

Bearing Witness / Pandemic Lamentations: The Multi-Layered Art of Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak

By Anna Tahinci, PhD, Art Historian, The Glassell School of Art, Museum of Fine Arts Houston

In history and in art history we need to know the *what* and the *when*, in order to better understand the *why* and the *how*. Engaging with Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's artworks is a deeply humanistic intellectual and intuitive experience for the viewer: it is an invitation to zoom in and out, to get closer and deeper, to combine the "micro" (the details) with the "macro" (the big picture). Thought-provoking and poignant, her artworks have multi-layered meaning. This essay was inspired by weekly conversations with the artist during the COVID-19 pandemic and it was written as a way of unfolding layers of meaning and sharing keys to open doors of appreciation.

Archives and Archaeology

As a Ukrainian-American artist, Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak has multiple belongings instead of a unique identity. She is weaving into her art images and words, individual memories and collective memory, family stories and history. In her *Pandemic Lamentations* a curated selection of articles from the *Houston Chronicle* and *The New York Times* lays the ground for drawing, painting and selected words to be embedded. This sophisticated use of the collage technique allows for fragments of recent pivotal events to become the foundation and the activator of memory, but also serves as a reminder that events can repeat themselves. The front page of Sunday's *New York Times* on May 24, 2020 was a mass memorial, a grim marker for the "incalculable loss" of 100,000 deaths from the COVID-19 pandemic. Recent articles and headlines remind us of "The Human Toll" and provoke a compassionate expression of grief and sorrow: "Does the President Feel Your Pain?" Powdered charcoal gets blocked in to create shades of gray, echoing the colors of the newspaper, the shadowy nature of current events, and reminding us of André Gide's quote "The color of truth is gray."

The confusion of the pandemic becomes readable in the viewers' eyes. Like a palimpsest, where the original writing has been effaced to make room for later writing, traces remain to be deciphered. The artist is an archivist of the Present, dealing with headlines and events as they unfold, drawing analogies and making connections. The viewer is invited to become an archaeologist of the future, to unearth fragments of the past that activate memories, and to bring to the surface stories of longing and loss, of destruction and creativity, of the regeneration of life.

Politics and Poetics

In his *Politics* Aristotle described the practical science concerned with the noble actions or happiness of the citizens. In his *Poetics* Aristotle defined poetic art as the mimetic (imitation of life) use of language, rhythm, and harmony and the poet as a maker. Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak's art is political and poetic in an Aristotelian sense. Images and words (the visual and the verbal) inform each other. Earth, fire, ashes, and thorns become powerful poetic metaphors of suffering, but also evoke the healing power of nature. The timely and the timeless are present side by side and remind us of the core of our common humanity in a deeply existentialist way. As a starting point, the collage of political events is an encouragement to the viewer to appreciate the power of written words and to understand the mechanisms behind the dissemination of narratives.

T.S. Eliot's hopeful lines from his "Little Gidding" stand out in a poetic season of unification of Past, Present, and Future, necessary for salvation:

"And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well
When the tongues of flames are in-folded
Into the crowned knot of fire
And the fire and the rose are one."

Life and Loss

The gates in the center of Part 3, in between life and loss, pay tributes to first responders and serve as an entry point for viewers to process the surrealist landscape of the COVID-19 pandemic. The midsection of the gates is meant to be mounted in the corner of a gallery space to reflect an intuitive understanding of spirituality and to translate the idea of folding and unfolding, both conceptually and aesthetically. "Warned", "uncounted", "exposed": newspaper headlines remind us of "2020 the longest year", of "the race for the vaccine" and of 2021 as "a year for healing", "a year for change", remind us of what was before and the hope that came after vaccines were becoming available. There are sporadic fires and smoke as a reminder that the fire is still burning, that the pandemic is not yet under control.

Constantly seeking to make sense of complex past and present socio-political situations, Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak reminds us of the laborious process of Sisyphus, pushing his rock up the hill, repeating the action over and over with remarkable rigor and self-determination. In his 1942 philosophical essay "The Myth of Sisyphus," Albert Camus saw in the mythological hero who finds meaning in his effort an existentialist metaphor for the human condition: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." (*The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Vintage Books, 1991, 91). One must imagine Lydia Bodnar-Balahutrak happy!