

Back into Life

by Abraham Orden

We know there are a lot of aesthetic circumstances out there in which the critic finds it good to deploy the adjective ‘poetic’ in characterizing an artist’s work, but what results when we aim for an annulment of that most pliant and promiscuous of descriptives in favor of something wieldable and hard-edged: a noun, an idea. What happens if we stop referring to Michael Huey’s *ASH, Inc.* as an art exhibition and start calling it a poem?

Anyone who has had contact with contemporary academic thought will feel the same automatic rejection of the notion that I did at first glance, perceiving a thorny briar or a quicksand sinkhole in the equation of text and image that the notion appears to assume. And yet in assembling an opinion of what Michael Huey does, what his work is, and what it gives us viewers, poet, poem, poetry have presented themselves with the self-animated assiduousness of a natural truth. As soon as I stopped demanding a difference between what words are and what images are, and instead focused my attention on what poems are and on what language is, I was able to put myself in agreement with this truth.

ASH, Inc. is not poetic, it is a poem. Now what the poet does is to take the existing language, the regular words that are available to anyone, and, like an old alchemist, to press them, condense them, expose them to heat, put them into unusual and impractical combinations, looking for an inexplicable (magical) transformation, a sudden density, a sudden heaviness, a sudden gleam: gold! These are just words, but in a poem they have passed over, have reached the other side and now live in a way that is neither terrestrial (daily speech) nor archival (the historical document) — though in their ascension they celebrate their existence as both, and that is essential. Compared to their prosaic brethren, the words in a poem are like angels, of another sphere, and winged, and terribly powerful for their ability to speak directly to the human soul.

ASH, Inc. is not poetic, it’s a poem. It’s the way Huey treats his material that leads me to the notion in the first place. Though the first time I visited his studio I admit I was perplexed. I could see that these pictures had been enlarged and made more vivid and more colorful and somehow cleaner than one expects at their age, but for me they just

looked like an old movie that had been touched up for DVD; there was nothing remarkable to it, their technical resurrection. He expects so much of his pictures, I remember thinking then, and what is he doing with them, exactly? The answer to the question in the second half of that thought, when it came, forced the reconstruction of the first part of it.

The studio space itself gave the clue. We stood in a medium-sized white room that had an air of prolonged occupation in spite of its extreme tidiness. The ceilings emanated strong, even light, and the walls were bare but for a single, shallow shelf running the entire perimeter of the room, like a chair rail, upon which some pictures were balanced. I came to learn that that long, narrow strip is where everything happens; it is Huey's easel, his brush, his palette, his paint, it is the mirror into which he gazes, composing with Morandian fixity the portraits of himself that issue from his sprawling, searching inquiries into the remnants of the past.

The shelf is the nexus in Huey's creation; on it, he balances his photographic reproductions, arranges them, looks at them,

rearranges them. And in this the hours begin to pile up. What Huey is at here, what he is doing, exactly, is thinking about his pictures, thinking about them an awful lot, we can even say an unnerving amount, meaning that he thinks into the pictures with a concentration that far surpasses what most people could achieve, for Huey attains an intensity of thought before which I am certain most of us would falter, second-guessing ourselves and our purpose.

In this, he is looking and looking and asking and asking. What do you show, picture, and what do you hide? What do you stand for, and what before? What can you give, and what will you take? What is contained in you? What can be plied out? What can you hold, and how much? What is your limit, where do you fail me? As I have come to appreciate the substance of this process I have adopted a new phrasing to characterize the artist's working: he doesn't harbor expectations for his pictures like I had thought, he demands of them everything of which he knows them capable. Through hard looking, he has learned the pictures' language, learned to open them to love the way the words of a poem are loved.





If an image is to become one of Huey's artworks, it will be expanded, enhanced, given a scale of life it may never have known in its original context, yes, but it will not be changed, not significantly. It will be processed in a photolab, in other words, so that it becomes a more glorious version of itself, but this processing is but a physical expression of the real processing, deeper but invisible, unspeakable, that it will have come through to enter into the artist's universe: this glaring vis-à-vis confrontation in the studio, propped up on the shelf and laid bare.

This the artist never undertakes with the misdirected ambition of defining the picture's meaning; it is rather a matter of adjudging its capacity to mean. The wattage of the image's significance is simply gauged, simply but accurately. What is defined may be termed the picture's human density. This is a kind of energy; what it speaks is not expressible in words, but it is ascertainable nevertheless. We can see that it is there in the pictures, the unexpected weight, the sudden gleam, finally, because it has been activated in the artwork, turned on and channeled along the grooves of possibility that Huey has carved out with the finished event, the poem.

These grooves of possibility exist between the works, inscribed according to their secret mathematic in the workaday tissue of signification that automatically exists between any two images when they are related in space. The grooves are poetry, the means by which the viewer's thoughts are made to rush along from what it matters when a photograph decomposes, to imagining a body entombed in rock, frozen and never to change, to a hand shaping a mountain from sand, to smoke equally thick, to representation when it might be important, to gesture when it is not. Channels such as these, in which agile thought is contained and directed but allowed to sprint openly, will lead by an unexpected turn in the poem into a quiet reservoir, where thinking's leaping babble ceases, begins to pool meditatively, swirling about the notion of ash, widening to fill it as a word and as a substance, occupying their coincidences, their differences, the various purposes to which these have here been put: why one moment can be a hinge for all the rest, or on which the door heaves shut, but is not always either. Gathering mass in this, the thoughts will come to overflow, drop in freefall, run back again along yet more channels carved in the other direction,

through sleep, dissolution, death as an idea, history geological, history monumental, history individual, intimations of the bonds they each break.

One is tempted, here, to wonder at the outcome, to try to name into what this watershed drains. An ocean, read as the infinite, suggests itself a suitable image. And it would certainly be tidy. But if there is something infinite at the conclusion it must be more like evaporation, only the return to meaninglessness, the return to a lack of apparent connection between the elements, the matters, that is also the appearance of total connection. A departure from poetry back into life.