

Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak

Imprints-Mementos

ADAIR MARGO GALLERY

EL PASO

by KK Todorovich

For *Imprints-Mementos* at the Adair Margo Gallery, El Paso, Houston painter Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak drew inspiration from travel in Ukraine, where she witnessed the far-reaching cultural destruction that took place under Soviet rule.

My Prayer, II—an oval collage consisting of embroidered cloth, photocopy, canvas, gauze, paint and wood—draws the observer in by means of layers. According to David Fontana in *The Secret Language of Symbols*, the ovoid form represents the sacred female principle itself. Also, it reminds me of traditional immigrant European living rooms where oval-framed ancestral portraits in black and white kept watch from ages past. The distressed black and white photocopy (achieved by slight blurring) adds texture and conveys the quality of relic. Bodnar-Balahutrak's "family portrait" shows an image of a woman—the artist herself—with her mouth open in prayer. This form echoes the open diagonals in the fabric, the patterns moving out in progressive, cumulative waves, linear only momentarily. One might read the embroidered cloth as the stole on the shoulders of a priest. But this particular stole, with its stylized flowers and leaves, carries an entire culture, a way of being which worships inside the circle of nature. The red zigzag pattern embroidered on the white cloth could represent ongoing generations; the berm of blue gauze, both ocean and sky, as well as the rivers that change direction but ultimately flow their natural course to these sources.

At a distance, the piece resembles an eye. Applying the idea of persistence of vision to this composition—what we see at death is what we carry into the afterlife—the raveling blue gauze becomes both the descending cloud of death and its disengagement.

The fragments of a newspaper in Ukrainian, unreadable behind the obscuring gauze even if the viewer understands the language, touches on

the idea of the Word that underlies all. Here, it may be the Ukrainian language, submerged and forbidden for decades. This artist's prayer of the title encompasses words relating horrific events, as well as words concealing those events.

In *Ingesting Culture*—made of photocopy, dried plants and mixed media on paper, including a ladybug—plants represent the cycle of life: fertility, death, rebirth, the source of primal energy. As food, they connote abundance, celebration and peace, the resolution of differences. And for Bodnar-Balahutrak, all of this is encompassed in her work. She writes that the Chervona Kalyna, the small tree, parts of which she collected in Ukraine and employed in these works, bears "red berries . . . symbolic of martyrdom—dying for a cause . . . The notion that we become what we ingest applies here—but in this case the ingestion is of the fruit of the land, the culture, the place and its history."

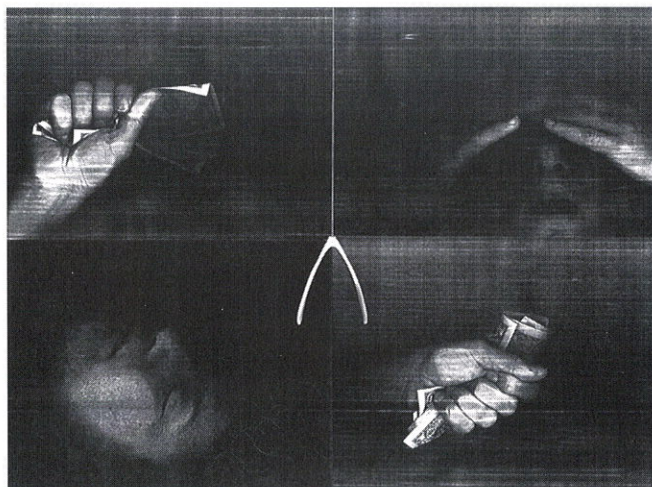
Again, the connection of aural and oral witness in the large *Nourishment at Root*—a piece made of photocopy, tree branch, ladybugs, conté and gouache—further pares the visual image nearly into an x-ray bridged by an aortic branch.

Wishing Well is a conté on paper collage in four parts: a dreamer, a hand offering dollar bills, a conjurer and a fist holding dollar bills, with a wishbone suspended at their intersection. It depicts the power of money offered and taken; dreaming and vision tied to the act of wishing.

Faced with the thematic and symbolic complexities of the exhibition, an

attentive viewer needs to engage both associative and intuitive capacities. Bodnar-Balahutrak does not settle for promises of transcendence. Yet she offers a frank kindness, even a light-hearted joy in the sureness and clarity of her vision, which begs to be read with a playful eye.

Her palette, constrained by nature and found objects, urges a universal interpretation of these works, which might have arisen from a Jungian collective unconscious. Though not once



overtly religious, the show conveys the deepest strivings of soul, a personal journey into the sacred.

Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak
Wishing Well, 2000
Photocopy, wishbone, conté
23" x 28.5"
Courtesy the artist