

Critics' Forum

Visual Arts

Paradox and Perspective: The Art of Dr. Kevorkian

By Jean Murachanian

The man known as Dr. Death died a few months ago, on June 3, 2011.

Regardless of your views on assisted suicide, you probably have an opinion about Jack Kevorkian. He was one of those people who, while sometimes courting controversy for the sake of notoriety, at the same time seemed to advocate for something he believed in very strongly – what he considered the very basic human right of the terminally ill to end their pain and suffering through doctor-assisted suicide.

Dr. Kevorkian came to national prominence in the 1990s when news spread about his more than 100 assisted suicides. It may be difficult to fathom now, but Dr. Death is widely credited with the proliferation of hospice care in this country. Through his relentless crusade, he brought about a change in the way we treat those who are terminally ill, allowing them to spend their remaining earthly life in relative comfort, without the intervention of often intrusive life-saving procedures. Dr. Kevorkian's efforts arguably helped the terminally ill usher in the final stage of life with a sense of dignity and appreciation that we all must eventually welcome.

Death is inevitable, a constant reality that, ironically, we tend to push aside in our busy lives. Most faiths, including Christianity, promise salvation, but normally not for those who commit suicide. Dr. Kevorkian's crusade intervenes at precisely this juncture, the socially and spiritually controversial question of assisted suicide for the terminally ill. The right to assisted suicide is one that Dr. Kevorkian advocated for, with every inch of his being, including interestingly – and unexpectedly – with his artwork.

Dr. Kevorkian's creations are not what we might consider high or fine art. Their interest lies in their vivid colors and macabre imagery. One wonders whether, as with his controversial stance on assisted suicide, Dr. Kevorkian created his art simply to provoke others. For instance, he used real blood, including his own, to paint the frame for the mixed media titled *1915 Genocide 1945* and often chuckled, when asked about the practice, "that gets people" (Michael Betzold, *Appointment with Doctor Death* [Troy, Michigan: Momentum Books, Ltd., 1993, reprint 1996], p. 13). So while he never considered himself an artist nor even apparently liked to paint, he did seem to have a knack for drawing and, as even a quick glance at his pieces makes clear, obviously understood human anatomy. Regarding his motivation for painting these sometimes distressing and disturbing images, he told a newspaper in 1964, "I tire easily of beautiful scenes and portraits, and abstract art has no tangible or intelligible significance for me. People may wince at some of my paintings, but nobody has denied their forceful accuracy" (*ibid.*).

Jack Kevorkian's foray into art started in the 1960s, when he took an art class and produced some 18 paintings, most gruesome by the standards even of modern or post-modern art. Unfortunately, a moving company subsequently lost those paintings. Kevorkian returned to painting in the 1990s in an effort to promote his crusade for assisted suicide, apparently shifting from a self-expressive to a more explicitly political mode of expression. Today the majority of these paintings are housed at the Armenian Library and Museum of America (ALMA) in Watertown, Massachusetts. The Museum recently completed its exhibition entitled *The Doctor is Out*, which opened in 2008 in celebration of Dr. Kevorkian's release from prison.



Nearer My God to Thee (oil, 1994)

The 1994 painting, *Nearer My God to Thee*, shows the head, shoulders, and arms of a frightened bald man – who looks very much like Dr. Kevorkian himself – from above, with a dark abyss opening below him. His arms are raised, and he is trying desperately to hold on to life with his fingernails, leaving long, deep scratch marks in the space closest to the viewer. In the darkness behind him are ghostly figures watching the scene intently with what can only be described as beady eyes. It is a shocking and disturbing image. Kevorkian said of the piece, “this depicts how most human beings feel about dying – at least about their own deaths. Despite the solace of hypocritical religiosity and its seductive promise of an afterlife of heavenly bliss. Most of us will do anything to thwart the inevitable victory of biological death...” (<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/kevorkian/aboutk/art/>, accessed September 16, 2011; all descriptive quotations from Dr. Kevorkian, here and below, are from this source). Kevorkian's hardened, even cynical, perspective suggests his own political stance regarding assisted suicide, while also giving us a clear glimpse into his artwork's position in the larger spiritual questions of death and redemption.

While explicitly promoting his political stance, the image also implicitly points to an interesting dilemma – it is difficult to imagine how Dr. Kevorkian thought an image such as this would actually promote his political cause. It does not suggest a desire to leave this world prematurely, conveying instead what appears to be a desperate desire to remain in this world and avoid the unknown darkness “below.” The expression on the protagonist’s face also suggests, not a super-human defiance, but a very human sense of doubt and desperation. As Dr. Kevorkian dutifully notes in his description, this image is in fact about the fear of death, despite the religious promise of salvation. However, he also notes that “below are the disintegrating hulks of those who have gone before; they have made the insensible transition and wonder what the fuss is all about. After all, how excruciating can nothingness be?” While the image suggests existential fear and the uncertainty of human choice, Kevorkian himself, curiously, insists on an interpretation emphasizing that we have nothing to fear, a paradox that permeates Dr. Kevorkian’s career and comes even more clearly into view when supplemented by his artistic efforts.

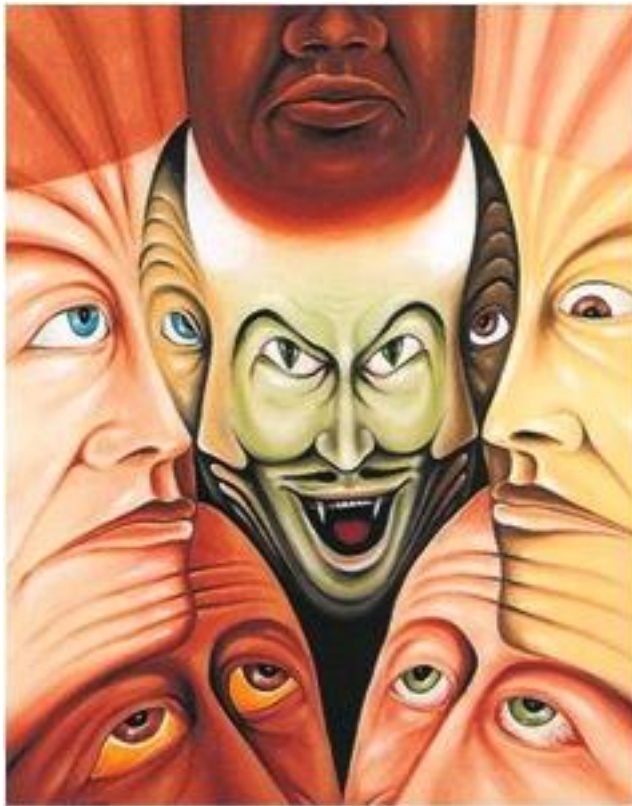


Fever (oil, 1994)

Another enigmatic image, *Fever* (1994), depicts the same man (Kevorkian again?) seen in *Nearer My God to Thee*. Here his nude torso is shown with translucent, pink flesh revealing the bones of his skeleton. His body is placed against a fiery background of red, yellow, and white painted with expressive brushstrokes. The

background appears to form an aura around him, with the bright white closest to his body and the fiery red along the edges of the picture. Kevorkian has said this image concerns “various medical signs and symptoms. It depicts the great discomfort of intense bodily heat. The inferno is internal; and in some tragic cases even the will to live is charred.” Presumably, Kevorkian’s intent here is to suggest that one should not fear death, which is simply a part of the cycle of life, particularly because nature prepares us for eventual death by discomfort or a weakening of the body. As Kevorkian noted in 2008 when discussing the message of his art, “when death is approaching naturally, nature prepares you for it.” This interpretation of the image casts some light on the meaning of the earlier image and Kevorkian’s naturalistic, self-determined approach to questions of life, death and suicide.

Kevorkian clearly wants to get the viewer’s attention with his shocking images, calling attention to his cause for euthanasia and convincing us, presumably, not to fear death but welcome it. He delivers that message, however, not with the bedside manner of a caring doctor but the gruffness of an impatient one. He is impatient because he believes that the issue of euthanasia, what we might call the ultimate act of self-determination, needs our urgent attention now, on both a political and personal level, and both within and outside western cultural and spiritual traditions.



Brotherhood (oil, 1994)

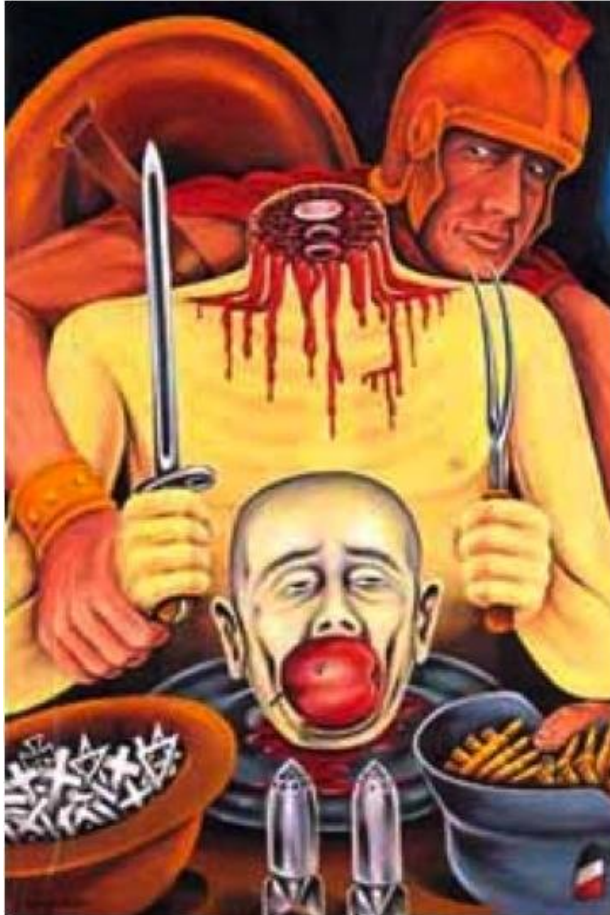
Another painting, *Brotherhood* (1994) shows the nose, mouth, and chest of a black man with what appears to be his jacket open, revealing five different faces of varying skin tones. In the center of these faces is a pale green face with arched eyebrows, a thin mustache, and a gaping grin bearing fanged teeth. The other men look forlorn, with deep crevices in their faces and sad rounded eyes. Regarding this image, Kevorkian comments, “every person is physically a part of the fabric called humanity... Despite effusive lip service to sublime ideals, humanity’s awe is lavished on its real god, Satan...” Once again, Kevorkian’s commentary, perhaps far more than his artwork, suggests his desire to shock us into a different sensibility, a realm of self-determination often belied by the more tenuous, doubt-ridden, and arguably subtle sensibilities of his art. While that art may not be considered high or grand from an art-historical perspective, its juxtaposition with his personal commentary and his far more public persona suggests a deeper paradox, both artistic and political.



Very Still Life (oil, 1996)

The 1996 painting, *Very Still Life*, is reminiscent of Dutch “vanitas” paintings popular in the 17th century, which served to remind the viewer of the transience of earthly life. In Kevorkian’s rendition, a large human skeleton with an Iris sprouting from an eye socket rests in the center of the composition on a red cloth surrounded by bone fragments. The background is black, with blue icicles hanging from the top and a

flayed yellow face nailed to the wall. Kevorkian's written description states that "brilliant colors highlight the melancholy age-old balance between the warmth of life and the iciness of death, spiced with the sardonic humor of irony."



The Gourmet (War) (oil, 1994)

A similar painting, the 1994 painting, *The Gourmet (War)*, depicts a yellow torso holding a knife and fork with his severed head on a plate before him with an apple in its mouth. Mars, the God of War, wearing a helmet with a shield slung over one shoulder, has engulfed the torso from behind, grabbing his right wrist. On the table in the foreground are salt and pepper shakers in the shape of nuclear warheads. On either side of the shakers are upturned helmets, one filled with bronze bullets and the other with silver crucifixes and stars of David. In his commentary on this piece, Kevorkian states, "what is war?... It is mind-boggling suicide – mass suicide – with humankind devouring or trying to devour itself.... How long will we persist in this lethal nonsense? How long before we really believe that salvation lies not in an insane paradox fostered by brute and selfish gluttony, but in the far more "nutritious" and healthful viand in the sadly neglected garden of human compassion and understanding?" He suggests that the God of War is responsible for our

insatiable, insane appetite of self-inflicted destruction and urges us to seek out human compassion and understanding. Once again, his descriptions of self-determined action confront these more complex portraits of folly and over-reaching, probing its moral and practical limits. If war is unjustified, according to Kevorkian's unstated principle of the sanctity of human life, one might ask, how then do we justify suicide? Is war not merely a wider, more social expression of self-destruction?

This brief overview of some of Kevorkian's key pieces reveals unexpected perspectives and paradoxical messages about the nature of life, faith and self-determination, with warnings against both the temptations of hopelessness and the vagaries of self-determination. As his public career attests, Kevorkian is no doubt a controversial figure who seemed to relish notoriety. He proclaimed he was on a mission to provide us with the right to choose how we want to end our time on earth in the face of terminal illness. And yet, his public proclamations, bold and disturbing as they are, when combined with his artistic productions, seem to offer a kinder, subtler message, of self-determination as struggle and hope. So while his mission seems directly at odds with both social norms and spiritual teachings, its most revealing aspect may very well be its own internal contradictions, its very human self-doubts.

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