

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Of Man and Nature, Layers and Fragments: The Art of Vasken Brudian

By Ara Oshagan



Vasken Brudian is an architect and artist. He has held one solo exhibition, but his work has been part of many group shows across the country over the past few years. After a long hiatus, Brudian has returned to the art scene with brand new work and the publication of a monograph entitled, “Paintings and Collages: Towards a New Aesthetics.” In conjunction with this publication, Brudian’s work will be on display in a solo show at the Harvest Gallery in Glendale, from March 24 to April 2.

Brudian’s work merges a wide array of concepts and ideas and employs a plethora of media: from architectural drawings, paint, acrylic and ink, to photography, alphanumeric texts, philosophical writings, poetry, literature, and essays by well-known writers. And in complement, the sizes of his works also vary from the very intimate to ones over 20 feet in length. His work is expansive and inter-disciplinary and does not lend itself to easy categorization. It attempts to strike a difficult and delicate balance of form, color and concept.

Brudian is best known for his “architectural paintings”—though these two words are not nearly sufficient to describe what this work is. These “paintings” are the product of a

process that combines free-hand painting (the paint and brush) with modern technology-based methods (the computer and plotter). Paint and pencil is used to begin a painting on a surface, typically mylar. Then, after it is dry, architectural forms (everything from lines to beams to numbers to sections of buildings and stairways) are drawn over it with a large-scale plotter. Then more paint is added, then more plotting. This process is repeated several times, layer upon layer, until a dense and multi-storied canvas emerges. Obliteration is used as a tool of construction here. Each layer fully or partially obliterates the one before it. It obliterates and also fuses into it and builds on top of it—constructing a painting in the same way one constructs a building, perhaps. Technology is inherent to the creation of these works—they cannot be conceived nor made without the use of computer technology. The end result of this process is that paint and architectural fragments are held in tension, the fierce linearity of bits and bytes tussle with the free-flow of the hand, instinct is interwoven with technology. Are the two fusing or clashing? This is a question that is raised by Brudian over and over again.

In his monograph, Brudian includes some of this earlier work but also adds a host of new work, some of it continuing in the vein of architectural painting and some of it departing from it completely. The new work takes its inspiration from various literary works, poems and essays. These fragmentary textual references are a strong presence, and they also serve as platform upon which Brudian develops his explorations of various themes. This series also introduces photographic images, mainly landscapes. And although at times they are altered, their essential photographic quality is retained. In the new work, these large natural landscapes are fragmented and altered and then juxtaposed with fragmentary texts or abstractions or architectural paintings. Nature, as a concept, makes itself known.

Where the landscape photograph is brought together with poetic fragments, the result is overtly and simply emotional. “The Caged Bird”—which combines a scenic landscape photograph cast to red with Maya Angelou’s verse about a bird singing of freedom—is idyllic in its presentation of nature and the bird’s romantic musings about freedom. “Two Butterflies,” which presents a very similar idyllic and idealized scene of nature, adds poetics from Emily Dickinson about waltzing butterflies. It is nearly impossible to not imagine butterflies waltzing in those trees or to not see the flight of a bird. These works are like reveries, simple invitations to stop and contemplate nature, to bathe in the serenity and emotional flow of verse and landscape.

It’s quite a leap from these pieces to the much more challenging and compelling ones that bring together nature and man via architecture and technology. This work is a direct continuation of Brudian’s architectural paintings but extends their reach significantly. While the earlier work was based on a process of layering and melding of diverse forms, Brudian’s new work begins with a clash, a conflict, but goes further—that is, it turns in on itself. In his best work, Brudian tiptoes along the razor-sharp edge between man and nature, conflict and harmony, instinct and technology.

These larger canvases are composed of two totally distinct and disparate parts—a color-washed photographic scene of nature on one side and a Brudian-style architectural

painting on the other. The works are juxtaposed and placed next to each other and forced to inhabit the same frame. The two sides of the frame are pitted against each other, and while in one moment they are clashing and tussling, in the next they suddenly seem to flow together in a strange harmony.

The best example of this is “/Twisting the Separatix/,” where underneath a serene row of upright trees (cast to blue) mad architectural forms crisscross. At first, it seems the ground ends and underneath the soil, architecture and art begin, i.e. man—the dividing line, the front is demarcated, the trenches are dug. But then, those architectural lines and forms begin to echo strange roots—cold, hard roots—that seem to feed the trees themselves, and suddenly the two parts of the canvas flow into each other, give and take from each other. Nature and man are at war, yes, but also at peace and perhaps even nurturing one another.

The work, at its best, is a constantly shifting perspective, asking and answering and suddenly losing hold of the answer and questioning again. The effect is thought-provoking and inquisitive: are the two sides clashing or complementing each other? What is the relationship between the natural and the man-made? These are the critical questions Brudian poses in his work.

Brudian’s monograph is a bold attempt at embracing a plethora of diverse and difficult concepts using nearly as many diverse media. In his best pieces, he manages to strike a delicate balance between a host of extremes—ideas, forms and colors, all pulling in different directions. Brudian’s reentry into the art world is refreshing and welcome.

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