

## **Giving Voice to Inner Life: The Art of Bobbi Van**

*“Slumbering in every human being lies an infinity of possibilities, which one must not arouse in vain. For it is terrible when the whole man resonates with echoes after echoes, not becoming a real voice.”*

*-- Notes from Hampstead: The Writer's Notes: 1954-1971*

Elias Canetti – novelist, essayist, Nobel laureate -- also cried out in these notes: “Learn to speak again at fifty-five, not a new language but speech itself.” Bobbi Van found a new voice and learned to speak again in her fifties, using painting as her mode of expression.

Born in Boston, Massachusetts, Van has lived in New York City since 1970. A business executive at first, she became a painter in the wake of an emotional crisis brought on by the death of her mother. Her response was to train for three years in the Art Students League of New York, a prestigious, forward-looking institution that was founded in 1875 and incubated abstract expressionism, that great American contribution to art’s evolution. A child of the abstract expressionists, Van has built on their achievements, reverse painting on Plexiglas and, more recently, using soft vinyl to create a hybrid form of painting and sculpture that she calls soft sculpture.

Abstract expressionism, art critic April Kingsley said, enabled content “to emerge simply and directly from the artist’s own internal reality.” In so doing, it liberated art from tradition in every respect – a process set in train much earlier of course by Pablo Picasso and the other early 20<sup>th</sup> century modernists. The important thing for post-war American painters was the expressiveness that modernism enabled. They took it forward in sea-changing ways and gave Van a compass that is still opening new worlds.

Van’s art makes you think of the output of another American artist – or poet rather – Sylvia Plath, who transformed intense emotion into poetry that another Nobel laureate, Seamus Heaney, characterized with the words, “irresistible given-ness.” Van’s paintings, like Plath’s poems, strike you with their “astonished being”, and the imprint of the force they pass through as they come into existence.

As happened with Plath’s mature poetry, which was written very fast, Van paints with fluency and rapidity. Her first image – the hieroglyph of a thought or feeling emerging in her – is seminally important. She turns around the Plexiglas base on which she has made the imprint, she looks at the image, turns the base around again, and develops the image or improvises around it, acting freely and spontaneously – her painting hand the limb of a dancer. This vital process of becoming is itself a guarantee of the being that emerges, the reason why it reveals to the viewer an impregnable legitimacy, a *raison d’etre* that cannot be contested. In giving voice to her feelings and ideas, Van creates paintings that signify their presence through sheer expressiveness. Images and colors and textures have infinite possibilities -- just as humans do, as Elias Canetti said -- and Van explores their frontiers even as she surrenders to them, the end product being things of great resonance and beauty.

In stretching her boundaries, Van has taken inspiration not only from many abstract expressionists but also some successor artists who have stood on their shoulders. Among the latter group is Edouard Puhliere, who, art critic Tristan Tremeau points out, has found a way of deploying paintings in space by “borrowing from sculpture its three dimensions.” Drawing upon Puhliere’s thinking, Van began creating, in 2013, soft sculptures that have given to her expressiveness not just sculpture’s three dimensions but a fourth attribute. Gaze at her recent piece, *Soft Vinyl Scroll*, which you could hang from a peg on the wall. Interspersed between its black and gray swirls are near white areas that draw you in, transporting you to a psychological space that induces you into contemplating such things as time, transience, and transcendence.

Think also of the great abstract expressionist, Willem de Kooning, whose brush strokes influenced Van. He once said, “What you do when you paint, you take a brush full of paint, get paint on the picture, and you have fate.” Poet, critic, teacher, and sometime curator, Bill Berkson, thought that de Kooning mispronounced “faith” with his Dutch accent. But did he? In 2012, Asian-born Canadian novelist Michael Ondaatje explained his approach to writing by referencing an eastern aesthetic tradition: “In the east, the artist follows the brush.” That’s exactly what Van does.

In 2009 New York’s Guggenheim Museum mounted an exhibition, *The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia, 1860-1989*, which traced how American artists drew upon Asian art, literature and philosophy for visual and conceptual ideas since the late nineteenth century and how this hitherto largely ignored lineage influenced the development of early modern abstract art in the United States as well as the later development of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalist Art, Conceptualism, and the neo-avant-garde in New York and the West Coast. Intuitively apprehended by Bobbi Van via abstract expressionists, Asian ideas have fertilized her art. What counts is action, not the consummation that marks the journey’s end. Her works are open to endless interpretation. Even after completion, they remain in a state of flux. Their being is astonished precisely because the process of their becoming never ends.

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