

A SELF TO RECOVER: EMBODYING SYLVIA PLATH'S ARIEL



Indiana University Art Museum
Gallery of the Art of the Western World
October 23, 2012 – February 4, 2013

LINDA ADELE GOODINE
BORIS LURIE
STELLA VINE
KRISTINA ZIMBAKOVA

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?

"STINGS" BY SYLVIA PLATH



Kristina Zimbakova's *Holes of the Papery Day* is based on Plath's "The Jailer," one of the poems Ted Hughes removed from Plath's original version of *Ariel* for being "too personally aggressive"—as it turns out, toward him. Plath finally decided to title her poem with the English spelling, jailor, after several manuscript and typescript versions with the American spelling, suggesting to me that she has her British husband in mind, no generic sadist. Zimbakova has given new embodiment to this figure, and included lines from Plath's text as part of what she calls a "scene" and Plath would probably extend to "crime scene." Zimbakova alters the speaker's exclamation, "What holes this papery day is already full of!" but has extensively

burned the surface of her canvas, "consistent with the poem's scene," to echo the next line: "He has been burning me with cigarettes," creating little holes, "little gim-lets." Where *Bound on Red* in some ways glamorizes the female body and provokes fantasies of domination and submission, Zimbakova's abstraction interacts with Plath's bafflement at the uses to which her jailor puts her.

Her second piece, *Out of the Shoe and into the Cauldron*, alludes, she says, to “the liberation from Daddy’s suffocating shoe and Ariel’s victorious flight into the cauldron of the morning sun.” “Daddy”’s famous opening stanza reads:

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.

And the final lines from Plath’s “Ariel,” composed on her birthday, October 27, read:

Every woman adores a Fascist,
The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.

The poem “Daddy,” of course, intends to exorcise this Nazi-figure from the daughter’s psychosexual life, and free her from abjection. Zimbakova’s figure also wants to reach outside the confines of the picture’s frame. The figure is heavily embroidered, and needlework of this kind is typically a feminine pastime, which might

remind us of Plath’s delight in sewing, braiding rugs, and cooking. Zimbakova has embroidered “names of pivotal places in Plath’s life,” where she lived, where she studied, and perhaps most significant, where the manuscripts for *Ariel* reside—the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College—ensuring Plath’s immortality.

