

Stoning Charlotte Bronte

by Charles Giuliano

The exhibition *Gabrielle Barzaghi: Perfect World* includes several large format, figurative expressionist pastel drawings. It is an approach that the artist is renowned for.

Also included is a series of fifteen, medium-scaled, black and brown ink drawings enhanced with colored pencil. Starting as an experiment, through sweat equity, they developed as a fresh challenge.

During a marathon studio visit she discussed how the series was inspired by a literary source. She read an essay “Stoning Charlotte Bronte” by Ann Baer (*The Book Collector* 63:2, Summer 2014). It was Baer’s aunt who remembered being visited in Oxford, probably in the 1920s, by a very old man who told her that he had once thrown a stone at Charlotte Bronte and hit her.

That inspired Barzaghi as a metaphor and allegory. She recalled reading *Jane Eyre* in the 7th grade. An avid reader, she delved deeply into the sisters Bronte, who were among the first women to publish under their own name.

“I started to draw and did perhaps five or six, she said. I had no idea what to do with them. They seemed so dorky that I put them away I had no idea what I wanted to do.

“Then later, with the election campaigning going on, I pulled them out. I took one and drew a grid over the face. Suddenly, I saw that the drawing had a future. I was so disturbed by what was going on in the world. I ended up taking a phrase from one of my grandmother’s recipes: ‘Not Enough.’ Those words felt so loaded with meaning for me that they launched the series. This drawing had a figure holding a piece of paper very awkwardly. It took me a long time to figure out what I was going to do. Finally I wrote on it ‘Not Enough.’ I kept going with it and they’re allegories. They’re filled with physical and formal eccentricities and I wanted that.”

Pursuing a new direction entailed a learning curve. Compared to the pastels, which she draws with arm and body, the *Charlotte* series entailed linear, precise graphic works with a lot of white space. That was disturbing and she toned areas with colored pencil but gradually came to accept the different look.

In *Telegram from Moscow*, for example, there is a giant rabbit behind the central figure of Charlotte with a large head disproportionate to its reductive body. There is the strong impact of that mysterious grid over the delicately toned face. Is it a defensive device like a fencing mask, or a reference to a veil?

She stated that the mask was a familiar device of the palimpsest which occurs in her drawing practice. It functions for negating or enhancing elements.

Gabrielle described to me dichotomies as the series progressed. There were days when she hated what she was doing. This was expressed by such invectives as “ugly,” “dorky,” or “stupid.” That was also the stimulus for a breakthrough.

“If you start something and it looks like a million bucks right away, you think, Oh Boy! But the idea of starting with something embarrassing and confusing is appealing to me,” she explained. “That’s a good thing. It’s not that this is so unique. You could find lots of stuff that looks just like this. But they are awkward and for me I really had to feel my way through it. I hated it but then I loved it. Every day I just sat there and said I’m going to do this.”

Barzaghi pulled images and elements into the series from Russian absurdist stories, imagination, fantasy, fertility goddesses and Cycladic figures from art history.

More significantly, working during the election of Donald Trump, she was infuriated by daily tweets and media reports including assaults on women, minorities, immigrants and refugees. Reacting to quotes resulted in drawings included in Trident’s recent exhibition *The Political Body*.

“Listening to Trump,” she said, “I was wondering, What will he do next? Stone Charlotte? He was slinging insults, threatening and bullying. He was calling women dogs, assaulting them and bragging about it. I was filled with rage at the xenophobia. I am the granddaughter of refugees.

“The drawings are nasty. It’s a nasty, nasty subject. I thought, How am I going to do this? It’s not bright, bright color with a lot of contrast. I wanted them to be serene. There’s writing on them which I normally never do. That felt very important. There was a time of despair when I had no idea of what I wanted to do.”

I asked what Bronte meant to her as a feminist icon. She insists that primarily the work must function as a visual experience based on strong composition, technical execution, and formal qualities.

“Art is impossible to really understand,” she explained. “When it’s working it’s a visual thing. It’s not intellectual. I didn’t start by thinking, I revere Charlotte Bronte, and she’s this icon. I wasn’t thinking about that. It wasn’t exclusively about Charlotte as a central character. She is used poetically as a stand-in for humankind.”

By avoiding being didactic Barzaghi allows for the breathing room that encourages us to explore our own responses. The drawings demand that we give to them a measure of the psychic energy that was invested in creating them.

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Charles Giuliano and Gabrielle Barzaghi were colleagues at the New England School of Art & Design / Suffolk University. He publishes and edits Berkshire Fine Arts (BerkshireFineArts.com). For many years he was a columnist and editor of Art New England and correspondent for Art News among many other publications. His fourth book, Gloucester Poems: Nugents of Rockport, will be released this summer in Gloucester.