

Bridge over Chaos

Exhibition notes by Marilyn K. Johnston

Ross Bleckner, Jonathan Borofsky, Louise Bourgeois, Tracey Emin,
George Grosz, John Martin, Auguste Rodin, and Chicano prisoners



Auguste RODIN (1840-1917)
Torse de la Grande Ombre, 1902-04
Bronze, 100,5 x 73 x 49 cm



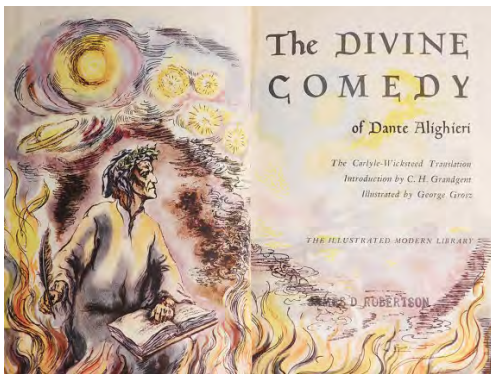
Louise BOURGEOIS (1911-2010)
Pregnant Woman 2008
Gouache and colored pencil on etched
music paper, 29,2 x 38,1 cm

*A mind not to be chang'd by Place or Time.
The mind is its own place, and in itself
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.*

Paradise Lost. Book I. Lines 251-253

Bridge Over Chaos explores man's indomitable capacity to imagine a path to something good out of something bad. The imagination sees an image that is not, but which might be. When the imaginer is an artist whose vision leads to a creative act, it might take the form of an epic poem, a sculpture, a painting, an illustration, a song, or even a letter to a loved one. In times of adversity, for all men, imagination is the bridge that can deliver us from chaos.

THE DIVINA COMMEDIA



Dante ALIGHIERI (1265-1321)
La Divina Commedia
Illustrated by George GROSZ
1944

The present exhibition at Akim Monet Side by Side Gallery begins with *La Divina Commedia*, widely considered the preeminent work of Italian literature, written by Dante Alighieri between 1308 and 1320. Dante was exiled for political reasons in 1302 on orders of Pope Boniface VIII. His exile, which lasted until his death in 1321, influenced much of the *Commedia*. The three Books comprising the work (*L'Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso*) have been illustrated by such notable artists as Sandro Botticelli, William Blake, Gustave Doré, and Salvador Dalí. The copy of *La Divina Commedia* presented in the exhibition was illustrated by **George Grosz**, who fled Nazi Germany in 1933, became a naturalized U.S. citizen in 1938, and lived in exile in New York until 1959.

AUGUSTE RODIN



Auguste RODIN (1840-1917)
Pierre de Wissant, nu monumental sans tête ni mains
1886
Bronze with a green patina
Ed. 2/8, cast in 2015
190 x 110 x 79 cm

The influence of Dante's *Inferno* and Italian Renaissance sculpture is very much in evidence in the works of **Auguste Rodin**. Born into a working class family, Rodin was rejected by the *École des Beaux-Arts* and the *Paris Salon*, where his first sculpture submitted for exhibition, *The Man with the Broken Nose*, was dismissed as unconventional and unfinished. In 1875 he visited Italy, where he encountered the work of Michelangelo,

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whose “*non finito*” (unfinished) works had a profound effect on his artistic direction. In 1880, Rodin was awarded a commission to create a portal for Paris' planned (but never built) Museum of Decorative Arts.

The portal is known as *The Gates of Hell*, a monumental sculptural group comprised of 186 figures depicting in high relief scenes inspired by Dante's *Inferno*. *The Thinker*, a famous component of the massive sculpture positioned near the top of the *Gates*, is said to be Dante himself. The sculptural pair, *Paolo and Francesca* (better known as *The Kiss*), represents Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta, whom Dante meets in *L'Inferno*, Canto V. The group of three figures, *The Shades*, are positioned at the apex of the *Gates* and originally pointed to the phrase "*Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate*" ("Abandon all hope, ye who enter here") from *L'Inferno*, Canto III, Line 9.

Many of Rodin's best-known sculptures started as designs of individual figures for *The Gates of Hell* but were also presented as separate, independent works, sometimes in fragmented form. Rodin's presentation of an “incomplete” figure as a finished work is perhaps his greatest contribution to modern sculpture. The elevation of the part to the stature of the whole had as much to do with Rodin's working process as with his enormous collection of over 6,500 antiquities. Typically he began with a small version of his subject modeled in clay. Then he had the figure enlarged to scale in plaster. At this point, he developed the figure by sculpting a particular element separately – the head, a hand, the torso, or the stride. He might then review photographs of the study model in various stages of development and he could even consider it in the context of his antiquity collection. When Rodin felt that a fragment communicated the essential content of his concept, he determined it to be a fully resolved work, much as the “*non finito*” works of Michelangelo. The exhibition features a separate and fragmented version of *The Shades*, namely, the ***Torse de la Grande Ombre***, a fully resolved single figure, just the torso, without head or arms, a masterpiece in itself (first page of these Notes).

Pierre de Wissant, nu monumental sans tête ni mains, pictured above and on view in the exhibition, is one of Rodin's masterpieces. Another cast of this work, having been on permanent display in the celebrated outdoor garden of the Musée Rodin, Paris, is now to be found in the entrance of the newly renovated galleries of the Musée Rodin. ***Pierre de Wissant*** is an example of a separate work that began as a study, in this case for one of the six figures in *The Burghers of Calais*, a monumental sculpture commissioned by the town of Calais to memorialize its siege by King Edward III during the Hundred Years War. The king ordered the town's population killed *en masse*, but agreed to spare them if six principal citizens came to him prepared to die, bareheaded and barefooted and with ropes around their necks. The present ***Pierre de Wissant***, unclothed and without head or hands, reveals his resignation and defeat in his forward-bending, twisted torso. His emotional agony is rendered metaphorically in an expression of physical pain by the heavy modelling of his broken back. Rodin was so convinced of the integrity and full resolution of ***Pierre de Wissant*** that he placed this masterpiece at the entrance to the *Pavilion de l'Alma*, his self-organized pivotal exhibition at the *Paris Exposition Universelle* of 1900.

JOHN MILTON & JOHN MARTIN



John MARTIN (1789-1854)
Bridge over Chaos
1824-1826
Mezzotint on laid paper
19,2 x 26,8 cm

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John Milton's epic poem in blank verse, *Paradise Lost*, first published in 1667, takes another approach to the universal story of the battle between good and evil, light and dark, creation and destruction. Unlike Dante's poem, where Satan is the personification of evil, in Milton's poem the devil is a fallen angel, an aspect of the Good become Evil. The poem is based on the biblical story of the Fall of Man: the temptation of Adam and Eve by Satan, their expulsion from the Garden of Eden, and their regaining Paradise through the death and resurrection of the Son of God. Having gone totally blind in 1652, Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* entirely through dictation with the help of secretaries and friends. He composed the work, judged to be the greatest epic poem in the English language, at the age of nearly 60 while he was often ill from gout, and despite the fact that he was suffering emotionally after the early death of his second wife and the death of their infant daughter. Through his escape into imagination, Milton surely bridged the chaos of his personal life.

John Martin, whose illustration from *Paradise Lost*, *Bridge Over Chaos*, gives the exhibition its name, was born in 1789 in a one-room cottage. He had a tumultuous family life. His youngest brother was a preacher who set fire to York Minster, for which he stood trial and was acquitted on grounds of insanity. In a single year alone, Martin's career was interrupted by the deaths of his father, mother, grandmother, and young son. Deeply influenced by his faith and the works of John Milton, Martin harnessed his pain to the service of his art and began work on a series of mezzotint engravings for Milton's poem that achieved wide public acclaim. Martin's illustration takes as its point of departure Lines 312-347 of Book X from *Paradise Lost* and is his most renowned subject. Other examples of this mezzotint are conserved in major museums such as the Victoria & Albert Museum (London, the Art Gallery of New South Wales, and the National Gallery of Canada (Ottawa).

GEORGE GROSZ



George GROSZ (1893-1959)

The Grey Man Dances

1949

Oil on Masonite

76 x 55,6 cm

Courtesy: Ralph Jentsch

Well known for his prodigious output of skewering caricatures and politically satirical drawings, **George Grosz** produced few paintings, most of which are conserved in major museums. We are very fortunate to have in the exhibition one of his most celebrated canvases, **The Gray Man Dances**, painted in 1949 when Grosz lived in New York. This rare and widely exhibited masterpiece was shown at the Whitney Museum of American Art (New York), the Neue Nationalgalerie (Berlin), and Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris).

The Gray Man Dances is an apocalyptic vision of a shattered, crazed man who hears and speaks no evil, but sees it all as he dances like a mad marionette, symbolizing the universal agony of the post-World War II

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world. Although at the time he painted this work Grosz was living far from the disasters in his homeland, the newsreels from Europe of the horrors of the concentration camps and the devastation of European cities were profoundly affecting. In this painting one sees Grosz's vision of Hell, his contribution to, and a continuation of, traditional depictions by old masters such as Hieronymus Bosch, who conceived his revelatory, allegorical canvases in the context of the Thirty Years' War.

Grosz was born in Berlin in 1893. He was a difficult child (and adult) who was expelled from school for striking a teacher. Luckily, his drawing master recognized his talent and helped him apply to the Dresden Academy of Art. Upon graduating, he entered the military in 1911, and experienced the horrors of war as a soldier in World War I. Grosz initially focused his art on social critique and became involved in left wing pacifist activity, publishing drawings in satirical periodicals, earning a reputation as a political activist and denigrator of German greatness. Sensing turmoil ahead, Grosz left Germany to accept a summer teaching position in New York in 1932. When he returned to Germany later that year, he learned that the Gestapo had searched his studio and that he himself was being sought. In January of 1933, the same month that Hitler came to power, Grosz fled to America. And not a moment too soon, because later that year his works were included in two "Schandausstellungen" (shame exhibitions) in Mannheim and Stuttgart, along with other works deemed "degenerate" by the Nazis.



George GROSZ (1893-1959)

I escaped to speak for the enslaved

Ca. 1948

Brush, reed pen, and pen and ink over charcoal on paper

69,7 x 52,2 cm

Illustration for Marek S. Korowic

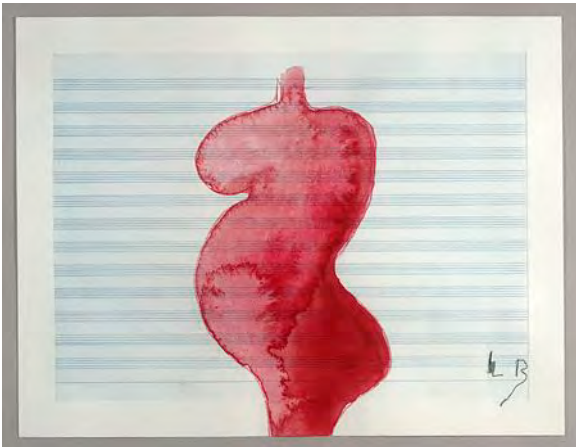
Stamped on the reverse "GEORGE GROSZ NACHLASS"

Numbered 4-81-9

Like Dante, Milton, and Bosch, Grosz worked in the realm of allegory. The figures that inhabit his art are typically not specific individuals, but rather representational figures symbolic of the different classes and the various plights of human existence. The exhibition features a trio of drawings by Grosz that speak to recurring themes of universal significance: ***Obit for Nobody*** (loss of identity in death), ***What did they live for?*** (mass killings), and ***Horror Story*** (the search for a better life).

Additionally, ***I Escaped to Speak for the Enslaved*** (in the exhibition), like ***The Grey Man Dances***, presents a more specific historical subject - the gulags, while ***Myself and New York*** (also in the exhibition), presents a very personal subject – likely Grosz's reported disappointment with America and his own life arc. Deluded by his American experience, in 1959, Grosz moved back to Berlin, where he died shortly after his return from complications following a fall down the stairs after a night of heavy drinking.

LOUISE BOURGEOIS



Louise BOURGEOIS (1911-2010)

Pregnant Woman 2008

2008

Gouache and colored pencil on etched music paper

29,2 x 38,1 cm

BOUR-13274

Louise Bourgeois was born in Paris in 1911 and was named after her father, Louis, who had wanted a son. She died in 2010. Her work, which spanned most of the twentieth century, was heavily influenced by traumatic psychological events from her childhood, particularly her father's infidelity. Bourgeois' artwork has a highly personal thematic content involving the unconscious, sexual desire, and the body. These themes draw on events from her early years, for which she considered making art a therapeutic or cathartic process. The present work, ***Pregnant Woman***, a gouache on etched music paper, is part of her celebrated series of pregnant women. Made just two years before her death, this work embodies Bourgeois' life-long investigation of the subject of constraint, whether physical or psychological or both (one thinks of her ***Cells***). Here the containment is a pregnancy, in which the female body is now subjected to the laws of Nature. Ostensibly free, a pregnant woman can be seen as imprisoned from within.

TRACEY EMIN



Tracey EMIN (b. 1963)

Lonely Chair drawing I

2012

Gouache on paper

101,5 x 137 cm (paper)

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Tracey Emin, born in 1963, is an English artist known for her autobiographical and confessional artwork. She shares with Louise Bourgeois the use of art as therapy, and her work has been analyzed within the context of early adolescent and childhood abuse, as well as sexual assault. At the age of 13 she suffered an unreported rape, and after graduating from the Royal Academy of Art in 1989, she had two traumatic abortions, which led her to destroy all the art she had produced in graduate school. She later described the period as "emotional suicide."

Using her own life experiences, Tracey Emin often reveals painful situations with brutal honesty and poetic humor. She uses art to make a story out of her own history and to break out of the prison of her negative experiences. By externalizing her past, she confronts it and thus transforms a personal experience into a shared one that touches the viewer, creating intimacy and universality. Emin works in many media, including painting, sculpture, drawing, embroidery, neon, and performance art. Her latest foray into performance-art-as-therapy might be her recent marriage to a "beautiful, ancient stone" that lives under an olive tree in the garden of her studio in the south of France. As reported in *The Art Newspaper*, when asked what this union meant, Emin replied:

"It just means that at the moment I am not alone; somewhere on a hill facing the sea, there is a very beautiful ancient stone, and it's not going anywhere. It will be there, waiting for me."

Lonely Chair drawing I (in the exhibition) was first shown in the exhibition *Tracey Emin – Egon Schiele: Where I Want to Go* (Leopold Museum, Vienna, 24 April to 14 September 2015). This drawing is part of a suite of three gouaches, one of which was reproduced on the façade of the Leopold Museum on the occasion of the exhibition.

JONATHAN BOROFSKY



Jonathan BOROFSKY (b. 1942)

Prisoners

1986

Documentary, 0:56:37

Jonathan Borofsky was born in 1942, and received a B.A. in Fine Arts from Carnegie Mellon. He developed his international reputation in California and now lives and works in a small town in Maine. ***Prisoners*** (in the exhibition) is in the permanent collection of several important public institutions, such as the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and the Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris). This one-hour documentary co-directed and produced by Borofsky with filmmaker Gary Glassman in 1985 explores the lives of 32 inmates in San Quentin State Prison for men and the California Institution for Women. The film focuses on the personal lives of each prisoner before incarceration, while incorporating Borofsky's dream imagery and music.

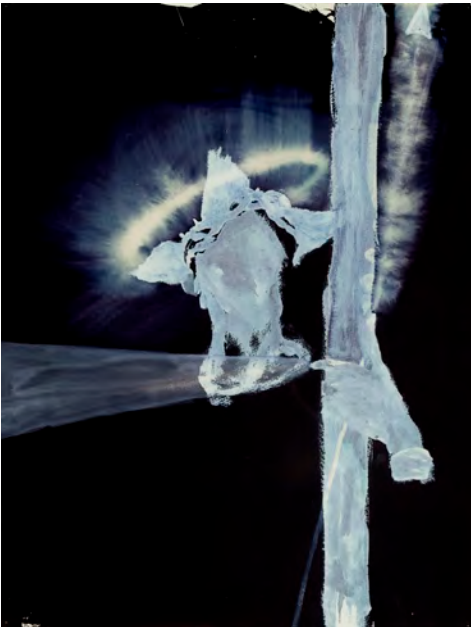
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“...[T]hese people are locked inside and are frequently kept separate from each other. They live in a structure that's made to inhibit and control their actions: the architecture is designed for that purpose, the daily routine reinforces it, and the authority of the system polices it. They are free only in their imaginations, in the way they imagine themselves free to think. Their thoughts are their only real possessions, the things most personally theirs.

“[The film] fits with Borofsky's ongoing meditation on the spirit and its relation to the material world which imprisons it...It is here, then, that one engages the primary theme of Borofsky's art: the role of the spirit in our lives and what we do to control, imprison, and displace its positive and life-affirming effects.”

James Cuno, Gemini GEL Catalogue, 1986
(James Cuno currently serves as President and CEO of the J. Paul Getty Trust)

ROSS BLECKNER



Ross BLECKNER (b. 1949)
Halo and Hand
1987
Watercolor on paper
40,5 x 30,5 cm

Ross Bleckner was born in 1949 and lives and works in New York City. He studied with Sol LeWitt and Chuck Close at NYU and was part of a trio with David Salle and Eric Fischl, who met at Los Angeles's CalArts in the 1970's and became 80's art-world it-boys in the New York art scene. In 1995, Bleckner was the youngest artist ever to have a major solo show in the rotunda of the Guggenheim.

As a gay man coming into adulthood and artistic maturity in the midst of the AIDS epidemic, Bleckner's art has been largely an investigation of change, loss, and memory. His recent works are a series of rugs woven in silk and wool with prayers composed by the artist rendered in his own handwriting, which emphasize the importance of an interior spiritual life. More subtle than Tracey Emin's direct externalization, but just as cathartic, Bleckner's prayer rugs are obviously personal works:

“I don't like to reveal that side of me, but it comes out in your work anyway, which is always the interesting part.”

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In his paintings, Bleckner uses visually elusive motifs and symbolic imagery reminiscent of John Martin, repeated from painting to painting, rather than the direct, allegorical representation one finds in works by Grosz or Bourgeois. Bleckner is also in the habit of redeploing and combining old motifs, reutilizing forms that constantly change focus. His works fall into several series that Bleckner calls "Dome," "Stripe," "Bird," and "Burn." The work presented in the exhibition (*Halo and Hand*) is one of his early seminal pieces from 1987 and is a prime example of his use of symbols and motifs.

PAÑOS BY CHICANO PRISONERS



Various unidentified inmate-artists

Collection of 9 *paños*

1994-1996

Graphite, colored pencil, pen and ink on cloth handkerchief

Each approx. 37 x 37 cm (14,5 x 14,5 inches)

Framed size: 191,5 x 146,5 cm

The Spanish word *pañó* means cloth or handkerchief and has become synonymous with the art form made by Chicano prisoners: a ball point pen or colored pencil drawing on a cotton handkerchief bought from the commissary or torn from prison bed sheets. *Paños*, appreciated for their iconographic strength and the uniqueness of their visual style, were included in a special curatorial project by Cindy Sherman for the 55th Venice Biennale in 2013. The exhibition presents **9 *paños*** and several envelopes on loan from a preeminent international collection of outsider art.



Unidentified Chicano inmate-artist

'To Vivian Arcos'

1989

Graphite, colored pencil, pen and ink on stamped, franked envelope

Approx. 24,2 x 10,5 cm (95 x 41 inches)

Framed size: 34,5 x 44,5 cm

Paños are a vernacular art form, which allows inmates to escape confinement and isolation through an artistic expression of their physical and spiritual longings. They can be intensely sacred or unashamedly profane, drawing on the deep desires and intense yearnings of Chicano prisoners, whose imaginations are limited only by their humble materials at hand. Much of *pañó* imagery and inspiration is drawn from the larger visual vocabulary of Chicano art such as murals, pornography, low rider culture, Mexican history, Catholic iconography, graffiti, and tattoo and cartoon motifs, depicting common themes that illustrate various aspects of prison life: confinement, drugs, violence, gangs, love affairs (real or imagined), and symbols of religious devotion and ethnic pride. Caught in a bleak present, all these prisoners have is their past and their ability to imagine a future. *Paños* preserve memory and cultivate personal and collective identity, creating an escape from psychological – if not physical - imprisonment.

Berlin, 29 April 2016