

Approaching Life:

Vision and Technique in Gale Antokal's *We Are So Lightly Here*

The title *We Are So Lightly Here* hangs over this selection of Gale Antokal's works like a pale moon, drawing our attention to certain discrete features of a familiar, often agonizing, human landscape. At the same time, it is not a thing apart at all, but rather a hovering emanation from the works themselves, a whispered articulation of this collection of hushed, powdery canvases.

Ambiguous, like the images themselves, the title foreshadows a collection of imaginatively transmuted snapshots—all of the works are derived from existing photographs—that together produce a remarkably complex portrait of human experience. This portrait offers for our feeling contemplation a human reality in which *we are so lightly here* in the sense of our selves and daily existence being defined by such qualities as fragility, precariousness, powerlessness, inconsequentiality, and even insubstantiality—but also strength and spirit. The title's tonal ambiguity—does it express fascination? lament? ecstasy?—mirrors a corresponding ambiguity in the art itself. These complexities of content and tone allow Antokal's works to resonate with our own complex responses to existence.

1.

Aornos 5, 6, and 7 offer an excellent example of the way that Antokal's works—which are unassuming in their well-behaved representational quality, “simple” subjects, and modest palette of whites and grays—conjure unexpected richness. Invoking Avernus, an Italian lake believed by the ancients to lead to the underworld, the group's title invites us to consider these works depicting 1930s figures against an iconic landscape of death. While the severe “cropping” of the images makes precise identification of context impossible—groups of people in transit are reduced to legs and pieces of personal luggage—there is sufficient detail to create a sense of foreboding: specifically, the three works suggest the psychological dislocation, loss, and uncertain future attendant upon deportation or unwilling emigration.

The “cropping,” however, does more than provide a conceptual shock. Its obscuring of historical and personal specificity allows the viewer to perceive a range of stories, including her own, within a formal representation of the transitory, fragmented nature of modern experience. The focus on legs and personal belongings further suggests the loss of full personhood, and recognizable human existence, in this new world in transit—and perhaps even more-sinister fates as a result of social or political barbarism. At this moment, these subjects have been stripped of the selves, homes, and freedoms that are never more than precariously ours. *We are so lightly here.*

But this is, at best, half the meaning of the three *Aornos* pieces. The artist's generous use of space around the clusters of people reinforces the sense of cohesive groups, whether of community or family; orderly behavior and dress are tokens of socially respectable, dignified lives. The effect is to intensify the tragic undertone in the works by intimating the destruction of personal relationships, community, and heritage. At the same time, the pieces transcend this undertone by functioning as a loving *commemoration* of lives stolen and as a call to preserve and extend those things that made them valuable.

Antokal throws another conceptual complication into the *Aornos* group by including, along with the three works discussed above, a fourth that echoes the others but doesn't “belong” at all. Focusing on vibrant steps, short skirts, and fashionable shoes, *Aornos 3* presents not a scene of historical dislocation and victimization, but rather one of 1930s women moving freely down a busy sidewalk. Does Antokal wish us to think about the liberty and life snatched away *so lightly* (easily and unexpectedly) from those who are being displaced? The *lightness* of their

plight (its lack of visibility, significance, consequence, or reality) to the rest of the world? A natural or inevitable balance between positive and negative types of journeying?

The *Aornos* pieces are typical of the other works in the collection in their unobtrusive treatment of life's tragic realities and use of ambiguity to approach their truth. Thus, *Place 3*, which depicts a solitary ice skater, can be seen as a respectful and feeling record of one of those private, everyday moments that comprise our lives. And though its subject is the trivial one of recreation, it invites us to regard this activity as symbolic of the essentially solitary journey of common lives, complete with its demands to keep striving, its minor consolations and distractions, its envelopment in a cold and gray universe. Such conclusions allow a deeply humanistic, ultimately optimistic reading of this work. On the other hand, we may find something incongruous and futile in the way that this blocky, prosaic figure moves in his workmanlike way over the potentially graceful and magical space of the frozen lake. In addition, the heaviness of the skater may be taken to figure the precariousness of our very existence—the necessity for a *light* touch, though even this may not be enough to keep us from suddenly crashing through the ice. Conclusions like these encourage us to see this work as a pessimistic representation of humanity's inadequate, clumsy efforts to respond to a mortal end that is always under foot.

One more example of Antokal's ambiguous vision. The image of the spilling milk in *Procession I* suggests, better than any other piece in the collection, the fragile, fleeting nature of our experience: an instant's mistake has turned a bottle of milk (we assume) into this torrent, and in another instant, it too will be no more. *We are so lightly here*. The life-fostering associations with milk and its dissipation on the geometric, dead steps shows the way that the passage of time, instant by instant, even in the most trivial events, may be manifested as affecting loss. At the same time, the image reveals that even in such trivial-important losses, there can be an arresting, magnificent beauty that enriches our experience. Without the broken bottle, there would be no pristine, cascading sheet of milk, a phenomenon that recalls, compositionally but also in its evocation of the sublime, travel photographs of the great picturesque waterfalls of the world. Antokal's focus on the spilling milk acknowledges the positive importance and unexpected depths of all of those trivial passing moments of which our lives are composed.

2.

We Are So Lightly Here must also be heard as an utterance of the works themselves describing their unique character as pieces of art. The notion that all art (especially that which depends on physical materials) is subject to deterioration and disappearance is acknowledged, even embraced, by Antokal's work. Created from only a small assortment of dry powders (baking flour, sacred ceremonial ash, pulverized pastels and graphite) rubbed onto white paper, these pieces enshrine art's vulnerability, even in their fixed state. Unexpectedly, the effect is to demonstrate art's power, not its limitation. More broadly, the material composition of the pieces mirrors the transitory nature of all of existence, the eternal interplay of life and death that the artist intentionally represents in flour and ash.

Antokal's *light* touch makes an integral contribution to her vision. While her soft focus undeniably aestheticizes the often difficult realities she depicts, it is an aestheticizing that, paradoxically, promotes rather than discourages thoughtful reflection and demystified analysis. The transmutation of photographs into dreamy, powdery, beautiful creations makes us see the original photographic images with new and wondering eyes, transforms their subjects into experiences both objective and subjective, and provides a contrasting "field" against which tragic reality speaks with a uniquely powerful, haunting voice.

Ultimately, Antokal's technique and materials are an ethical matter, implying a relationship to the people and events she depicts, and to life itself. Her *light* touch—in her

technique of gently, patiently applying powders with a single bare fingertip—expresses her intimate involvement in the stories she tells. The visual *lightness* of the images—all whites and grays and softened lines—intimates her respect for the serious subjects she addresses, subordinates her ego to realities that she knows are always larger and more complex than artistic understanding, and expresses her pious appreciation for life, freedom, and beauty. Eloquent in its silence, her very choice of the most fragile materials to create her art bespeaks her acceptance of the fleeting nature of our existence—an unselfish willingness to let go, to let it go.

Craig Buckwald PhD, Principal Editor at the University of California, Berkeley