



Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak

# *Elegies*

Essay by Donna Tennant

September 15 – November 12, 1995

The Nave Museum  
306 W. Commercial  
Victoria, Texas

*A Seduction*, 1993-95, oil, mm on canvas, 65" x 41." Courtesy of the Barrett Collection, Dallas, Texas.



**"The Cry is not yours. It is not you talking, but innumerable ancestors talking with your mouth.  
It is not you who desire, but innumerable generations of descendants longing with your heart."**

— Nikos Kazantzakis, *The Saviors of God*

Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak has been listening to her Ukrainian ancestors. The paintings in *Elegies* are her poems to the past, her songs of remembrance, her celebration of Ukraine's rich cultural heritage, and her mourning of its tragic history.

Bodnar-Balahutrak grew up in a Ukrainian community in Cleveland, Ohio, where she learned to speak Ukrainian before English. A strong sense of her cultural identity was instilled in her by her parents and grandparents, who fled Ukraine in 1949.

In 1991, an artist's grant enabled Bodnar-Balahutrak to visit her ancestral homeland for the first time. The trip was a major turning point in her life and her work. Although she thought she was psychologically prepared, Bodnar-Balahutrak was nonetheless overwhelmed by the evidence of years of Soviet oppression—crumbling tenement dwellings, destroyed churches, and desecrated cemeteries. Both the native language and religions had been forbidden.

Enraged and sorrowful, Bodnar-Balahutrak returned to Houston with a compelling need to document what she had seen. She began researching and photocopying everything she could find about Ukraine. Particularly horrifying was the Famine of 1932-33, when Stalin brought the country to its knees by enforcing collective farming. Referred to as the "Harvest of Sorrow," an estimated six to eight million people died of hunger. Pictures of this tragedy formed the foundation for some of the artist's most political pieces, which included objects she brought back—Soviet ruble notes, Ukrainian embroidery, dried flowers, seeds, and even handfuls of black soil.

Late in 1991, the Soviet Empire began to unravel and Ukraine declared its independence. Bodnar-Balahutrak followed the developments closely, channeling her emotions into her work. She began the large painting *That Which Conceals and Reveals*, an homage to her paternal grandfather, a Ukrainian Catholic priest. She used his vestment as the central element in the cruciform-shaped canvas. Pulled aside, the embroidered fabric reveals a photograph of the artist cradled in her grandfather's arms. His favorite poem is collaged across the top of the canvas. Delicate spring flowers and other mementos are embedded in the rivers of red paint. Bodnar-Balahutrak also began *Second Sight*, an homage to her maternal grandfather, in which she painted herself in one of his suits, holding his hat.

In 1993, the artist returned to Ukraine for nine weeks. She

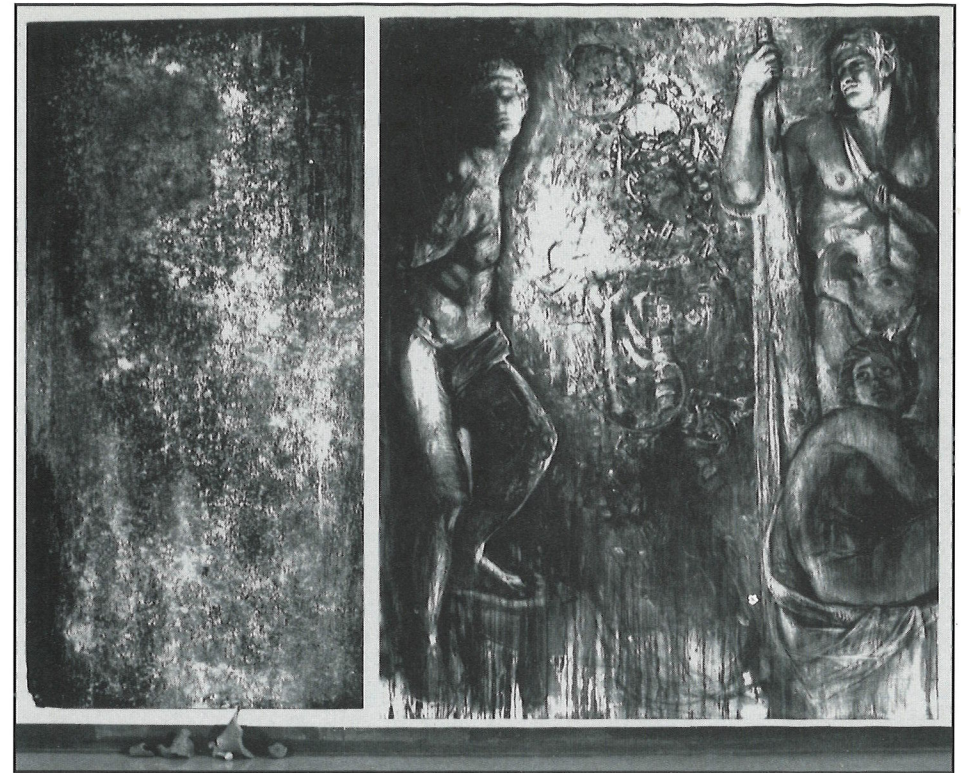
spent time in the steppes, the flat, fertile land where Ukraine produced a quarter of the U.S.S.R.'s wheat and a third of its corn. Huge coal and iron deposits led to heavy industrial development, including nuclear power—there are five nuclear plants in Ukraine, including Chernobyl. Such wealth, along with access to the Black Sea, have long made Ukraine a target for conquest, dating back to the 1240 Mongolian destruction of the Kievan dynasty, and continuing with Poland, Lithuania, and Russia.

Bodnar-Balahutrak traveled the ancient lands that were once home to the nomadic Scythians more than 2,000 years ago. Intrigued by the warriors known for their superior horsemanship and skill with the bow, she visited their burial mounds, thousands of which have been excavated to reveal the incredible richness of their culture. She was especially drawn to the faces of the monumental Scythian figures created to guard these burial sites.

Back in Houston, the artist began a series of panoramic paintings more spiritual, romantic, and elegiac than ever before. She focused on themes of humanity and inhumanity, life and death, redemption and resurrection. Embarking on a series of iconic self-portraits, she also depicted herself as a woman of the steppes, a figure steeped in mystery.

"A timeworn, earthy, viscerally hewn female monolith" is how Bodnar-Balahutrak describes the goddess figure in *A Seduction*. In a pose borrowed from German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker's *Self Portrait on her Sixth Wedding Day* (1906), she holds her swelling stomach as if to denote the sacred nature of this part of her body—her pregnancy symbolizes the renewal of spring. Surrounding her are fragments of Ukrainian poems about the land and its seasons. The pulp of the paper has been mixed in with the paint, giving the surface a rough, textured look. Bodnar-Balahutrak alternately builds up layers of paint and scrapes them away, likening her process to that of the archeologist who scratches away at the earth to discover its secrets. The artist's techniques of collaging, burning, scoring, and tearing render the work more complex, both physically and emotionally.

Another dramatic female figure takes center stage in *Heads Toward the Light*. Draped in blood-red robes, she holds a sleeping head in her left hand. Dried sunflowers are embedded in the paint around her. Treasured in Ukraine because they turn toward the light, sunflowers have come to symbolize Bodnar-Balahutrak's search for truth and enlightenment. A skull in the



*Witnesses*, 1994-95, torched painted wood panel, oil on canvas, ancient pottery shards, 96" x 48" and 97" x 78"

predella below is surrounded by fragments from Ukrainian women's magazines and an ancient female fertility figure. This painting, with its intensely personal and cultural metaphors, raises questions concerning the role of women in today's culture. Archetypal female figures—solemn and ceremonious, reflective and visionary—appear again and again in Bodnar-Balahutrak's work, as she seeks to define her identity as a woman and an artist.

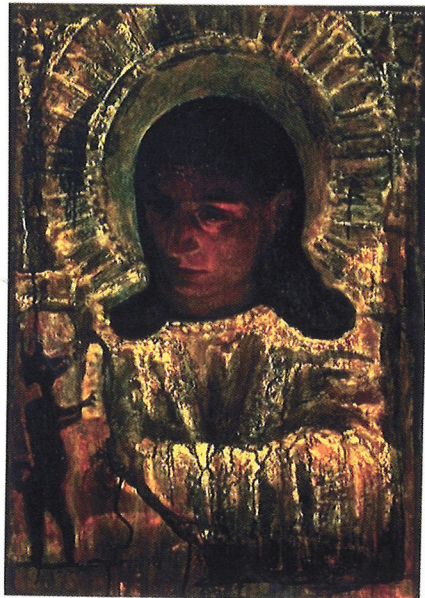
The monumental diptych *Witnesses*, on the other hand, delves into the past in order to understand the future. The central figure is based on Michelangelo's *Rebellious Slave*. Seething with rage, he struggles against the slender bands restraining his immense torso and powerful arms. For Bodnar-Balahutrak, this figure symbolizes the enslavement of the Ukrainian people, while the noble warrior to his right represents Ukraine's glorious past. The seated female watching over her right shoulder is a self-portrait. "I am bearing witness now," the artist points out.

Central to this panel are its images of jumbled bones and pottery inspired by photographs of unearthed Scythian burial mounds. The left panel has been burned and then flooded with

white paint, creating a mysteriously veiled surface swirling with subliminal images. On the floor below are pottery shards from an archeological site on the Black Sea. "I am sifting through the past, digging things out, putting together bits and pieces, and reclaiming them," says Bodnar-Balahutrak.

These paintings, which weave together history and myth, are both an homage to the past and a reflection on the future. As the product of two distinct cultures, the artist is fusing her experiences into a new cultural hybrid. "I have a compulsion to imprint myself on the Ukrainian culture and place myself in its history," she says. Drawing on the rich legacy of Ukraine with its literature, music, folk customs, and religious beliefs, Bodnar-Balahutrak has created a remarkable body of work with universal relevance.

*Donna Tennant, who lives in Houston, holds a Master's degree in art history and has written for Artnews, Artweek, Artspace, New Art Examiner, Houston Chronicle, Houston Press, and Houston Life Magazine, among others.*



**LYDIA BODNAR-BALAHUTRAK**

**EDUCATION**

- 1977 George Washington University, Washington, DC, Master of Fine Arts
- 1976/77 The Corcoran School of Art, Washington, DC
- 1973 Kent State University, Kent, Ohio, B.S. in art education

**SELECTED SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

- 1995 Southwest Texas State University Art Gallery, San Marcos, TX
- 1995 Dallas Visual Art Center, Dallas, TX
- 1993 "Cultural Renaissance: A Personal Frame of Reference,"  
The Galveston Arts Center, Galveston, TX
- 1988 Graham Gallery, Houston, TX

**SELECTED GROUP EXHIBITIONS**

- 1995 "Tangled Roots," Bowling Green State University Art Gallery, OH (catalogue)
- 1993/94 International Painters' Symposium Exhibition at Kiev Art Gallery, Kiev, Ukraine,  
& Artists' Union Exhibition Hall, Mykolayiv, Ukraine
- 1989/90 Sherry French Gallery, New York, NY
- 1989 Grand Central Art Galleries, New York, NY (catalogue)
- 1989 State University of New York at Purchase, Purchase, NY
- 1989 Utah Museum of Fine Art, Salt Lake City, UT
- 1989 University of Arizona Museum of Art, Tucson, AZ
- 1989 Triton Museum of Art, Santa Clara, CA
- 1988/89 The Noyes Museum, NJ

**HONORS AND AWARDS**

- 1993 Creative Artist Program Award in Visual Art, Cultural Arts Council of Houston
- 1993 Second International Painters' Symposium in Ukraine
- 1991 IREX Grant, Guest Artist Residency in Ukraine
- 1985 *La Napoule* Art Foundation Grant, Art Symposium in La Napoule, France
- 1985 Harris and Eliza Kempner Fund Grant
- 1985 Scurlock Foundation Grant

**SELECTED PUBLIC AND PRIVATE COLLECTIONS**

- The Barrett Collection, Dallas, TX
- Edward and Nancy Kienholz, Berlin, Germany, and Hope, ID
- The Hoyt Institute of Fine Arts, PA
- University of Houston, Houston, TX
- Dimock Gallery, George Washington University, Washington, DC
- Museo D'Arte Dell'Universita Cattolica*, Rome, Italy
- Transco Energy Company, Houston, TX
- Dr. & Mrs. H. Bailey, Jr., Little Rock, AK
- Bertrand Bory, Geneva, Switzerland
- Janet Fish, New York, NY

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**Cover:** *That Which Conceals and Reveals*, 1992-93,  
oil, vestment, dried plants, mm on wood, 75" x 96"  
**Above:** *Who Am I? What Am I?* 1994-95,  
oil, mm on canvas mounted on wood, 42 1/2" x 24"  
**Left:** *Heads Toward the Light*, 1990-93,  
oil, dried plants, mm on canvas, wood, 98" x 65" x 3"  
Courtesy of the Barrett Collection, Dallas, Texas.



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