

Oleg Vassiliev

Part of what's amazing is how these seemingly straightforward landscapes manage to suggest such a range of themes that are at once larger, more abstract, and more resonant than any single thing we can point to in the [works] themselves. How does that muddy field in early-spring, pocked with glistening puddles, persuade us that we are sharing in a complex recollection? How exactly does that wooded lane convey dislocation and exile? ... And why do we feel that these seemingly peaceful, deserted landscapes are so thickly populated by restless ghosts?

Francine Prose, 2007

Oleg Vassiliev (1931-2013) was one of the most important Russian painters of his generation. He was not prolific: not counting sketches and small studies, he made fewer than 300 paintings (many are in museum collections), and only 45 or so large paintings. And he was quiet. Unlike many of his colleagues, he did not create art as political protest. However, he was universally respected by his peers and has been recognized by many as *THE* quintessential Russian artist, as *the* artist who best captured on canvas the essence of “the Russian soul.” Despite his special connection to his homeland, though, Vassiliev’s art work explores universal themes and has been exhibited in prominent museums and galleries in Europe and in the United States, as well as those in Russia.

Vassiliev’s primary theme was memory. He once wrote:

To me, the visible and tangible world is more a thing of remembrance than of perceptions of reality. The present is saturated with the past as a live sponge is saturated with water.

But how do you depict memory? How do you show on canvas or in a drawing the complex set of interactions that are in our minds, say, when we look at a long-time friend and see not only the person who exists now, but also each of the people he or she has been throughout the past 50 years? Or when we set out to visit the farm where our grandmother’s old home place was located and are appalled to discover that it has been overrun by civilization, that it has been subdivided and is now cluttered with brightly-painted suburban houses?

Let’s face it: 2020 has been a difficult year. Yes, we celebrated the weddings of friends and the births of babies, and there have been quiet joys and growth as we were forced to settle back into ourselves and to reassess how we should prioritize our time and commitments. Yet even if we and our loved ones escaped the worst of the pandemic’s wrath, almost all of us were affected in some way and are quite glad that 2020 will soon be in the rear-view mirror.

I gave serious thought to not sending a holiday card this year, or to sending a card without a text. Given the pain and dislocation of the year, I didn’t know what to say, what to write. I still don’t. However, I didn’t want the streak to end at 29: I wanted to carry on into this 30th consecutive year of cards and texts. And, as I was deliberating whether to proceed, the painting depicted on this card flashed in my mind: a visual analogue of how I felt as the “restless ghosts” Francine Prose described and I walked the deserted streets of Columbus in those first days of the pandemic shutdown.

Goodbye 2020. May our memories of you deepen our understanding of our lives and remind us of the importance of others in this fragile world.

- Neil Rector