images of gorky: from another place

The one motif that pervades the work of Maro Gorky is the landscape in all its copiousness and luxuriance. In this essay, I hope to make the case for her absorption in this visual modality as an expression of a migratory or nomadic drive that longs simultaneously for both a safe haven and a continually changing environment. Under these circumstances, painting becomes a semi-fixed point of reference expressing a form of cultural cohesion that still allows for sudden swerves from the cardinal points of her compass. My argument grows out of a long telephone interview that I conducted with her on June 30, 2004, and her unusually candid responses provide the backbone of my conclusions.

Gorky believes that the artist functions as a kind of “shaman,” and that the authentic aesthetic product has less a political than a “spiritual” content. She rejects anecdote or the story telling of social realism in favor of an intuited art form derived from nature. She describes her own politics as “liberal,” neither Left nor Right, and readily confesses that she has never voted in her life; if she did vote, however, it would be for the British Labor Party. She is committed to maximum civil liberty, but also to some form of elite rule that keeps the crowd at bay. She opposes imperialistic war-mongering, corporate greed, the aggressive and mad quest for “loot,” and deems it appropriate to cancel Third World debts.

She was in Venice at the time of the news of 9/11 and was shocked by what she perceived as a terrifying thing, comparable to her experience of the destruction of the Space Shuttle. It struck her as a weird, “satanic” event — a “mushrooming of evil.” She attributed it in part to the failure to resolve the Palestine-Israeli conflict, betraying at the same time America’s incapacity to fulfill its role as self-appointed “policeman of the world.” In our discussion of the destruction of the Trade Towers, she was reminded of the bombing of Dresden near the end of World War II, another act of vengeance aimed against a civilian population.
Although readily agreeing that women still occupy a socially denigrated terrain and that female painters have a tougher time than males in getting their work shown and distributed, she is inalterably opposed to feminist agitation that she considers extremist and potentially too time- and energy-consuming. She is less interested in social action than in personal verve. Painting and exhibiting are crucial for her, through which she wishes to reach a universal audience. She seeks to communicate with the subconscious of others by tapping into her own subconscious self. Her wish would be that the beholder grasp the pictorial idea "in the first three seconds of viewing," especially given the short attention span of most gallery and museum visitors in the present age.

She feels a kinship with the early Renaissance masters Mantegna and Uccello, and modern masters Picasso, Miró and Klee, role models she inherited from her father. Her work has been inspired by Cubist space, but tempered by her attachment to certain plant forms that retain their intrinsic shape and coherence in the final compositional structure. Her father, the charismatic painter Arshile Gorky (né Vostanig Adorian), has inevitably influenced her work: she feels that her devotion to Tuscan village life is analogous to his attachment to his native Khorkom, the Armenian village high up on Lake Van. His consecration to the theme is embodied in his famous Garden at Sochi series, a title that (like everything else in his life, including his fictional name) displaces to a better-known site a childhood nostalgia for the bright flourishing gardens and orchards of a lost world. She understands her unique vision of rural Tuscany as a fulfillment of his imagined community that she jestingly notes is also free from the oppressive presence of Turks. Tragically, he committed suicide when she was only five-and-a-half-years-old, thus leaving a void in her life that she tries to fill through this lingering attachment to his memory and ancestral identity. She retains the connection with diasporan culture in being a "citizen of the world" (also an explanation of why she has never voted), an individualistic "English-American" adrift in the Tuscan hills. She has sojourned in various countries for extended periods of time, is trilingual, and these dislocations and history of dispersals have made of her what was once called a "rootless" cosmopolitan. In part, her multiple national identities and transnational character are owing to her father's hybrid existence and traumatic ending, but also to her mother's influence. Agnes Magruder was the daughter of a naval officer, continually uprooted and residing in various international ports. The Magruders, or MacGregors of older lineage, brought with them an ancient pedigree when they traveled to America from Scotland in 1620. They were Highlanders or "mountain folk" that Gorky holds up as models to emulate. She sees these mountain people as more forthright and "intransigent" than the people of the plain who perennially look to "make a deal." She identifies with her ancestors' self-reliance in their courageous pilgrimage to the New World and the start of their own diasporan existence. Thus on both sides of her family, there are memories of attachment to a distant ancestral homeland, albeit mythic and imagined.
In one sense, this has been a liberating history, allowing her to jettison the painful past for a usable history that enables her to confront the unexpected in the present. She has a questioning intelligence (in our interview she would turn the conversation around to my thoughts on a subject) that prompts her to test ideas as opposed to following accepted precepts about anything. Like most questioning human beings, she tries to penetrate the mysteries of the world and with her art contribute to its storehouse of meaning. She orders her observations into a system that restores her to a state of “calming,” a kind of stilling of her internal demons that love nothing better than to sow confusion. She subscribes to no orthodox religious belief; but considers herself a “transcendental pantheist,” accepting an impersonal pervasive energy or force that she equates with the Divine nature oblivious to territorial delimitations. Influenced by the natural sciences, this idealist construct embraces a sense of awareness of the consciousness in lower material forms that she can apply to her beloved flora and fauna. Her work is consistently populated with egg, seed, and planetary sun and moon shapes in combination with stems and plump tree forms that indicate her fascination with primal beginnings. She also has a firm belief in what science can accomplish in helping human beings understand their environment, but insists that science remain open-minded to the human predicament. Her historical prototype is Galileo, whose discoveries represented a breakthrough in modern scientific belief, and she finds it remarkable that it was only little more than a decade ago that the Vatican finally admitted its misguided persecution and recognized his conclusions. She opposes all religious fanaticism or fundamentalism, any form of extremism, whether religious or political.

She and her husband moved from London to their Italian farmhouse in San Sano, near Siena, Tuscany, in 1968. The timing was crucial: they were very upset with the American intervention in Vietnam, and, comparable to the shift of America’s alienated flower children to independent rural communes, made the journey from city to country. They had completed their education (Matthew at Oxford, Maro at the Slade) and were primed for change. Although considered “conservative” and “old-fashioned” by their peers, keener on art than on politics, rejecting dope, experiments with psychedelic drugs, and sexual license, they experienced the political pressures of the period and concluded that there was “no room” for them in the big city. Nevertheless, having attained maturation in the 1960s they still cling closely to its culture and music. Gorky loves the Beatles and her favorite movie is Alain Robbe-Grillet’s Last Year at Marienbad (1961). Paradoxically, their shift to the isolating environment of the Italian countryside encapsulated them in a kind of closed circuit of disjointed time. While their old sixties’ crowd have become major players in the cultural world and live in grand style, Maro and Matthew retain their status as “bohos,” living closer to the ground and without all the luxuries and advantages of urban life. At the same time, they were fortunate enough to be freed from money worries by the legacies of their parents.
Next to her work as a painter, Gorky passionately takes up gardening and the cultivation of her natural surroundings as a complementary vocation. Nature to her is “fabulous” and her ideal existence is nature in harmony with “agricultural man.” Habitually dressing the ground yields a measure of control over the environment and stabilizes the homestead. Her garden is purposely covered with weeds whose seeds she has gathered from the remote geographical localities she and her husband have visited. She prefers to “cultivate” weeds rather than typical garden flowers because they require less care and acclimate better to their ecological niche. In this sense, she agrees wholeheartedly with the tenor of the environmental movement and says straight off that “pollution is terrifying.” She blames corporate corruption for wanting to transform the earth into one giant cemented-covered shopping mall. She arranges her schedule to do gardening in the mornings (and also the shopping that she deplores) and painting in the afternoons. She rejects the conventional notion of the artist activated by the rush of sudden inspiration or divine frenzy, and works steadily each day when possible, achieving a delicate balance between her gardening and painting.

Their idyllic lifestyle, however, held out an unexpected outcome for Gorky and Spender that in turn had profound consequences for her work. It was here in the Italian countryside where they raised their family, and while they thought they had found paradise their two young daughters reacted differently. The slow-paced, isolated existence of the rural Tuscan village held out little of the enchantment for the daughters that so entranced Gorky and Spender, and eventually the children rejected this lifestyle for the quickening urban excitement of the big city that the parents had abandoned. Gorky’s appreciation of the irony of this development taught her a decisive lesson about the nature of change, and gradually the surreal state of suspended time achieved in their peregrination collapsed upon her insight into the dynamic character of environmental, social and cultural mutation. During her years of child-rearing she had put off her painterly activity, but now she returned to it refreshed by this new insight and her work became less trifling and detail-oriented, more simplified and radically condensed into symbolic forms and rhythms.

She became intensely aware of the alterations in the environment, exemplified in the desert landscape that moves her so profoundly, where ancient mountain formations are eroded and their striations polished by wind and sand. She gazes at beautiful buildings and foresees their ending as a pile of rubble, and in that sense the skyline of New York (especially post 9/11) seems to her like the desert rocks undergoing transmutation by the forces of nature and human intervention. She struggles against a pessimistic inclination and sense of decadence associated with the awareness of this ongoing metamorphosis, but simultaneously turns it to her advantage in gingerly taking on the world as contingent and forever in process.
She strives to disclose the significance of this altering landscape, and in depicting it glean self-understanding: hence painting for her is a journey of self-discovery, a visual equivalent of a Bildungsroman. She explores the notion of origin through natural or organic cycles of life, tracing seasonal change with such themes as Spring Olive, Winter Light, August Beach, or even more dramatically: Brave New World: Summer and Brave New World: Spring, while also paying close attention to the diurnal transitions with special emphasis on moonlit scenes. What she brings to her pictorial vision is what she describes as a kind of "professional deformation," that constitutes her original and individual input to her empirical observations. She does not consider herself a "very social person," but treasures her moments of solitude and private communion with the landscape. Conversely, she experiences claustrophobia in a crowd and becomes breathless in the presence of a room full of strangers. She imagines the throng as a kind of giant "amoeba," amorphous and threatening — perhaps the primal source of her moderate political views. She views herself as a "loner," though she is quite comfortable entertaining her circle of peers and extended family.

She spent years drawing from reality, obsessively painting "fussy" floral arrangements and portraits with a "doily effect," committed to limning every button or frill on a sitter's dress. This period coincided with her "Hausfrau" stage, when she was raising her children and single-handedly running the household. Gradually, she began simplifying her shapes, distilling solid natural forms into "symbols of reality," without losing contact with the everyday world. She wished to convey to the viewer something of her own somatic experience of crawling through thick vegetation or dense woodland, trying to visualize the sensation of her own body moving through the underbrush. She meditates for a long time on a subject before finalizing it, and often an idea crystallizes unexpectedly when she drives down a road or comes upon a natural or human-made artifact — even something as clumsy as a crane or telephone pole — that enables her to formalize the material submitted to her prolonged consideration. In The Drive the blue wedge running up the middle and ushering in a wider field grants us breathing space through the two densely crowded zones of vegetation it separates, while we experience a similar sensation in After the Storm where a swooping road narrowing at the horizon molds the bifurcated halves of wooded glen into two oval cases. That traveling on the road is crucial to her resolution of aesthetic problems again suggests the critical role of nomadic existence in her art production. Her roads rarely assume a diagonal direction, moreover, for both formal and perhaps psychological intentions: her pathway fissures disallow the viewer's easy entry into the scene and maintain an exclusionary outcome, a point to which I will return momentarily as I believe it key to an understanding of her characteristic approach to the landscape.
During the interval between unformed idea and realization, she makes diagrammatic renderings or quick color sketches, or, in some cases, the idea strikes her so vividly through repetitive encounters that she can memorize it. Her raw studies, diagrams with color notes, and memory traces are gradually transformed into designs of extraordinary visual diversity distilled through the alembic of a geometrizing sensibility. Despite this transition from nature to artifice, however — and never consciously deliberate — her work inevitably culminates with some visual connection to the reality that inspired it.

She sees her portraits and landscapes as one; starting off with an academic, perfectly realistic portrait she then submits it to the same pointblank process of simplification that she strives for in her landscape. She paints several versions or series of sketches until she gets the concentrated metaphor that crystallized at the flash point of insight. Her portrait of the Woman in Green, for example, seems modeled after a floral prototype, with the angular puffed sleeves and arms forming a stamen; the head the stigma; the flared jacket ends serving as petals; and the skirt and legs the receptacle. The “blossoming” crimson armchair that envelops her heightens the metaphor. After having studied five years at the Siade School of Art she is quite capable of producing a competent academic portrait, but she is after bigger game. Her preferred use of egg tempera as a binding medium for her pigments puts her in mystical touch with the prehistoric cave dwellers, and here again she cherishes their instinctual side of art-making. Her floral symbolism may be likened to tribal totemistic practice in which the natural object is taken as the emblem of clan or family group.

There is clearly a reciprocal relationship between her painting and her gardening, yet another association with her father whose fascination for horticultural metaphors expressed a connection to his ancestral homeland. Gardening motivates her, and watching plants and her beloved “weeds” grow imparts to her the sense of the harmonious interaction of human and vegetable life. The example of the tomato often springs to her mind, its beautiful shape, ripe luscious taste and smell, its deep red color, constitutes a kind of living creature that inspires and reaffirms her pantheistic outlook. The tomato also reminds her of the instability of so-called “reality,” because it challenges the conventional notion of reality that would exclude plant and animal life from the human equation and hence permit the wanton destruction of the environment that sustains them. In that sense, her landscapes reconcile the macrocosm of creation with the microcosm of her flower-beds that may lie at the heart of her “transcendental pantheism.” Her transformation of solid natural forms into emblematic tokens and rhythms manifests her desire to capture the moods and impulses of the vegetative universe under every conceivable variation. The alternating expanding and contracting forms are suggestive of fertility and growth, of seasonal continuity and organic generation. Her imagery aims at bringing order out of chaos through sensitive human intervention and by embracing the organic nature of all living things. When she subjects her bulbous forms and unfolding
seedpods, and all forms of rugged, recalcitrant botanic life to a geometric structure, she operates analogously to the bees whose beehive is a marvel of geometric efficiency and function.

But it is also needs to be stressed that her carefully disciplined structures also allow for reminders of the chaos: in Night (1997) the ovoid shape near the center dangles precariously while held delicately in suspension by the knobby and wedge-like forms that surround it; in Sinai Rocks (1994) the diagonal alignment of the cylinders and rectangles recall something of the dynamic principles of Malevich’s Suprematism, but add a disturbing note in the conical shapes falling away from the organizing center; in August Beach (2004) the prospect shifts abruptly from a bird’s-eye-view of surf and sand to a crow’s-nest survey of the aligned sails of a sprightly regatta. Generally, her multiple optical perspectives in a single design and transparent forms alternating suave curves with wedge and rectangular shapes and vertical uprights maintain a kaleidoscopic complexity that nevertheless mitigates against simple symmetry.

No overt human references obtrude in her landscapes other than her own ghostly presence, but then she paints in her moments of solitude when gazing outward on her natural surroundings becomes a matter of urgency. Her insights and visions come to her when no one is around — her preferred social state. Yet she is also constantly aware that in the countryside “every bush hides an eye,” that there is less privacy in the country than in the city and life is totally transparent. This may explain yet another contradiction at the heart of her enterprise: despite her stated desire to entrap the beholder, there is a remoteness in the landscapes that makes them inaccessible to a spectator who would identify with the perspectival exhilaration of entering a valley or woodland thicket. Divided often into flat horizontal strata or organized laterally by trees looming from top to bottom, Gorky’s designs literally set up both a pictorial and psychological barrier against the spectator’s imaginatively entering into the picture. In such works as Tornano (2003) and Brave new World: Summer (2004), the rigid horizontality makes them appear impenetrable, with no logical pathway for the eye to comfortably follow and meander into the landscape. Occasionally, a bifurcating road relieves the sensation of impenetrability, as in The Drive, but even here the road acts more as a split or faultline on a flat surface than as a mediating pathway into the picture and is abruptly segmented just as it attains the valley beyond. The aloofness of her landscapes may represent another means of submitting the landscape to her private control, as opposed to a more traditional schema allowing for the beholder’s own positive sense of transition to a non-urbanized, natural environment. Thus she treasures her moments of seclusion as an opportunity to shut out the social pressures and distractions she abhors. Perhaps in this way the landscape operates as a kind of privatized surrogate “homeland” for the homeland she never possessed, relieving her momentarily of her status as spurkahye — the diaspora Armenian.
Every artist, she reminds us, develops her own “alphabet of shapes,” and it is no coincidence that rounded plant forms and her signature trees statistically dominate the examples in this show. On occasion she introduces artifacts suggestive of metal or other material, and in these cases she tries to achieve a shiny quality by highlighting the object with a diminishing intensity that gives a three-dimensional register to the surface. Most of the time she prefers a matte finish in prismatic hues, and for her color — modified by glazing — is a defining component of her work. Although her landscapes sometimes resemble still life in their close-knit structures, she long ago abandoned the genre and eliminated what she derides as “bouquets” from her visual production. It is the widened view of the world outside her studio subsequently compacted into powerfully interlocking designs that constitutes the locus of her work. Most often she posits a high horizon line that visually establishes a panoramic embrace and disallows a too-reposeful gaze. At the same time, there is a playful component to her visualizations, a joyful exuberance that tempers the somber character of her geometricized universe. Many of her paintings, especially those with cypresses and Italian pines, crisply silhouetted against a colorful backdrop, recall a child’s pop-up book whose images jump swiftly from a level surface to a vertical position in the twinkling of an eye. Steeped in the witty eighteenth-century literature of Diderot and Voltaire, with its abundant double-entendres, she too expresses a kind of doubling in her work that touches tensely on the brink between order and chaos. One can’t help thinking as well of Voltaire’s Candide, winding up cultivating his garden as a response to the awareness of cosmic evil in what started out to be the “best of all possible worlds.”

Although rejecting any overt political references and anecdotes in her work, Gorky’s strong convictions about life and society cannot be divorced from the peculiar formal structures displayed in her work. The urge to bring order out of chaos, to transform the commonplace into the uncanny, to find herself in the midst of solitude, manifest an awareness of the transience of existence that would urge her on to fix it in obdurate geometric patterns always on the verge of exploding. Changing the world in her painting to conform to her inner vision momentarily freeze-frames it for the “three-second” entrapment of her viewer. In the end, her art answers to the need to fill the void and heal the rupture of absence and groundlessness that stamps the expatriate with an eternal nostalgia for the dispossessed community.

Is it a coincidence that her favorite movie is Robbe-Grillet and Resnais’ Last Year at Marienbad? The setting alone of garden grounds scrupulously molded into geometric shapes and patterns would have appealed to her sensibility, but equally important the plot unfolds in a resort in an unidentified region of the world. An anonymous male meets an anonymous woman who tries to convince her that they had an affair the previous year and agreed at the time to meet at the present
spa one year later. She does not remember him at all, but in his discourse he creates a past for her that merges with and makes sense of her present condition. Time is suspended in a surreal, hermetically sealed-off world — the perfect expatriate allegory where time is out of joint, and the past is reinvented to compensate for loss of memory and absence.

In the case of Maro Gorky, it would seem that the restlessness of expatriate existence continues to guide her brush as she veers between longing for a “patrie” — Fatherland — and the actual Lost Father that taught her the first lessons in her life’s work. At the same time, this very restlessness constitutes the spiritual core of her vivifying creativity, as she exultantly navigates the diverse terrains she inhabits with the fresh vision of someone who is always prepared to expect the unexpected.

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