." Michael Markowsky's *Driving Paintings* are on the way to reality, no doubt, if reality is the inextricable multitude of perceptions any common reader can feel.

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