Lowly resume

Unpacking the Painting-The Art of Tim Lowly

by Karen Halvorsen-Schreck

One cold Spring evening, Tim Lowly delivered a battered, yellow suitcase to my house. Though I knew he had packed it with paintings for my consideration, I didn't open it. I set it on my front porch, where it waited like a stolid, patient friend, forsaken for the sake of a baby who, much desired and long anticipated, finally came home. Weighty and wondrous, unselfconscious in his need and his regard, the son I had held in my heart for seven months now finally lay in my arms. To open Tim's suitcase, I would have had to put him down, and my daughter, too, who seemed to cling, clamoring, ever closer, a pure conduit for raw joy, jangled nerves, all the nuances and noise of a family undergoing transformation.

The morning after Mother's Day, my husband, Greg, saddled up the stroller and ventured off with our children. Shockingly alone and stunned almost to numbness, I opened Tim's suitcase. Inside appeared to be a jumble of brown towels. I unwrapped one of the towels from the painting it protected, propped the painting on the couch. So this is quiet, I thought. In that moment, the stillness glossed the familiar and tinged it strange; I felt a visitor in my own home. With a certain stiff formality, I took a seat across the room. When was the last time I had focused on anything besides my son's features, my daughter's emotions? Who was I now, and what would I be able to see?

I took one look at the painting before me, *In Ekstasis*, and did what I had been waiting to do for weeks. I began to cry.

In Ekstasis is a painting of Temma, Tim's daughter, who for sixteen years has been his most frequent subject. At the word 'subject,' I can't help but wince, for one might argue that it is Temma's particular *subjectivity* that Tim works most passionately to express. She is profoundly physically and mentally disabled, a person historically considered a non-person, still often regarded as Other. Certainly, she is not the typical artist's model-a projection of contemporary dreams and ideals, the measure of traditional beauty and desire.

Yet in paintings like this one, Temma's visage works on me with the power of a great portrait. On one level, *In Ekstasis* is a loving, artful testament to her appearance; on another, it is an exploration of how her appearance makes manifest her interior life-or the allusive mystery of her interior life.

Like much of Tim's recent work, including the *Bath* series and *Tend*, *In Ekstasis* is based on an actual photograph-on what some might consider a *bad* photograph, blurred and fragmented, unconstructed and oblique, a seemingly unremarkable moment fixed on film. It is the kind of image a young child might take, given the chance to play photographer, or an adult, who has neglected to frame and focus a "shot." The end result is a glimpse of life that some might deem wasted, and edit out.

On closer look, however, these are intimate images, of a mother and daughter, of the body at its most vulnerable. Intimate images, acknowledged and honored by the simple fact that someone-Tim-has chosen to paint them. Yet strangely distant images.

Perhaps it is the formal composition, or lack thereof, that inspires this response in me-this sensation of distance that may even lead to frustration. The painting is within the realm of realism, and yet it is not. The allusive content thwarts the likelihood of a single narrative-the kind an artist might use to illustrate or anchor his intention, or a viewer might apply to secure her interpretation, or a parent might provide to decipher the complexity of a daughter or son.

To focus is to know, we are inclined to believe; to focus is, perhaps, to possess. Yet images such as *In Ekstasis* , imply that we may think we know too much, and so shut down the possibilities. Perhaps Tim's shifting vision plays with our assumptions about knowledge and the impossibility of truly knowing anything at all. Like the painters he admires, Gerhard Richter and Antonio Garcia Lopez, Tim hopes for what he calls "openness" in his work. Temma's life has also inspired his approach. Her meaning, Tim explains, has much to do with how she impacts people around her, but her impact has little to do with her intentions, with what she intentionally *does*. For Temma, life is less about *doing* than *being*,

and it is at least in part a person's response to her being that helps shape her significance. Tim makes paintings that reflect this aspect of her life, trusting that viewers will become collaborators, enter into the work and internalize the meaning, share in the significance.

But what is significant after all? One can't help but wonder, looking at *In Ekstasis*.. In fact, Tim's images call into question what he calls our "hierarchy of moments." As a people, we esteem election days and elevate wedding days in much the same way that we aspire to acclaim and achievement. But for someone like Temma, all moments are commensurate. Bath or baptism, it's hard to say, when every experience is weighted with equal intensity. The mundane may prove incarnational and the unremarkable epiphanic, as our peripheral vision is brought full center. *In Ekstasis,* for instance, seems to reveal one of Temma's fleeting expressions of happiness, or what appears to be happiness. I know that she is cortically blind, yet here I see her *seeing* something above and beyond me and my ken. In fact, she appears to be gazing at radiance, or releasing a radiance within. It is impossible to know for sure, and much of my response to *In Ekstasis* depends on my emotional perspective in the moment of looking.

Because the power of this portrait lies in the fact that it doesn't just reveal Temma to me. It also becomes a mirror for reflection, and reveals me to myself. In acknowledging what is ultimately unknowable-the allusive mysteries of Temma's interior life-this work acknowledges the allusive mysteries of my interior life, of every interior life. And finally, if I am willing, a painting like this transports me through these mysteries to another site of illumination. "'Ekstasis, from which we get ecstasy," the art historian Jeremy Begbie writes, "involves self-forgetful attention to the other." Like an icon, *In Ekstasis* becomes a focal point for meditation, honoring what is most present-this moment, now, in Temma's life and in mine. Here is the convergence of what's most mundane and most transcendent. Here, right in front of us, or maybe a little to one side. Don't worry if it can't be fixed and focused, if it shifts a bit. Simply behold. Look and see the Other; look and see yourself seeing the Other; look and see yourself; look and see.

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Karen Halvorsen Schreck received her Ph.D. in Creative Writing from the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her *previous article* on Tim Lowly appeared in the Fall 1994 issue of Image Magazine. The recipient of an Illinois States Art Council Grant, a Pushcart Prize, the New American Fiction short story award, she has published short stories in various journals and magazines, as wells as a children's book *Lucy's Family Tree.* She lives with her family in Oak Park, Illinois.

Tim Lowly index