On the Painting of Pesach Slabosky

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A known historian and art critic told a certain painter that he won’t write about his work. He said, “I’m a man of literature and symbolism. I have nothing to add to what has already been written about you.” The tremor in the artist’s voice was heard clearly when he came back and approached the historian, as Esau approached his father, Yitschak: "Do you have only one blessing, my father? Bless me too, my father!" His plea succeeded, but I heard an echo: “You? A great Tsaddik and scholar such as you? You have no other blessing to add?” Painting, altogether, always seethes and yearns. It flows and bubbles and creates worlds like a concealed wellhead, where words seemingly have lost their force. The various eulogies for painting come from that Cartesian failure, the imminence that is trapped in words. But painting, like poetry, aspires always to what is beyond, not just to the verbal, and the painting of Pesach Slabosky does that forthrightly. All the same, I said to Pesach: “Bring me everything that has been written about you.” “Why do you need that?” he said disdainfully. Pesach never asked what I think about his paintings, and I never said a word of comment, but his paintings have absorbed many hours of our talk about life, about humans, and about painting—attentively and patiently, as only painting is capable. Now, everything having been said, and my having read everything, I can finally stand in the holy and terrible place which the historian chose not to assume, confronting painting without words.

Pesach Slabosky’s paintings say, “I shall be what I shall be”, as only pretentious entireness like that is able to express, matter-of-factly and humbly. His self-sure subjectivity is not egoism in hiding. It is pointed self awareness, almost dread, of the eternal pleading presence of the great (not the Other) Fellow. The private and measured license which he possesses is not anarchic. It is the license which he wishes for, and also offers to the Fellow, as painting. It is not painting that means to penetrate mysteries. It is painting that has existence, is, as an entity in the ocean of entities, but it “is” only through painting. On occasion, from anxiety that breaches the boundaries all and all, it takes upon itself a further burden of kingship that exceeds even the kingdom of painting, and it crowns itself with signs: the word “charity” (צדקה) for example, which its faint letter Hay (ה) nearly comes to instruct of an order that breaks through to the act of painting, and from there goes beyond and away. To connect justice (צדק) and charity in matters of form (in the Aristotelian meaning) beauty and poesy, who here would dare? Slabosky dares, but not to challenge, only to offer as a gift.

This is Slabosky’s life story: founded on a broken marble kitchen counter, bandaged over the remains of abandoned art, macrocosmically spun over sea, earth and sky, decked out with a log of wood for a crown, with a pourer containing enamel as nature’s abode and dwelling, merging always with the female Other, with no clear frames or boundaries, with no visible means of support, floating. Pesach’s paintings speak Painting, as it was and always is, with Painting blessed, loving and yearning for Painting, but still wanting a blessing. I declare a rule: Painting always wants. Painting that has it all, that lacks nothing, or that gives everything and needs nothing; that is less painting. Sometimes it is no painting at all. And what does this painting want? The merging, the development towards the nameless abundance, the dance between the painting and the viewer. But Painting doesn’t do that like a smart aleck talking in riddles. It is open and pure of heart, humble and smart and a lover of peace, even if often it is complicated and graceless, helpless and close to impenetrable. Here is the man, Pesach Slabosky, friend among friends and hearty companion, a prodigal teacher, confident master who returned painting to us, here, in the painting that’s before us. Rest my soul in this work.