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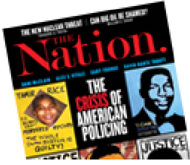

The Nation.

Artists Keeping Secrets

The eloquent silences of Albert York and Judith Scott.

Barry Schwabsky December 9, 2014 | *This article appeared in the December 29, 2014 edition of The Nation.*

Farm Landscape *(c. 1970), by Albert York*

Generations of readers have puzzled over the opening lines of William Carlos Williams's best-known poem: "so much depends / upon // a red wheel / barrow." What exactly does depend on it? The poet, content to keep a secret, stays mum. There happens to be a red wheelbarrow in a 1974 painting by Albert York, whose work is now the subject of a beautiful retrospective in Manhattan at the Matthew Marks Gallery, through December 20. The wheelbarrow could be called pink, but I imagine that it's a red that has faded from long exposure to the elements. And besides, York's palette never included bright colors; pale, shadowy hues stood in for the whole spectrum. Whatever he painted he painted with uncanny concentration, as if nothing else existed for him except his perception or imagination of his

subject in that moment. So much depended on it, though what he could never say. As the very first review of York's work, in *Art News* in 1963, put it: "He is a specialist in very tiny, important differences."

York, who died five years ago at age 80, was notoriously reclusive, so he might have been mortified by the show at Matthew Marks. But then, his viewpoint was singular: he would not attend exhibitions of his own work, and when he finally did—in 1989, at the Parrish Museum in Southampton, New York, just a few miles from his home—the result was devastating. What he'd done was "pretty bad. It has no relation to good painting," he later told Calvin Tomkins, in the only interview he ever gave, for a *New Yorker* profile reprinted in the Matthew Marks catalog. "I don't recognize myself in those things." (It is curious that he thought of the paintings as self-portraits, even if failed ones.) The view of York's achievement among his fellow painters is otherwise—a reverence bordering on the cultish. "When York was alive, I considered him the best living American painter," an artist friend told me recently, adding for emphasis: "And that was when de Kooning was alive, too."

York's sparse output declined drastically after the 1989 show in Southampton; his last finished paintings are dated 1992, though he was still working every day when Tomkins saw him in 1995. (One suspects that York had agreed to the interview only in the hope that finally talking about his work would give him even more reason to stop doing it.) "York conceded that he had been doing a lot of scraping down lately," Tomkins wrote, and evidence of that can be seen in a late, undated work called *Landscape With Alligator*. The reptile, barely sketched in at the left, seems to look with satisfaction upon the holocaust that the artist has made of the painting's lower right corner, scrubbed down to the wooden panel. This may be the ghost of a painting, but it could hardly be anyone else's but York's. The clouds, sky and patch of ground that remain have an understated, obdurate thereness that is his trademark, as does the scratchy brown mess left by his saturnine act of erasure.

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If York's knowledge of art history was deep, his use of it was highly selective. He painted a takeoff on Manet's *Olympia*, and the snakes that slither through several of his landscapes might be the diminished descendants of the serpent that has killed a man in a famous 1648 painting by Poussin. Closer to home, his early work shows that he'd imbibed both the mystical tonalism of George Inness and its gloomier, more inward-looking yet formally taut variant in the art of Albert Pinkham Ryder. The only near contemporary who seems to have counted for York is Giorgio Morandi. The names of other prominent American artists born in 1928, as York was, amount to a catalog of what left him untouched: Donald Judd, Sol LeWitt and Andy Warhol, but also Helen Frankenthaler, Al Held, Cy Twombly. From the earliest works here, dated 1963, to the last, his style is consistent—only his palette changes, becoming lighter and clearer. As he matures, the paintings seem to open up, even while remaining enigmatic. Speaking with Tomkins, York berated himself for his inability to use a full range of colors, but a restricted palette formed the basis of his work's economy of concentration. His paintings are consistently small, typically around the size of a sheet of typing paper, and usually more or less square, presenting a restricted repertoire of subjects

straight on, with classical balance.

The paintings are most commonly still lifes (mainly of flowers) and landscapes, often with cows or dogs about, or with one or two figures who usually look more like figurines, or creatures of the enchanted but tenuous realm of fable (turbaned Turks with scimitars, Indians who are more like the carvings in front of old cigar stores than the ones living on the Shinnecock Reservation not far from York's home). Sometimes a vase and flowers are inexplicably placed out in the open air, combining the genres of still life and landscape. The strange disproportion of scale in these works—the flowers seem colossal before the immensely distant horizon—heightens a sense of metaphysical intensity that is more tacit in others. Here's where the difference between York and Morandi emerges: in Morandi's still lifes and landscapes, perfectly objective as much as they are profoundly intimate, their formal quiddity is the result of the artist's concentration on the visible world, whereas the things York paints, as ordinary as they may usually be, have been espied by the mind's eye alone. They keep their strict proportion there.

You don't need to look at a painting for long to know if it's good or not—but to understand why, it sometimes seems that no amount of study will yield up the secret. Anyone who knows painting can sense the quality, the integrity of York's effort. How, then, did he lose sight of the value of what he'd done? While his fastidious self-consciousness may have been York's undoing as an artist, it also lent his work gravity for three decades, as well as a mute emotional intensity. He was out of step with the times, and he knew it. "The modern world just passes me by," he admitted to Tomkins. But that wasn't the real problem; there were plenty of artists who might have felt the same and with whom he could have made common cause, if he'd wanted to. Fairfield Porter, for instance, was a fellow Long Islander who wrote about York's work and included it in a show he curated. But York kept his distance.

One guesses that the paintings are the corollary of the painter's incommunicativeness, and yet they are very different—the man absented himself, whereas the paintings' silence bespeaks complete presentness. Robert Kulicke, a painter who ran the Manhattan frame shop where York worked for years before moving to Long Island, told Tomkins: "I don't recall a single thing he ever said except, 'Yes,' 'No,' or 'Maybe.'" York may not have been keen on conversation, but for a painting to say "Yes," as his so often do, is a tremendous achievement.

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Though York's few words illuminate little about the enigmas of his art, what we know about his intentions amounts to an encyclopedia in comparison to what we know of Judith Scott, the sculptor whose work is at the Brooklyn Museum (in a one-person exhibition subtitled "Bound and Unbound") through March 29. As Catherine Morris, one of the show's curators—the other is Matthew Higgs—writes in the catalog: "Scott did not title her works. She left no notes, sketches, or recorded ideas revealing the thinking behind her making. She gave no interviews. She never noted favorite pieces or in any way singled out those she felt were of particular significance—a piece, for example, that might have been some sort of breakthrough in her working process. She never acknowledged the influence of other artists

or of art history. Scott did not sign her works, leaving few clues about such rudimentary concerns as the orientation of any given piece, or a preferred method of presentation."

While York's silence was elective and only partial, Scott's was absolute. To some extent, this is gloriously beside the point. One needs no manifesto, no autobiographical statement, to see why the works are formally compelling. They can be described as organic abstractions made from everyday materials—mostly cloth, wool, yarn, rope and string, assiduously wrapped around more rigid objects that are sometimes completely concealed but sometimes visible. Sticks, tubes and even miscellanea such as clothes hangers or the rim of a bicycle wheel without its tire—shades of Duchamp!—poke out of the weave. Scott's sense of color, and its interrelation with three-dimensional form, seems almost unerring, whether it is monochromatic, limited to a few related hues, or resplendently dappled and pied. As for her manner of weaving and wrapping, that too is immensely varied—sometimes quite regular and systematic, sometimes a gorgeous tangle, often both. Seen in Brooklyn in a roughly chronological installation, this *oeuvre* seems consistent—like York's, without radical stylistic swerves—but open-ended and far from repetitive: the artist seems to be testing her formal and material resources, constantly trying new variations, and always developing.

Scott's earliest works, from 1988, are bundles of sticks only very partially wrapped in various fibers; it seems that she would start with a fairly slender bunch and, after having wrapped it, would add some more sticks and do some further wrapping of the now-fattened *fascis* . Then the wrapping becomes denser and more colorful; the forms become more complicated, but still across a single plane. At some point in the following year, the sculptures have assumed the third dimension with gusto. Sometimes the armatures include (as the catalog has it) "bent and trussed forms, creating a structural tension that is seemingly held in place by her wrapping and weaving technique," but in other cases, they form hulking corporeal shapes, like animal bodies without heads and limbs. As Scott goes on, she experiments with combining these different types of forms into single multipart assemblages. These objects have no definite top or bottom, front or back; they might well have been displayed differently, highlighting different aspects. But in some of the last works Scott made before her death in 2005, objects function as bases as well as armatures, resulting in pieces that demand to be shown in a determinate way. One, dated 2004, takes a child-size chair as its starting point; another, from 2003–4, overflows a shopping cart stripped of its front wheels—more of an exoskeleton than an armature, in fact.

It's easy enough to see the parallels between Scott's work and that of other contemporary sculptors: the metaphorically rich yet referentially unspecific organic forms of Martin Puryear (by coincidence, also on view at the Matthew Marks Gallery, through January 10); Bruce Conner's spooky assemblages of detritus wrapped in nylon stockings; or Franz West's lumpy plaster "Passstücke," or "Adaptives," organic forms meant to be handled and even worn. This kind of sculpture is akin to the postminimalist trend that Lucy Lippard (referring to the work of Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse, among others) dubbed "eccentric abstraction," in which "evocative qualities or specific organic associations are kept at a subliminal level," so that "a bag remains a bag and does not become a uterus, a tube is a tube and not a phallic symbol." No explicit meaning is imposed on the material, even as it stimulates inchoate

associations. But one can also see hints of the mysterious assemblages wrapped in strands of metal formed, presumably in the 1970s, by the anonymous maker known as the Philadelphia Wireman; and one can even see hints of *boliw* , the powerful, vaguely animal-like forms made from organic materials layered over rigid objects by the Bamana people of Mali. Though they seem compacted of a homogeneous material, "a little of everything enters into the construction" of *boliw* , according to one observer: "wood, bark, the roots of trees; the horns and hair of hares, antelopes, cattle…ails and claws, venom and even the various excretions of animals."

Though Scott's intentions are mostly unknown, we can be sure that she never contemplated these echoes or knew of those works, since she had never been acquainted with the history, conventions or concepts of sculpture in particular, or art more generally. Scott was born with Down syndrome and was both deaf and mute. Because no one realized that she was deaf until she was an adult, she was pronounced "profoundly retarded" and "ineducable" and never learned sign language or to read. Only in 1987, at age 43, did Scott enter the Creative Growth Art Center in Oakland, California, which had been established in 1974 in the belief that "disabled people need a place which enables them to fulfill and release their creative potential and to experience themselves as unique and worthwhile individuals."

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If what Scott made is art—and believe me, it is—it could only have been modern art, because in no earlier phase of Western history would the materials she used have been recognized as carrying the potential for art; in a time when sculpture meant carved stone or cast bronze, she could not have been invited to try her hand at it. That Scott made her work without any acquaintance with art's history or theory or the common sense of studio practice as handed on from artist to artist is extraordinary, and that its development unmistakably registers critical thinking at work—despite the fact that she was denied access to the acquisition of language—seems little short of miraculous. This is not activity for the sake of activity, filling time and avoiding the curse of idle hands; it is aesthetic intelligence at work. You can see it, too, in her drawings: far from the stereotypical *horror vacui* of the "outsider artist," her dense concatenations of cursive colored lines make space rather than just fill it.

Since my years as an undergraduate philosophy student, I have subscribed wholeheartedly to the late-Wittgensteinian doctrine that there is no private language. In other words, the idea of a language that would be, as the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy summarizes it, "necessarily comprehensible only to its single originator because the things which define its vocabulary are necessarily inaccessible to others" is incoherent. But I now have to reconsider that belief. The thinking invested in Scott's objects is of such a high order that it seems impossible that it could have lacked concepts—that is to say, linguistic categories. But what form could they have taken? It's impossible for us to say.

The makers of *boliw* follow a maxim: "A man who is fully master of himself never reveals the source of his thought." The mysterious nature of their forms, often evocative of cattle—oddly enough, one of York's recurrent subjects—reflects the fact that there really are secrets hidden within them, sources of magical power that are dangerous and must be hemmed in. York's

paintings, too, seem to contain secrets, as if beyond the concrete presence of the brush marks there lie some unutterable feeling the artist wanted at once to transmit and to conceal at all costs. Scott's sculpture is different. Although there is often no telling what is caught within her dense layers of wrapping (and sometimes the contents were acquired surreptitiously: "People would be very careful about their keys," the artist's sister Joyce Scott recalls), nothing about the sculptures suggest that this unseen something is significant except on a purely structural level.

If I'm right in thinking that Scott's art was made possible by her possession—her invention—of a private language, it means that she had a language in which there were no secrets: everything known in that language was known to everyone who knew the language. That's why Scott's work seems so open, why it seems to have nothing to hide, why it has no dark core, even though it remains mysterious—because the mystery is not some piece of hazardous knowledge that could be expressed or withheld, but the very language in which that knowledge would reside. There is a kind of fearlessness to this work—to the decisiveness of the choices made, and their rightness. In her art, at least—a self-communion excluding no one—Scott would never be misunderstood.

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