

Tombstones, Bad Boys and Fond Farewells.

Letter from Paris III

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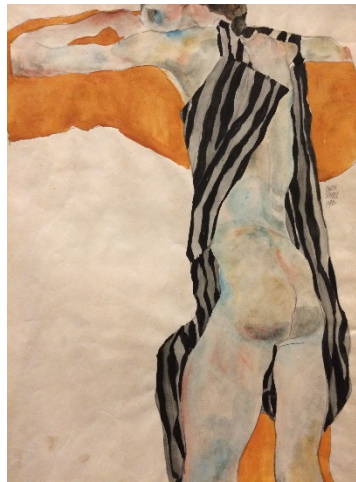
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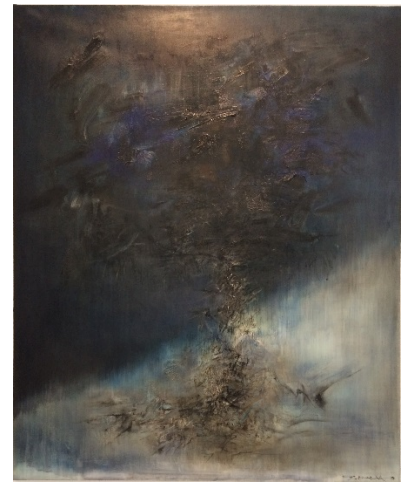
Institut Giacometti



Jean-Michel Basquiat, Untitled 1981



Egon Schiele, Young Girl



Zao Woo Ki 18.10.59-15.02.60

Lying Down 1911

I've always wondered why Paris has been such a cauldron of artistic activity throughout the centuries. The air? The food? The drink? The people? The architecture? The river? The colour? Or perhaps lack of colour - Paris is a white city with bleached winter skies at the moment. In between my fevered museum and gallery-going, I have somehow - in one month and by some mystical and unknowable process - produced 10 small paintings of a deep, dark forest, like Dante's *Selva Oscura*, "where the straight path was lost". They don't seem to have much to do with what I have been looking at in the museums, so it's interesting to me that while this wonderful city mysteriously feeds me, the history of its art, the built urban environment, and its citizens do not appear at all in my own work. Perhaps it's a form of self-defence. As I've said before, it feels daring (hubristic?) to try and make art here.

How I have done these new paintings I do not know, as I am working in a tiny space, once a storage attic above a servant's quarters. It seems to me that it's not a coincidence that this little studio is in Montparnasse - the 14th arrondissement that has been home to hundreds of artist's studios, most of them long dead and buried in nearby Montparnasse Cemetery. In a great hunger for trees, and now that it is too cold to sit in the Luxembourg in those wonderful metal chairs, I have been walking most days in the cemetery, looking at graves and admiring the leafless and

melancholy trees.... saying a respectful *bonjour*, and paying *homage* to Beckett, Baudelaire, Gainsbourg, and Wollinsky, among the many others I do not know.

This last name belongs to the brave cartoonist, one of the victims of the obscene Charlie Hebdo massacre and his simple grave brings one up short. You simply cannot forget the human tragedies here in this romantic place as you wander amongst the bombastic tombs and mausoleums of the military intellectual triumphs of the Chevaliers and Officiers de la Legion D'Honneur. The deaths in the camps, heroes of the Republic, the loss of wives and husbands, the premature deaths of children....

This is a strangely starry place. Metro tickets, pens and pencils, hairbands, and lipstick kisses anoint many of the glamorous gravestones. Tributes once took the form of cigarettes, so perhaps this indicates a healthy change in French habits, although smokers still haunt the pavements outside office buildings, and cafes still allow smoking in certain places. My favourite old cafe (which shall be nameless) still turns a blind eye to smoking indoors... only in Paris....

Simone de Beauvoir lived right opposite the place where she is buried with Sartre, and the new *Institut Giacometti* (which recreates his old studio in rue Hippolyte Maindron) is right next door to her home. The institute is a wonderful place and the ever inventive and irreverent conceptual artist Annette Messager has been invited to connect with the sculptor's work with her habitual wit and verve in the present show. Giacometti would have relished this artistic companionship.

Last week I took in the work of 3 bad boys. I was sceptical about *Caravaggio in Rome* at the *Musée Jacquemart-André*, as I grew up among his old haunts in Rome and he is my familiar, my daemon. In fact, there were paintings I had never seen, and I was *bouleversée*. Then, there was Schiele and Basquiat at the *Fondation Louis Vuitton*, a building worth seeing for its own architectural epiphanies. The two separate shows were an interesting juxtaposition of two brilliant, troubled artists, and bad, bad, bad boys who were both tempted to fall back on mannered, predictable tropes. I admire Schiele's work very much, but it sometimes descends into mannered fashion-drawing out of Vogue. Its celebration of the aesthetics of anorexia is also worrying. Basquiat's paintings do still thrill me with their energy (see blog October 2017) and their manic iconography is life enhancing. But they feel bombastic and self-important in Paris today. Tastes change... thank goodness.

The discovery for me this week has been Zao Wou-Ki (1920-2013) at the *Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris*. I am amazed that this Paris-based, Chinese artist's work is not better known. The show is called "Space is Silence" from a comment by his friend, the poet Henri Michaud, and refers to a "tension between what the eye sees and what cannot be seen", which might be an excellent definition of abstraction -a reductive concept Zao found unhelpful in describing his work.

Perhaps Zao's delicate, quiet, elegiac, sensitive landscape-based paintings are out of fashion these days. The so called "School of Paris", an informal group that paddled in the wake of post-war American Abstract Expressionism, is not valued in the auction houses. *Tant pis* as they say here with a shrug. I ran out of this show and couldn't wait to get back to my own work with my head buzzing with ideas. And I finished the series of Forests in an afternoon. Always a good result from museum-going for me. Vampiric perhaps. I prefer the idea of borrowing. The history of art is an acrobatic circus act. If we see far - to paraphrase Newton - it's because we stand on the shoulders of giants. I have found plenty of shoulders to stand upon during the last month.

I am off to *Cimetière Montparnasse* to say hello to Zao Wou-Ki now.

À la prochaine, Paris.

