

A SELF TO RECOVER: EMBODYING SYLVIA PLATH'S ARIEL

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of Glass?
From "Stings" (1962) by Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath (October 27, 1932 – February 11, 1963) was an American writer of great influence, most famous for her second book of poetry, *Ariel*, published two years after her suicide. Plath wrote most of these poems in October 1962 during an astounding period of productivity, working in the hours before dawn while her two young children slept. Many of these poems raged at circumstances around the breakup of her marriage to British poet Ted Hughes after she discovered his infidelity. Yet they also celebrate and verify the mastery of her art, and her prospects for forging a new identity as a professional writer living in England. As editor of *Ariel* after her death, Hughes rearranged her chosen poems and replaced twelve of them with compositions she had planned for a third collection. *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (2004) presents Plath's original version. Her first book, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (1960) is generally characterized as "transitional" works leading to her accomplished *Ariel* voice. And her 1961 semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* continues to be an international bestseller. As a major cultural icon, Plath's work has largely been read as confessional, death-obsessed, and potentially dangerous to the psyches of young people. Her life story and work has also been highly influential in the development of feminist thought and women's writing, and for women struggling with depression.

Focusing on the female form, "A Self to Recover: Embodying Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*," featuring the art of Linda Adele Goodine, Boris Lurie, Stella Vine, and Kristina Zimbakova, engages key issues and images found in Plath's October poems of 1962, including the controversial use of Holocaust in art, beekeeping and life of the hives in relation to myth and female identity, and the roles that visual expression and poetry play in recovering from loss. Lurie's "Bound on Red" from his *Love Series* depicts the conflated personas of victim and perpetrator of violence and domination associated with war culture, while Vine's "Sylvia Plath Court Green 1962" presents a cheerful family photo (sans Hughes) at the Devon home where Plath composed most of her groundbreaking works. Zimbakova's "Holes of the Papery Day" is derived from Plath's poem "The Jailor" that Hughes removed from *Ariel*, and her "Out of the Shoe and Into the Cauldron" incorporates images from the notorious "Daddy" and liberatory "Ariel" poems. Goodine's "Bee Listening" and "Services Rendered" relate to Plath's celebrated Bee Sequence poems and their exploration of psyche and the beekeeping community. Considered by many to be her finest works, these poems include "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," and "Wintering."



Bound on Red, Boris Lurie (1962–3), Photo transfer & oil on canvas, 80 x 53 inches

From Lynda K. Bundtzen's "From Hive to Honey pot: Artists Harvesting Plath's Bounty" text for "A Self to Remember: Embodying Sylvia Plath's Ariel" exhibit brochure, 2012:

The first work in this exhibition, *Bound on Red*, is not inspired by Plath's October poems, but contemporary with them, dated 1962–63. The artist, Boris Lurie, was a Russian Jew and a Holocaust survivor of Buchenwald who arrived in New York in 1946 at the age of 22 and struggled for recognition in an art world that he abhorred for being apolitical and market-oriented to collectors looking for an investment. The reigning art movements were Abstract Expressionism and, later, Pop Art, both antithetical aesthetics to Lurie's work, which, in the words of a 2011 invitation to a retrospective exhibition, "not only shocked and confused but even repulsed much of the viewing public." Of this I am not entirely convinced, because a 1964 review by Tom Wolfe of Lurie's work being exhibited at Gallery Gertrude Stein on the upper eastside claimed that there was no frisson of disgust at all. As Wolfe put it, "Shocking the bourgeoisie is getting tougher and tougher. They have gotten so they will take anything you throw at them in the name of Art, bent automobile fenders, old shower nozzles sticking out of canvas, anything, and just love it to death!" In this case, the exhibition was 21 piles of faux mammal dung, which may well account for Lurie's lack

of commercial success even if the gallery viewers appreciated his artistry with the dung and loved it to death.

Bound on Red belongs to a period in the early 60s when Lurie apparently “compulsively cut out pictures of nudes from girlie magazines” and wallpapered his living space with them, until, he says, he was “overwhelmed . . . by the ‘monstrous growth’ of their ubiquitous nudity.” He felt as though he were under sexual surveillance like that at Buchenwald, where inmates were frequently stripped of their clothing. In an attempt to control his own sense of being sexually assaulted by these nudes, Lurie tore them down, attached them to canvas, and smeared paint over them, covering them symbolically, he says, with blood and semen. These were his “Saturation Paintings,” and while Bound on Red does not belong to this series, it has similar pornographic dimensions, stirring fantasies of submission and domination, where woman’s body is the object of discipline and punishment. It resonates with poems by Plath like “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” or “The Jailer,” where the power of Plath’s figurative language invades our fantasy lives on several levels—historical, political, and psychosexual.

As Steven Gould Axelrod argues, Plath’s “gifts for language, feeling, and allusion . . . reanimate” scenes of torture for her readers. Like Jacqueline Rose, Axelrod is unclear about whether this reanimation is therapeutically cathartic for a reader or recommends a specific political response. Likewise, Lurie’s stiletto-heeled, tightly bound, and faceless female form provokes but does not polemicize; the figure is passive, stiff, submissive to her bondage. This nude is on red, surrounded with a white shadow that makes the figure look burned. One may see it as reflecting Lurie’s personal sexual anxieties, his need for control of a female sexuality he felt overwhelmed by, like the “Saturation Paintings,” or alternatively, as making a larger statement about political torture, about erotic depictions of female nudes arousing sadistic fantasies, or even, given the stiletto heels and graphic simplicity of the image, about women’s bodies as popular vehicles for commercial ads. Sex sells.

Boris Lurie on his No!Art movement:

The ivory tower is no substitute for involvement in life. In a time of wars and extermination, aesthetic exercises and decorative patterns are not enough. Limiting, purist, puritanical approaches are rejected. We are not playful! We want to build art and not destroy it, but we say exactly what we mean – at the expense of good manners. You will find no secret languages here, no fancy escapes, no hushed, muted silences, no messages beamed at exclusive audiences. Art is a tool of influence and urging. We want to talk, to shout, so everybody can understand. Our only master is the truth. . . . Now they tell us all about the concentration camps. Bergen-Belsen has been turned into a beautiful park. Thousands kept on starving after the Liberation. . . . look down. What do you see? Count the dead! Count the living? What do you hear? Silence. How can they be counted?



Sylvia Plath Court Green 1962, Stella Vine (2012), oil, 18 x 14 inches

Stella Vine on her creative process:

The ideas for my work have been in my head for a really, really long time, fifteen years or longer. I used to write songs about PJ Harvey or Sylvia Plath, or Emily Pankhurst — strong, inspiring women. I'd do some sort of creative . . . soup or medley. Like I wrote a song about a woman who was continually twitching her curtains to look out of her window because she'd gone a bit mad and was living a sad life, she was a neighbour of mine. At the same time it had elements inspired by PJ Harvey and Sylvia Plath as well as all sorts of other things within my own life. . . .When I was at my painting classes in Hampstead, I was painting Sylvia Plath and I was painting my step dad and his lawn. My inspiration now is no different from the images that were in my head when I first became aware of how you can be creative, even at age seven when I was making things with playdoh.



Holes of the Papery Day, Kristina Zimbakova (2008), acrylic & shredded paper on canvas, 35 x 25 inches

Kristina Zimbakova on her creative process:

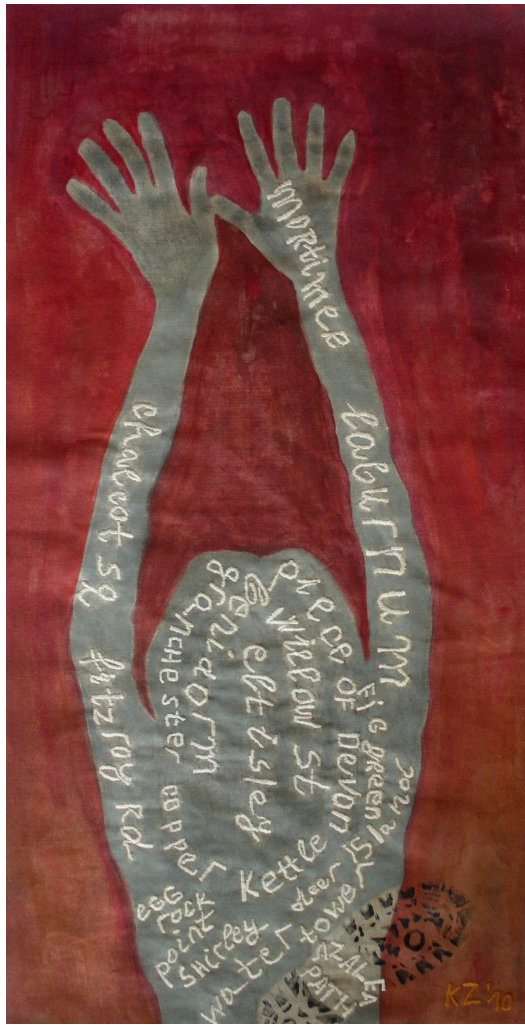
My literature background informs my mixed-media paintings in myriad ways, and contributes to my interdisciplinary approach to visual art. References to the poetry of Sylvia Plath have been a lush source of inspiration for a sizable body of work. The painting “Holes of the Papery Day” contains key phrases from the poem “The Jailer” as background inscriptions, whereas the texture is extensively burned, consistent with the poem’s scene. The central figure, made of shredded-paper, is depicted as a ghost-like, tortured female. “Out of the Shoe and into the Cauldron” includes embroidered names of pivotal places in Plath’s life. At the bottom is “Azalea Path,” the cemetery path leading to her father Otto Plath’s final resting place. The imagined vertical axis is rounded up with the conspicuous “Mortimer” at Smith College, the Rare Book Room where most of her manuscripts reside, thus signifying the eternity of her art. I imagined the portrayed figure as a Shadow trodden by the boot, hinting at the ubiquitous notion of “the double” in Plath’s oeuvre. The work title alludes to the liberation from Daddy’s suffocating shoe and to Ariel’s victorious flight into the cauldron of the morning sun.

My night sweats grease his breakfast plate.
The same placard of blue fog is wheeled into position
With the same trees and headstones.
Is that all he can come up with,
The rattler of keys?

O little gimlets—
What holes this papery day is already full of!

His high cold masks of amnesia.
How did I get here?
Indeterminate criminal,
I die with variety—
Hung, starved, burned, hooked.

Stanzas 1 & 7, stanza 4 lines of "The Jailer"



Out of the Shoe and into the Cauldron, Kristina Zimbakova (2010), acrylic, glue & embroidery on canvas, 43 x 22 inches

And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies,
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

Final lines of "Ariel"

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

Stanzas 1 & 9 of "Daddy"

On Linda Adele Goodine's creative process: "Bee Listening" was created at midnight, where its black backdrop creates a feeling of weightless suspension, somewhere between sleep and waking. She placed herself and objects on a digital flatbed scanner for this work, where her eyes are closed, but her ear hears what the bee communicates. For "Services Rendered" Goodine immersed herself in a vat of honey, as part of a series where she is "thinking of honey in terms of healing" and what she describes as "love, death and war" as well as "an expression of grief after the death of two of her closest students" and the suicide of a beekeeper she had known from childhood.



Bee Listening, Linda Adele Goodine (2006), photo from the Seneca Honey Series, 40 x 60 inches

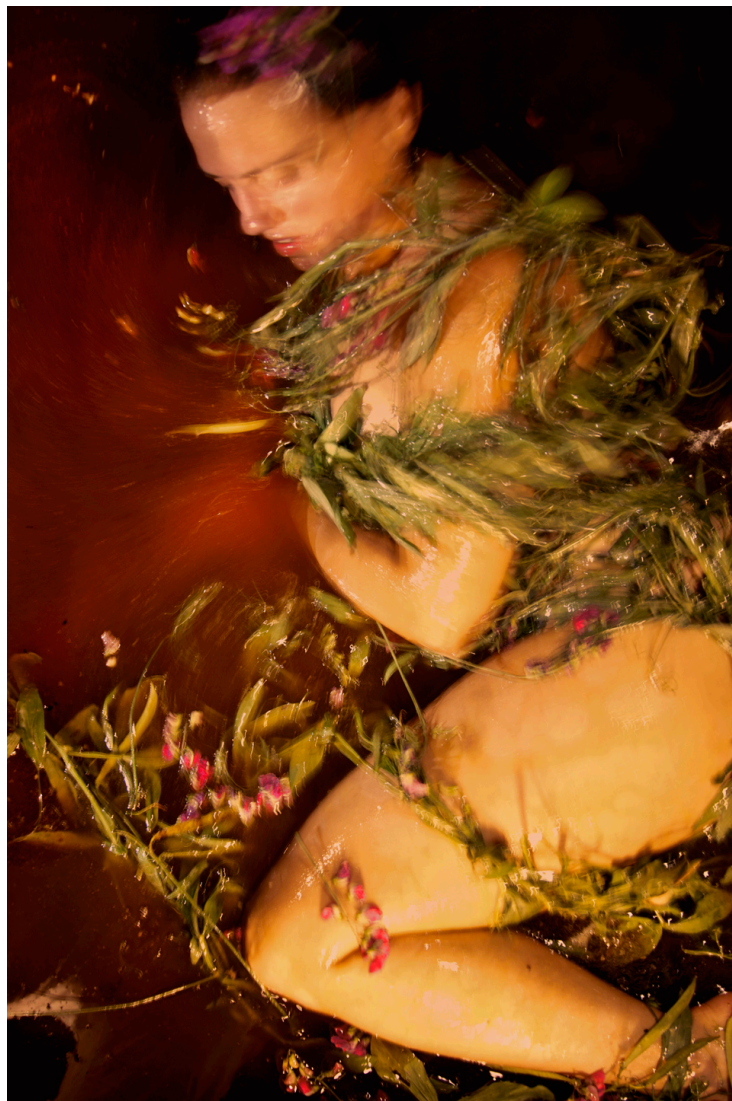
I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me

If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary.

Final lines of "The Arrival of the Bee Box"



Services Rendered, Linda Adele Goodine (2006), photo from the Seneca Honey Series,
60 x 40 inches

The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men,
The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors.
Winter is for women –
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think.
Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring.

Final lines of "Wintering"

Guest curator: Kathleen Connors
Sponsors: Indiana University's Department of English Sylvia Plath Symposium
2012, Office for Women's Affairs, Office of the Provost, & Themester 2012, and
the Boris Lurie Art Foundation of New York.