

Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's Drawings By Donna Tennant

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For Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak, drawing is more a process than an end in itself. Although she considers her finished drawings to be an important component of her oeuvre and has exhibited them as such, the *act* of drawing is much more essential to her and pervades every aspect of her work. It is the basis of everything—paintings, sculpture, prints, even assemblage.

Unquestionably, Bodnar-Balahutrak is a superb draftsman. To her natural talent she has added years of study, including several sojourns in Italy, where she came under the spell of Piero della Francesca, Giotto, Caravaggio, Michelangelo, Leonardo and others. "Even the lesser-known artists had remarkable drawing skills," she wrote recently. "Drawing was a means of carving out space, of learning about forms and their relationships to one another in space."¹

By its very nature, drawing is an experimental medium, basic and direct, with an immediacy that reveals significant details about an artist's working methods and attitude. For Bodnar-Balahutrak, whether it is a commissioned portrait or a painting, the creative process is both additive and reductive. "I add and take out, first applying marks, values, and colors to the surface and then wiping out, erasing, scratching, and even tearing. Images emerge through these various processes."²

The artist's portraits, such as *Portrait of Tim D*, color pencil on paper, 1989, are far more than mere verisimilitude, expressing the personality and mood of the sitter. Using fine gradations from light to dark, along with a powerful range of tonal effects, the artist reveals much about her subject. The eyes are especially always intriguing, bringing her portraits to life, somewhat disconcerting at times. For example, there is a touch of sadness in Tim D's right eye, with its heavy lid, lying in the soft shadows cast by a strong nose above a well-formed mouth. We sense from his face that he is a kind, intelligent man with a wealth of life experiences both behind and before him.

An examination of Tim D's hands is also revealing. His hands, which are strong and sculpted, rest lightly on his knee. They seem almost alive, caught at rest for only an instant before moving again, in a gesture or, eventually, in some sort of purposeful activity.

In *Portrait of Tim D*, Bodnar-Balahutrak conveys a sense of ambiguity, of something "hovering, elusive, transitional".³ Tim D, in turn, has chosen her to preserve and celebrate this particular moment in his life.

In a powerful series of figurative drawings from the early 1980s, the artist focused her attention on the elderly, including her grandparents. The drawings were as much about her passage as theirs, as she adjusted to a new city (Houston) far from home and family in Cleveland, Ohio.

Looking back on the artwork I was compelled to do after I moved to a distant city and made a break with my childhood, I begin to understand the impetus for using images of my grandparents. [They] stood for traditional value, the ritual-laden customs and the love of the past that became an undeniable part of my own identity. They also became icons for me, evoking the spirituality and uniqueness of every human being and symbolizing the circular path of life—from birth to death to re-birth.⁴

In works such as *The Balancing Act*, *Bathed in Sunlight*, and *Acclaim of Bench and Cane*, the artist provides glimpses into the precarious days, months or years of later life. There is a stillness about these portraits that speaks of waiting for the inevitable. Light also plays a critical role in conveying mood. The rays of the rising sun make *The Balancing Act* even more poignant, as an old woman sets about making her bed in a world that has narrowed down to a single room. The sun directly overhead in *Bathed in Sunlight* warms an elderly woman sitting peacefully on a porch. And slanting rays of the sun moving toward the horizon in *Acclaim of Bench and Cane* serve as a metaphor for a life that is drawing to a close.

Like Caravaggio, Bodnar-Balahutrak uses chiaroscuro to create drama in her drawings. Areas of reserve become dazzling highlights, while subtle gradations of light produce modeling that brings her figures to life. In *Madonna Complex*, a color pencil study for an oil on canvas by the same name, a strong light source in the lower left emphasizes the ears, eyes, nose, and mouth. These are executed with great attention to detail, while the hair and shoulders are merely suggested with a few simple strokes. The preparatory drawing reveals the process that is then carried over into the resulting powerful painting.

Although *Madonna Complex* is actually a self-portrait, as are *Oh, To Be A Man*, *Fighting Demons*, and *Hooded Plea*, that is not the point of these drawings. They are rather the artist's exploration of various states of mind. In the piercing gaze and male clothing worn by the figure in *Oh, To Be A Man*, for example, we perceive many things—confrontation with a touch of anger, sadness, and perhaps finally, acceptance.

The dramatic emotion in *Fighting Demons*, heightened by the sweeping movement of the arms, the drapery, and strong contrasts of light and dark, evoke the work of the Italian Mannerists, whom the artist admires. The Mannerists considered the head, hands, and feet to be “the carriers of grace...”⁵ and, most appealing to the artist, “they straddled the line between pathos and hilarity.”⁶ In drawings such as *Fighting Demons*, she does what she admires in the Mannerists’ work – “using the human figure as metaphor but without sacrificing individual expressiveness ... of being able to construct narratives, even with a solitary figure, with a sweep or nuance of gesture.”⁷

When I first saw Bodnar-Balahutrak’s drawings 25 years ago, I wrote: “ She knows exactly when to use an incised line and when to smudge her pencil with a finger or an eraser; when to shadow with a heavy layer of soft-ledged strokes and when to infuse a drawing with light by leaving areas of the paper untouched.”⁸ Her drawing techniques have improved with age, with the paper becoming a repository for the history of the artwork’s evolution.

Bodnar-Balahutrak continues to explore “human frailties, beliefs, and strengths,”⁹ along with emotions that range from despair to ecstasy. It’s all part of the creative process, which begins with the lyrical clarity of drawing. “It is as if, in the act of drawing, the soul or spirit of the artist finds its way to the paper.”¹⁰

¹ Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak, Artist’s statement, 2004

² Ibid.

³ Artist’s statement, 1988

⁴ Artist’s statement, 1979

⁵ Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya, and Richard G. Tansey, eds., *Gardner’s Art Through The Ages*, 11th ed. (Fort Worth, Texas: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001), p. 676

⁶ Artist’s statement, 2004

⁷ Artist’s statement, 2004

⁸ Donna Tennant, “Downtown exhibit tries to blend two artists of varied capabilities,” *Houston Chronicle*, 14 December 1979, sec. 3, p. 10

⁹ Artist’s statement, 2004

¹⁰ Henry M. Sayre, *A World of Art*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle Hill, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2003), p. 191

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