

We Are So Lightly Here: The Fate of People and Places

By Laura Richard Janku

The ordinary yet delicate nature of Gale Antokal's materials underscores the haunting images and important ideas they describe. Flour, ash, graphite and chalk unite into fragile surfaces that depict people walking, birds flying, mountains, milk pouring down stairs, children sledding, smoke and footprints. Though disparate in subject matter, all of the images have at their foundation two significant threads: the ambiguity of personal identity and physical location; and the way in which memory and history are forged from everyday moments. The blurry rendering of seemingly static scenes imparts tension and suggests a physical, personal and social myopia. Unlike the particular moments they portray, the images dissolve into abstraction at close range, posing more questions than they answer. Each work is totally specific, but, through the artist's mediation, speaks to a collective experience and asks: What do we leave behind to prove we have ever existed? What is left after all is taken away?

Antokal has always worked in pastel, defying the eye to discern that what appears to be definitive line is, in fact, skillfully deployed tonal values. Because hard edges and visual borders are places where opposing forces meet, where one thing ends and another begins (and as such are metaphors for personal and political boundaries), Antokal favors, instead, a haziness that supports the ambiguity of her content. As a result, her works are more akin to painting than to drawing, and, like history and hindsight, they appear more clear from afar, but reward proximity with rich surface and texture.

The *Aornos* series depicts the legs of people walking or standing in line. Using both historic and recent photographs as her source material, Antokal crops them in order to reduce the image into a symbol for any people who have been forced from their homes to unknown destinations. The limited, neutral palette and lack of high contrast, amplify the mired atmosphere, mimic the uncertainty of memory, and refuse to aestheticize human suffering. The works ask the viewers to step into the subjects' shoes and imagine the anxiety of the unknown. Though the imagery itself is relatively benign, the fragile light, packed bags, and communion of the walkers intimates something foreboding.

Aornos literally means “without birds” in Greek, and these earthbound, horizontal works hang in counterpoint to the *Ornos* series, where birds scatter freely in feathery lines up vertical planes. The two series are also differentiated by scale: the small size of the birds casts them at a distance, and reinforces them as a collective; the images of the people have been enlarged such that personal detail is evident, but, here, individuation is denied by the truncated cropping. The blurred resolution lends both series a lack of specificity and a dislocated dynamism: without reference to perspective or land, the birds remain aloft in space and, much like the walking people, travel between two undetermined destinations, mandated by the fate of gravity. In both groups, the copious amount of space around the drawings and the powdery delicacy of the graphite, chalk, flour and ash physically and visually underscore Antokal's thesis that we—as people and the artwork itself—are so lightly here. Just as the materials cling tenuously to the paper's surface, so too do humans exist evanescently on earth.

In Antokal's personal iconography, ash is the finite end of all material without hope of regeneration. But because death represents a certain kind of freedom, Antokal also equates ashes

with birds in that they both drift aloft in the air. And for her birds, flocks in particular, represent the regenerative rhythms of the natural world. The freedom of flight and the predictability of migration patterns directly contrast with the unnatural extirpation of peoples, and the disruption of their daily routines. The irony and poignancy lies in the fact that one being so free can occupy the same space as another being that is so restricted by oppressors and the physical laws of gravity. In counterpoint to ash, flour, in its ability to transform and nourish, signifies life. Using two materials with global relevance and spiritual implication, flour and ash gird the works with history and meaning and underpin the images of people caught between life and death. And as the smoke in *Dym* the birds in *Ornos* billow abstractly in the air, but will eventually settle, ash-like on the ground of their choosing, while the humans in *Aornos* series are miserably grounded, and will only take flight from gravity in death as ash.

Unorthodox and meaningful materials allow Antokal to give the work a considered gravity without resorting to heavy-handed imagery. They allow each drawing to remain historically nonspecific, and to invoke responses from within each viewer's personal experience. And while some works reveal clues—the boxy suitcase, the dated hemline—to place and location, the blurriness and physical fragility of the work—one brush against the paper and the image vanishes—reminds how quickly the lessons of history can be forgotten. Just as bird migration is part of the rhythm of their species, so too does exile seem to be an unfortunate part of humanity. And because these deportations are based on a collective identifier—religion, skin color, tribal affiliation—they also dramatically alter personal identity, reinforcing the associations between the self and that society. The individual is completely subsumed and defined by its group—a necessary conflation by the oppressor in order to completely differentiate themselves and to

justify their inhumane acts. The figures in the *Aornos* series are not free on two levels: they are, by force of fear, no longer free physically, and they are no longer free to be individuals because they are being defined by a single aspect of their being, over which they had no control.

Throughout her career Antokal has bridged representation and abstraction; realistically rendered images act as agents for conceptual and philosophical explorations. Case in point, are her drawings of large snowy mountains soaring into the sky. These began as an extension of her earlier images of bowls of flour, which represented the moment at which someone in their kitchen would be forced to flee, leaving behind their unfinished work. In these drawings the peaked pile of flour in the bowl resembled a mountain. Massive and earthbound, mountains represent the meeting of land and air, and have long held mystical powers and have been vehicles for religious sentiment throughout art history. In the late 1990s when the Swiss banks' dormant World War II accounts were discovered, the flour mountains took on new alpine significance for Antokal. To her, they became symbolic of Swiss complicity with the Nazis. The drawings manifest the need to reconcile past accounts, and they function as an animistic monument to those interrupted lives.

Snow is the intersection between air and water, and when melted becomes a substance in transition. Because snow is a solid state, its potential energy as moving water is trapped, much as the promise of the people in the *Aornos* series will be unfulfilled. Snow and ice recur throughout Antokal's drawings, and the whiteness casts a depthless, dislocating field that flattens and abstracts the picture plane. In *Place 5*, footprints record, seemingly definitively, human presence, but because they are in snow, their presence is fleeting. The footprint itself suggests a host of associations: animal tracking, anthropology, forensic studies. For Antokal, the footprint raises

broad important questions: How does the physical weight of something correlate to its importance? What is left behind to document that we were here?

The children sledding in *Place 4* get lighter and smaller across the paper, a visual strategy to conjure perspective and distance, but one that serves as a metaphor about the human journey toward oblivion. Similarly, the skater in *Place 3* alights across the ice in a precarious dance made temporarily possible—much as human existence is—by the cooperation of certain sensitive physical conditions, namely temperature and gravity. Just as the footprints, the blade of a skate scratches the ice, and the runner of a sled grooves the snow like brief shadows of humankind's ephemeral time on earth. Antokal uses the luminosity and lightness of the snow (described by chalk and flour) in contrast to the density of the human body (described by ash and graphite) as a visual metaphor for these examples of how, indeed, “we are so lightly here.”

Like the liquid allusion of snow, in another series, *Procession*, Antokal focuses on milk pouring down a staircase. This image combines her earliest memory—as a four-year-old she tripped and fell while carrying a bottle of milk—with a dramatic fact—pregnant with her, Antokal's mother tripped and fell while carrying two bottles of milk and almost miscarried. These works are as much about the reverberations of history and memory, as they are about the profound impact of gravity and the formal and symbolic aspects of milk itself. On one level, the work is totally abstract—the strong horizontal steps and white field of milk can be read purely compositionally. But the fact that it is milk imbues the image with meaning. Beyond being a simple symbol of motherhood and nurturing, milk has played a complex role in global mythologies.

In very concrete physical terms, the milk can spill, and humans are rooted in place because of ineluctable gravitational forces. What does escape the laws of physics, and exists by its own mysterious set of unknowable principles, is memory. Antokal's early links to spilt milk are a catalyst for exploration: Why do seemingly arbitrary occurrences linger in our consciousness forever, while other more momentous ones are lost forever? *Procession* and all of Antokal's works also explore how memory and moral consciousness can deeply inform the artistic practice, enriching it beyond academic and theoretical exercise into a personal journey and public dialogue. The contingency of memory is like that of all people and places: conditions collude to capture some and let others slip away.

Laura Richard Janku is an independent curator and the editor-in-chief of *Artweek*. Her writing appears in *ARTnews*, *artUS*, *Artweek*, *Contemporary*, *Sculpture*, *zingmagazine*, and various exhibition catalogues.