

Symbolic Vessels. (“Joan Scaglione: Exposed Journey.”)

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SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

Great drawings thrill us because of their immediacy. They seem to be spontaneous physical forms of thinking or feeling. Because most drawings do not conceal their process, viewers can imaginatively retrace the evolution of the work as they can in few other art forms. And this sense of participation is increased by the fact that while not everyone sculpts, paints, makes movies, composes music, and so on, nearly everyone has drawn. Drawing, like storytelling, is an elemental human practice—a form of communication, therapy and magic.

Representational drawings are most exciting when they hover between being an accurate record of some thing and being an expression of the artist’s attitude toward that thing. A rendering may communicate clearly, but it lacks life and complex meaning. A drawn expression of a private mental state may be therapeutic for the maker but meaningless to others. Works of art combine these two drives into visions that are familiar yet strange; they resonate with both our objective knowledge of the outer world and our subjective experience of our inner realms but without merely illustrating either. Art employs yet exceeds illustration and semiotics, expression and subjectivity. Art even surpasses its maker. Living art is a symbol of an experience that a culture has not fully consumed.

Joan Scaglione makes large charcoal drawings of small boats. While she is clearly interested in describing canoes and kayaks faithfully, her choice of compressed charcoal—with its tendency to smudge and to encourage broad and adventurous, rather than fine and restrained, marks—threatens clarity. The drawings are at once sketchy and dense with signifying intent. Expressive marks swarm into ship shapes but appear to be just as willing to fly apart again. The effect is to make these carved shadows fugitive, like dreams or memories.

After spending time with these pictures, it becomes apparent that the artist is less concerned with recording reality than she is in transfiguration. Scaglione wants to transmute this common recreational object into a symbol. While a sign matches a signifier with a concept (the letters ‘b-o-a-t’, for example, refer to the concept or mental image of a boat), the concept that a symbol refers to is more complex, unclear and perhaps even beyond cognition. Symbols are meditative objects that focus our attention on a set of related thoughts, feelings, experiences and possibilities that exceed conventional language. Scaglione’s drawings seem to be symbols of her experience of being at once an ephemeral body and an eternal soul. Her images are embodiments of her meanings. After a particularly stunning and original performance, a critic asked dancer Isadora “What does it mean?” she replied, “Honey, if I knew what it meant, I wouldn’t have to dance it.”

Scaglione’s boats are seen from above, as if by a paddler about to embark on a trip. This raking perspective causes them to look like upright figures. And with their skins, ribs, and spines, boats are physiological mimics of their passengers. But the skein-like charcoal lines also make these

vessels look like natural objects. Cocoons, pods, seeds or mummies, the bound bodies seem about to burst into a new form. “Those Who Spoke of Bones,” featuring the moody silhouette of long boats raised off the ground like a funeral pyre, underlines the connection between boats, bodies and spiritual transformation in the artist’s cosmology. The theme is picked up in “The Nether World” where anthropomorphic sunken boats are suspended under churning water as if in limbo. The title and image remind us that water is universally regarded as a symbol of the unconscious and boats often represent the conscious self. Are these submerged boats lost souls or selves?

Another title, “The Vessels Will Speak,” hints that these are not only boats but also vessels. Vessels have a rich string of associations, especially when they are said to speak. Are they oracles? What do they tell us? Of course, they are drawings and therefore mute. It is up to us to make meanings with them. As the title of another piece so poetically describes it, ours is a “Dialogue in Silence.”

The two boats in “The Vessels Will Speak” are, as in several others, black and white. They may be Yin and Yang, the masculine and feminine principles, consciousness and unconsciousness, light and shadow, and many other forms of the unification of opposites. They may also be autobiographic references to the artist and her husband(’s kayaks) —opposites joined in a common path.

Another drawing of an overlapped black and white boat on a dock, “Shadows Unmasked,” hints that behind the shadow’s mask is the principle of light. Again, the artist encrypts symbolic messages in her drawings for viewers with a similar spiritual inclination to decode. The ‘shadow’ in Jungian thought is the embodiment of those parts of our character that we have repressed (Darth Vader is Luke’s shadow). The shadow is impossible without consciousness and vice versa. But Scaglione’s references are not only spiritual but also material. The suggestive shapes of the vessels emphasize the merging of corporeal boundaries. Both phallic and vaginal, pistil and ovule, the kayaks combine male and female in one indivisible being, making them symbolic of individuation.

HYBRID BEINGS

Without a paddler, a boat is a lifeless hull. But Scaglione’s boats are not empty vessels waiting to be filled; they are drawings infused with life. Despite the physical absence of paddlers, their presence is implied. Like Van Gogh’s famous painting of old work boots so worn out by labour that they developed a character that echoes and evokes the body of their wearer, these drawings conflate the human body and boat body in a swirl of vibrant lines that make them seem conjoined and alive. The literary term for this is ‘metonymy’, and it refers to using a thing intimately linked to (say) a person to stand in for that person. While these pictures draw a symbolic and spiritual relationship between boats and people and souls, they also evoke a more visceral and common sensation, the transformative experience of being alone on the water in a boat.

A small boat is an extension of the human body. Its body offers a stronger skin, ribs and spine; its paddles are upgraded hands. It, ironically, permits us to go further into nature while being protected from nature. Boats defy the natural order by making the paddler no longer a land mammal but a type of amphibian. Legs, the evolutionary feature that raised us from the water, are rendered nearly useless—kayaks make us mermaids and mermen.

In these drawings Scaglione does not express her interest in nature. She is not drawing what is seen from the boat but what it means to be a hybrid being *with* a boat. Her subject is the surprise of this re-embodiment. Part of the appeal of kayaking is not just what you see but how you reform your self, how you are a different being in a boat.

Because there is little room in a kayak, you must simplify yourself. Sitting on the bottom of a boat, you lose stature and are much closer to the earth. Engulfed by the natural world, you feel a part of it, rather than apart from it. The sensation of lying on the bottom of boat with eyes closed and body gently rocked by waves is embryonic.

In a small vessel you lose your grounding and are subject to the forces of nature. While not helpless, you are working with or against weather and water in an elemental way. Anyone who has been in danger on the water knows how that primal moment can have you actively believing in local gods.

Small crafts also permit you to travel noiselessly down ancient water routes, experientially linking you to previous cultures. Altogether, the experience is so unlike our daily routines in a human structured world of texts, machines and grids that it is uniquely conducive to sublime meditation.

A SYMMETRY

Most spiritual symbols, like most religious buildings and monuments, are symmetrical. Much of the art of the insane is also symmetrical. And when artists are in a transition or a crisis they often reduce their pallet to monochromatic colours or black and white and create nearly symmetrical compositions. Symmetry is the simplest way to achieve harmony. While the boat is a symmetrical form, few of Scaglione's compositions are. She tries to disrupt easy harmonies with complex, even violent compositional devices. As if drawn to harmony but afraid of its constraints, the artist finds novel ways to tempt her compositions into an exciting crisis while still promising the possibility of balance. Very like white water kayaking!

And here is where the peculiar psychology of the work emerges. While I have been talking about how these pictures are about spirituality and journeys and the possibility of individuation, it is a remarkable fact that all of these boats are moored or laying on a dock; others are propped up by real sticks and paddles. Some are even stuck in the earth (“In Situ”), sunk (“The Nether World”), and wrecked (“Broken Kayak”). Scaglione seems to be saying that despite the redemptive hopes embodied in the boat symbol, reality is less pure. Like boats, bodies get broken, spirits stuck and souls lost. These pictures may indicate recuperation or a moment of rest before the renewal of a

journey. They demonstrate the fear of never being able to resume, of being beached. But these are fears that can be overcome with a little faith and by rising to the heroic call.

Few symbols are richer and less arcane than the boat. It is an archetypal element of many heroic or spiritual journeys. Numerous myths begin or end in a boat: Noah, Moses, Jonah, Ulysses, Dante, to name but a very few. Vessels carry the hero over the threshold from obscurity to the heroic journey, from the mundane material realm to the metaphysical. Joan Scaglione combines the heroic and spiritual with a common experience to show the dramatic possibilities that lurk in the everyday. This is how living art, symbols and people are formed.