

The Burden of Memory

An essay by Cyndi Conn

We must never allow the future to collapse under the burden of memory.

- Milan Kundera



I stand before a painting of a painting. Two, in fact. On one side of an immense 60 x 120 inch canvas is an impeccable rendering of the 1868 masterpiece *Automedon and the Horses of Achilles* by Henri Regnault. On the other side, where there was once a precise twin image, is a wholly abstract painting that betrays only subtle references to the colors, movements, and memory of the original.

For days, weeks, and often months, Santa Fe and Los Angeles-based artist Lawrence Fodor meticulously re-creates historic masterpieces. He analyzes the composition, structure, color, symbolism, and meaning of venerated artists including Rubens, Michelangelo, Ramey, and Greco-Roman sculpture. Fodor exquisitely paints two precise masterpieces as one spellbinding diptych. He then obscures one of the paintings into complete abstraction.

Fodor creates scrupulous homages to and remembrances of artists, legends, and messages of the past. He also then eclipses those narratives to create space for modern stories to be told, new heroes to emerge, and ancient archetypes to be repositioned within a contemporary context. As Fodor describes, "using paint, tools and hand I rephrase the mired, yet universal, mythology within the historic piece into a current context, or perhaps, as a means of 'forgetting as a condition for the possibility of remembering'."

Looking at Fodor's meticulous rendering I am captivated by both his dexterity at precisely recapturing this painting as well as the legend being retold. *Automedon and the Horses of Achilles* is based on a tale from Homer's *Iliad*. The moment captured is Automedon, Greek warrior Achilles'

charioteer, urging Achilles' horses into battle. Achilles is desperate to return to war, enraged over the death of Patroclus by Hector. Automedon is charged with wrangling these powerful, immortally bewitched, and defiant horses into combat. Automedon struggles with every ounce of his being and the horses resist with herculean conviction, for the horses are bestowed with a prescient knowledge. They attempt to defy taking Achilles into the battle field, fully aware that this battle will be his last. Achilles ultimately perishes in this war – driven back into battle out of loyalty and pride for the Greeks and revenge for the death of his beloved brother in arms.

In a recent interview with Lawrence Fodor he revealed that one the reasons this image so captivated him is that the story goes deeper than the tale of just Achilles and Automedon. These horses also hauntingly portend the death of the artist himself. Just 25 when he completed this masterpiece, Henri Regnault won the *Prix de Rome* and was declared exempt from French military. Two years later, however, the Franco-Prussian war broke out and Regnault, like Achilles in the legend, felt called to serve his country and defend his fellow man. Regnault died in combat at the tender age of 27.

Sebastian Smee of the Boston Globe writes that “presumably, when he painted it, Regnault had no such foreknowledge of his own fate, or of France's. But something about his rendering of these horses — their wild and fearful eyes, their sheens of sweat, their froth-throwing mouths — convinces you that a sense of imminent tragedy was in the air.”

With tragedy, war, and sacrifice haunting my thoughts I am drawn to the abstracted side of the canvas. I can clearly see the traces of Regnault's color and movement, the muscularity and foreboding of the horses, the urgency of Automedon's faithful and patriotic conviction. But the paint on canvas seems thicker and more raw-- the impact more exigent, personal, current. The absence of narrative and omission of figuration leaves vast space for individual interpretation, and I contemplate my beliefs, personal myths, my own destiny.

Margaret Atwood asserted that “myths can't be translated as they did in their ancient soil. We can only find our own meaning in our own time.” I sink into abstracted thought about how we live our lives; our contemporary battles and wars; patriotic conviction; and what we do for power, religion, resources, pride. Old and new side by side, I find a mesmeric and disconcerting tension that cracks open for me an entirely new dialog. Fodor describes that “in the act of not ‘resolving’ these paintings and eclipsing their historical trace, I open myself and the viewer to individual recall, conjecture and collective history/memory – an invitation to exchange and expand each other's personal narratives in how they relate to each other and the world in which we live.”

Fodor carefully, skillfully, and thoughtfully dissects the meanings of these masterpieces and demands to know how they function within a contemporary context. Lawrence Fodor's paintings are at once an homage, a veneration, and an insistence on new discourse. They are masterful reinventions, irreverent obliterations, and a call for a new understanding of the impact that contemporary art can have on our most pressing global challenges.

What are the lessons we bring from the past to our future, and why? What are the assumptions, preconceptions, and biases we carry, and how can we create a space to rethink our narratives, reframe our problems, and consider new solutions to our urgent present? What better form than art to generate new questions, incite fresh debates, and question the veracity of the legends that comprise our conception of “truth”? In Fodor's paintings the past is reconfigured, narratives are obliterated, and tragedies of the past whisper the possibilities of future transformation.

Lawrence Fodor was born in 1951 in Los Angeles and started painting at an early age. He studied painting, printmaking and art history at Orange Coast College in Costa Mesa, California, received a BFA majoring in printmaking and art history and completed graduate work in painting at Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles. Fodor's paintings are exhibited in fine art galleries and museums in the United States and he has received favorable reviews in *Art News*, *Art in America* and numerous regional publications. He was a recipient of the *City of Santa Fe Mayor's Award for Excellence in the Arts* (2014) and his proposal for the exhibition *Cumulous Skies; the Enduring Modernist Aesthetic in New Mexico* received NEA funding for the City of Santa Fe's Arts Commission to produce the exhibition (2013). His paintings have been included in the publication and exhibition, *Speak for the Trees*, (2010) and have been the subject of two catalogues to accompany exhibitions at the Laguna Art Museum, Laguna Beach, California (*Holding Light*, 2012) and the Lannan Foundation, Santa Fe, New Mexico (*Kôan Boxes*, 2009). Fodor's work is in numerous private, corporate and public collections, most notably the Lannan Foundation Collection and the Modern Art Museum of Fort Worth and has been included in solo and group exhibitions at the Laguna Art Museum, the New Mexico Museum of Art and the Lannan Foundation.

Lawrence Fodor currently lives and works in Los Angeles, California and Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Cyndi Conn has over fifteen years of expertise in the field of contemporary art, writing, and economic development. She is the Executive Director of Creative Santa Fe, a nonprofit organization dedicated to transforming the way people engage with the world's most challenging issues using a visionary approach that is inspired by Santa Fe and its unique sense of place. In 2014 she was appointed Chair of Mayor Gonzales' Housing and Community Development Transition Team and was honored by Albuquerque Business First as one of 40 Under Forty awardees statewide. She currently serves on the Advisory Board for the National Parks Arts Foundation. Cyndi held the position of Visual Arts Director and Curator of the Center for Contemporary Arts, Santa Fe before founding gallery and art advisory firm LAUNCHPROJECTS in 2008. Cyndi holds a Masters Degree in Curatorial Studies and Arts Administration from Skidmore College in conjunction with the Tang Museum, a BA in Latin American studies from Tulane University and studied at the Universidad Ibero Americana in Mexico City. She has lived in Paris, Mexico City, Austin, and New Orleans. She currently lives and works in Santa Fe, New Mexico.