TIM LOWLY

TIM LOWLY DRAWING

Catalogue essay by Susan C. Bergman
Curated by Phylis Floyd, Kresge Art Museum
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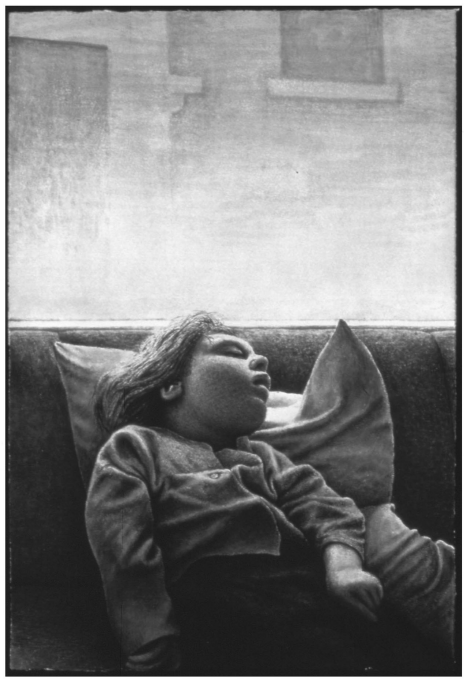
Cover: ***1. Amnesia: The Amy Predella,*** *1992 Ink and charcoal 4 x 20 inches*

It is still morning and the light slanting in through Tim Lowly's large studio window comes from the North around the edge and over the flat roof of the neighboring brick building. Even this early the light is cold as it fingers a series of new paintings on objects scattered about the room. On a table against the far wall I am drawn to the porcelain bowls of pigments and mediums Lowly is using to mix his anachronistic batches of egg-tempera paints: some cobalt blue and the egg-oil emulsion (part stand-oil, part linseed, part Damar varnish) next to a dish of cadmium yellow.

Lowly tells me the formula and I write it down: three parts egg yolk (as binder), one part oil, one part water, shaken vigorously several times. Applied on a surface of acrylic gesso and modeling paste the color lasts. "Almost all tempera has a blond quality," he says. "Hung next to a heavier oil paint it can look soft. It washes out in the overkill of certain lighting." I am here to go through his drawings, most of which I have never seen, although I am familiar with his paintings. He pulls out a series of portfolios from long narrow drawers, carefully untying the edges and slipping the heavy papers and drawing boards from between tissue paper sheets. We sort the drawings, rather than into periods or styles, into roughly three types: quotes drawn from other artists' works, studies for paintings he may or may not have pursued, and finished works that stand on their own, initiated and carried out as drawings. They are drawn in charcoal, graphite, or ink, mostly in some combination of materials and erasures. I am surprised that there are so many remarkable works hidden away in drawers, over eighty drawings.

2. Mrs. F. b. Grubbs, *1989 Graphite 8 1/2 x 5 1/2 inches*

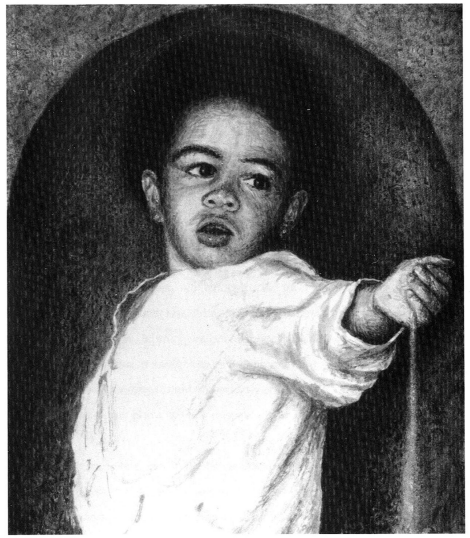


3. Imago Dei, *1991 Ink and charcoal 22 x 15 inches*

Probing the range of reasons for his drawing, we begin to glimpse the process of this artist's work. Evident at once in his borrowing is a sense of identification with the early Renaissance painters of primarily religious subjects. In ***Beyond the Golden Gate*** there is the allusion to Giotto's Anna and Joachim greeting one another at the announcement of Mary's birth, enclosed in the shape of the arch that frames the drawing's figures. In his technique I recall the early Flemish genre painters whose interior settings are glazed in the quality of dustless light that Lowly has rediscovered. Not only does his intricate technical skill resonate with Giotto or Simone Martini more than it would within a contemporary sphere, but his replacement of a naturalistic representation with what could be considered an iconographic style strives to recover transcendent values. His sincerity of presentation recalls an age when mechanical reproduction had not yet short-circuited content. Lowly does not borrow from early masters as a postmodernist painter might: he closes the arms-length distance that constitutes irony. He borrows as a means of learning rather than of knowing, replacing distance from the past with an earned proximity to it.

After an initial absorption in the surface of these drawings, I feel compelled from formal consideration toward content. The formal detail, with its slight distortion, displays its reason in its subject not in its visual fineness. Not simple allegorical renderings of mythical or spiritual scenarios, not psychologically motivated panoramas, these drawings partake of a world of familiar perceptions. Their figures, often solitary and static, function metaphorically within the edge of the page. Their significance moves between the discursive tale being told and the manner of its telling--the one simultaneously effacing and enabling the other. ***Amnesia*** (figure 1) gives us the dreamlike particularities of a drain pipe attached to the corner of a wall, bushes that have either just lost their leaves or are beginning to bud. First the setting, then the incident, coming back the way a lost thought does, the refrain first, then the verse. And suddenly a figure comes running toward you--or is she jumping in place?--arms raised, you can't recall what sound she made--was it your sister? She was seven. She was wearing . . . but she is blurring even as you think it was your sweater she had borrowed. You see her from the window of a train. There is a reason this image remains but its content is elusive: the day it was, the time of year. The windows are open as you pass by too quickly to recover--the smell of . . . --but not fast enough to let your vision of it disappear entirely.

Lowly's work is quiet work. His subjects and settings,whether local or from the not too distant past of a boyhood spent in Korea, are presented contemplatively, without a shade of hurry. Flamboyance is entirely undetectable on the surface or in the direction of his drawings. I have trouble slowing down enough in front of the image, as though the work issues a call--as I rush toward or away from it--to stillness, a call to humility, a call to peace (when there is no peace), a call to intimacy, a call to faith. In ***Imago Dei*** (figure 3), a finished drawing of Lowly's disabled daughter Temma, the quiet is almost stifling. The drawing is divided horizontally into two unequal halves. Above is the view through a frameless window at dusk; the geometry of a building, or a window



4. Tempus fugit, *1991 Ink and charcoal 7 1/4 x 6 1/4 inches*

ledge softens in an encompassing fog. It must be outside, because inside on the lower half of the page the single figure of a child is propped on a pillow wedged in the crook of a sofa. We get the folds of the pillow case and its domestic cushioning.

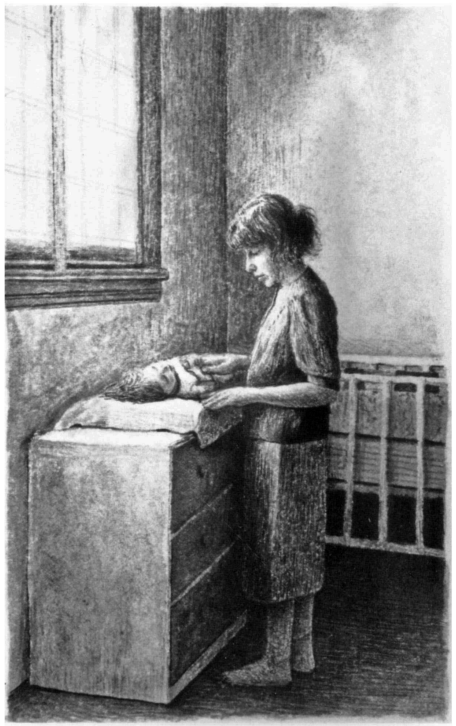
Beyond the lean setting--in my faithlessness I might wish for more extensive props--is the raw vulnerability of the sleeping child whose mouth has fallen open as her eyes have closed. Temma is one of Lowly's meditative points of focus ("made in God's image" the title suggests), in whose being the artist searches for the meaning of that phrase. "My work testifies to the seeds of truth that I see in the lives of others," Lowly has written. "Predominate is an 'incarnational' perspective, one which considers the interrelatedness of the intuitive and the rational, the personal and the global, the political and the spiritual, as well as that of God and humanity." His regard lets the work speak in subdued tones. The child's presence before the viewer only hints, mysteriously, at a possible connection between the unseen and the world visible to the eye.

Among us the glory of the transcendent? There is the light that brushes her forehead. Light pools in the cup of the pillow's folds and runs over onto the crumpled jacket and down along the surface of one misshapen hand. If Lowly drew more than he saw we would not believe him. His restraint convinces, avoiding any far-fetched or spiritualized elaboration. Whether he depicts the ephemera of a dream or a fragmented memory, or the angle of light falling on more material substances, there is no excess. It would be just like this: the light could not reach into the corners of the mouth. Though someone has carefully propped the child near the window, she remains helpless. Even at rest, the body looks akimbo, one arm shorter than the other, the chest disproportionate to the wide expanses of cheek and jaw. If this is how it appears, and there is pain in it, the drawing does not point to where it hurts. If there is help for pain, it remains beyond our view.

Yet in the ache--or is it merely awkwardness?--there is serenity. "After great pain," wrote Emily Dickinson beyond her privation, "a formal feeling comes." The situation is not mine to change, but with the artist it is mine to observe. Or mine to be the child, carried about, set in the fading light, relying on someone outside the picture's frame for everything. *I am this small, O Lord, and this dependent.*

This severe austerity--like one candle lit in the dim sanctuary of the human condition--challenges me to a simplicity of response that I am unsure I am able to bestow. Wait, the drawings say, compelling a selfless vigilance. Believe there is a cathedral, even though you see only this small illumined station before which you stand.

Susan Bergman



5. Study for Sacrament, *1987 Ink 8 x 5 inches*