

A Language of the Unsayable:

some notes on Irving Petlin and the Seine Series

by Michael Palmer

In a culture so much of the moment, of nowness, one all too susceptible to the luxury of forgetting, Irving Petlin's art offers a temporal window. It is a window that looks out at the immediate world, certainly, but more significantly, it looks beneath surfaces, beyond appearances, toward the undisclosed, the enfolded and the disappeared. His is a body of work that, for this and other reasons, lies largely outside the accelerated play of the art world, that often frenzied quest for currency. Its present is a complex vision of temporal folds, times inhering within other times, tenses we might name the future-past, the first-and-last, the lost-and-found; that present of what he has called an "impregnated presence," and "something in a sense plucked from the mind and not from nature itself."¹ The art is insistently exploratory, searching for the meeting point of the interior and the exterior, and for a language of the unsayable. It returns again and again to certain resonant objects and figures, recalled or imagined, in order to see them again from a slightly altered perspective and thus discover their undisclosed or alternate meanings. (Hence the crucial importance of the "series" throughout his work.) It is understandable that such a quest might prove baffling to many critics, however skilled in decoding the contemporary swirl of proliferating styles and ideologies, since it asks for another kind of silence and reflection, another way of seeing, with the mind's eye. Though it is by no means literary painting in the accepted (these days usually deprecatory) sense of that term, it nonetheless elicits a kind of reading, a sounding and resounding of its characteristic figures, objects and landscapes. Like Bacon and Kitaj, with whom his work at various times has been compared, Petlin's narrative - or anti-narrative - emerges obliquely, through its multilayered, metamorphic representations. Again like Bacon and Kitaj, though in his own distinctive manner, his work foregrounds a deliberately articulated tension between astonishing draughtsmanship and expressionistic rawness, the latter a legacy of his Chicago School background.

I have followed the evolution of Petlin's art for well over twenty years and have watched its figural imagination grow more and more assured, its signifying capacity deepen, its palette and subject matter expand; so I eagerly accepted the invitation to visit his Paris studio in May of this year, to view the Seine Series

¹"The Rightness To Be Depicted," a conversation between Michael Palmer and Irving Petlin, *Sulfur* 18, Winter 1987.

and to respond in whatever way I chose. Before arriving, I thought a great deal about the multiple risks of the project that he had undertaken. How once again to depict a site so laden with representations that it has been virtually abandoned to week-end painters of the scenic for more than seven decades? How possibly to engage anew with some of the central signifiers of European cultural life and history?

I spent parts of ten days in Petlin's studio off the Rue du Cardinal-Lemoine (located in the same complex of apartments where James Joyce completed *Ulysses*). Each day we would discuss the individual canvases for a while, and then Irving would leave me alone with them to look and take notes. What I gradually came to realize was that, across this set of oils and pastels, Petlin had attempted to depict a series of silent conversations, conversations between the visible and the disappeared, the living and the dead, multiple pasts and multiple presents, conversations at once synchronous and diachronous. Historical and spatial anomalies are deliberately and systematically invoked to create a fracture in the apparent scene or site, and within this fracture the drama of historical and personal memory is enacted. We witness too a convergence and conversation between the language of oils and the language of pastels, the two media in which Petlin has most often worked. Here they are dramatically juxtaposed, in a sequence of mutual, sympathetic interrogations.

The Seine Series was first suggested to Petlin by the sight of the river in January of 1995, swollen from torrential rains, inundating the quais. To Petlin's eye, it was as if the river, in the force of its flooding, were reasserting its primitive self, its aqueous memory, while simultaneously stimulating a flood of personal recollections and associations. Thus the first canvas, "The Seine (in flood)," sets what is the essential, methodically compressed frame for the entire series (for, though these are indeed panoramas, there is an almost claustal feel to the majority of them). To the viewer's left is the Pont de Tournelle; at the approximate center of the canvas, on the Ile Saint Louis, the Cathedral of Notre Dame, in Petlin's words, "the disappearing apex, the emptying center," of the series; and to the far right, Jean Nouvel's Institut du Monde Arabe. Near the base of Notre Dame, tacit and invisible to the viewer, lies the Holocaust Memorial. Wisps and streaks of atomized, grainily dispersed reds and yellows dot the sky. Spidery aeriels and chimney pots establish their listening and watching, remnantal presence. The river is seen from a high vantage point, as if at once from multiple, subtly shifting, points of view. The "now-and-then" and the "near-and-far" have been set in play. Beginning there, the work resonates through its various echo-chambers. From my Paris notes, I would like simply to offer a few points of orientation.

To the viewer's right in the second canvas, "The Seine (The Arab Rider)," floats a figure in blue, taken from "Le Cavalier Arabe," a drawing in the Louvre by Fromentin. It hovers like an ephemeral witness to this canvas which appears almost to have been flooded and stained by the river. Rather than painting things on the surface of the picture, the brush seems to be in the process of bringing up submerged forms. The foreboding evident in the first canvas has become more manifest. A dematerialized, wound-like Notre Dame is represented in red.

“The Seine...October 17th, 1961” refers to a nightmarish incident witnessed by Petlin in his youth during a protest against the Algerian war. Walking along the Seine, he saw countless bodies floating by, the corpses of executed Algerian activists. The void of the river fills with white stains, white absences or erasures, figures-which-are-not. The Institut, not yet built in 1961, nonetheless stands as a brightly colored, enigmatic signifier of a world as yet unacknowledged, invisible. Light has been wrenched from the sky, which in turn is now flooded with terrestrial hues and textures.

The fourth canvas, “The Disappeared, I,” is the first of two dedicated to the great post-Holocaust poet, Paul Celan, who lived in Paris after the war and committed suicide in 1971 by leaping into the river from the Pont Mirabeau. The painting evokes the Paris of World War II, a shrouded, blacked-out city, its bridges spectral, its sky filled with puffs recalling anti-aircraft fire. One window is illuminated, for Celan, who is not there. A remnant of the recently destroyed city of Grozny appears as an echo within this echo.

“Paris is White” is dedicated to the poet and author of *The Book of Questions*, Edmond Jabès. Forced into exile from Cairo as a result of the Suez episode, Jabès lived in Paris for the rest of his life. The title derives from a key moment in Jabès's *Return to the Book*, when the doomed lovers, Sarah and Yukel, first meet. The whiteness of the page, the city, the canvas, the desert. The white of the third picture in the series has been transmuted into a ground of light. The spiritualized verticality of the painting contrasts with the horizontality of the others in the series. The city's architecture has dematerialized, and everything is in flux. Lines and masses waver, refusing fixity, completion.

As the title indicates, “The Seine in Sleep” is an oneiric canvas, a portrait of the river as dreamed, eyes closed. What is to be seen, after the visible has been withdrawn, detail has been submerged? What comes forward when “it” disappears? The pastel functions here as a kind of mute after-image to “Paris is White.” Yet the dream is, paradoxically, full of light. The red of the sky in the homage to Jabès has now been pushed to the far right-hand edge of the viewer's gaze. The Institut, virtually transparent, seems almost to be made of light.

There is an armored and riveted character to the colors and masses in “La Guerre des Deux Eglises,” a tautness of representation, yet at the same time an apposite, manifestly oriental, delicacy in the way the city itself has been depicted. Two languages of representation, at once at odds and in dialogue. Language to language, *Book to Book*. A form can be seen in the water below Notre Dame, emerging from the point behind the Cathedral where the Holocaust Memorial is situated. Except for this form, the river is now empty, blank. The skin of the canvas itself appears raw, but the “war” referred to in the title is silent, submerged, to be known only by inference. It exists wordlessly, as a kind of weather, an atmosphere. In fact, the identity of the “two churches” is left ambiguous. Christian and Jewish; Jewish and Arab; Arab and Christian, etc?

"The Disappeared, II," a pastel on raw linen, is the second of two for Paul Celan. It asks, "What is it when someone disappears or takes his life?" The atmosphere or weather mantles everything here. Color and event have been suppressed (the usual bright character of pastel itself has been suppressed, as an empathic gesture toward what is depicted). Things are seen through a scrim. Forms that in many of the other canvases are solid have become hollowed out. The disappeared, and the suicide, are also the unrealized, the incomplete, the mute. Browns and greys dominate, along with the linen itself.

The vantage point in the final two canvases shifts to the top of the Institut du Monde Arabe, where the view extends beyond Notre Dame and the atmosphere expands. These are eventless canvases, celebrating what enfolds and underlies the act of depiction. After exploring his most paradoxical of subjects, the river that at once recalls and conceals, Petlin now pays homage to air and light as defining that subject. In a sense, the last two pictures explore the canvas, actual and metaphorical, on which the others appear. In so doing, they bow toward the Monet side of the Impressionist spectrum. This is a surprising acknowledgement for Petlin, whose sympathies among French painters have always lain more with Seurat and Cézanne and the Post-Impressionists. The making of the Seine Series might then also be viewed in part as a process of personal, pictorial dialogue and reconciliation with artistic currents he struggled against in his youth.

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As an afterword, I should note that my first, more truly collaborative and visceral response to the Seine Series took the form of a poem, "The White Notebook," printed separately. In it, among other things, there occurs a kind of dialogue between the language of Paul Celan and that of Edmond Jabès. I am grateful to the translators Pierre Joris (Celan) and Rosmarie Waldrop (Jabès) for the English language versions I employed.

