

Miklos Pogany's Acts of Commemoration

By: John Yau

Miklos Pogany is an artist living in the diaspora. The particulars of his diasporic situation help us understand his paintings, but don't explain them. He was born into a prominent Jewish family in Budapest in 1941, during World War II and the Holocaust, but did not learn that he was Jewish until he was in his 50s. At the end of World War II, in order to escape Hungary, which Winston Churchill and Joseph Stalin had agreed would be part of the Soviet sphere of influence after the war, Pogany's family appealed to the Catholic church, which helped them immigrate to Italy, where they were placed in a camp for displaced persons in Rome. Pogany's grandfather had converted to Catholicism before the war, which, as Pogany told me¹: "did help somewhat to protect the family from persecution from the Nazis."

As a child of six, who was displaced to Italy, he knew Hungarian, Russian, and German. Growing up in Rome, Milan, and finally in Moltrasio on Lake Como, Italian became his mother tongue, and he also learned French. He remembers doing "endless exercises in chiaroscuro in high school in Italy"². In that same email, Pogany wrote: "I believe that by living in Italy, as well as France and England, I was greatly influenced by the Italian paesaggios, and European sculpture, frescoes and architecture."

Pogany was in his teens when he moved to America to study. He became seriously interested in art while studying English and philosophy at St. Procopius College, in Chicago, Illinois (in 1970, the college elected to change its name to Illinois Benedictine College). After getting his B.A., he went on to get a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature and Aesthetics from the University of Chicago (1972). During his years in graduate school he taught at various local universities as well as pursuing his interest in art. At this juncture in his life, all the outward signs pointed to the likelihood that he would embark upon a successful career as a university professor and make significant contributions in his field. Pogany, however, did not follow the course he worked so hard to set in motion. After being appointed to teach at Northwestern University, he quit his position in 1972, and moved to California, where he devoted himself to art. In other words, he did what many of us long to do but don't: he changed his life.

Even though Pogany's life is marked by extreme change, starting with moving from Budapest to Rome as a child and learning a whole new language, it did not make him afraid to embark on a path

¹ email dated June 23, 2022

² email dated June 17, 2022

marked with uncertainty. During his first years in the Bay Area, he taught Italian literature at the New College, where the poets Robert Duncan and David Meltzer were on the faculty. He also began exploring the medium of monotype, which he was introduced to at 3EP Press Limited, founded by the collector Moo (Mary Margaret) Anderson, the artist Joseph Goldyne, and the dealer Paula Kirkeby. Historically speaking, in the early 1970s, the interest in monotype was new, inspired largely by a revelatory exhibition, *Degas Monotypes*, at the Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge, MA (April 25, 1968–June 14, 1968), which was seen by Michael Mazur (1935-2009), who began exploring the medium almost immediately, as well as spreading the word.

Not connected to any art or literary scene, either in Chicago or the Bay Area, Pogany belongs to that group of sophisticated, self-educated artists in America that includes figures as diverse as Joseph Cornell, Robert Ryman, and Jasper Johns. In contrast to these artists, Pogany has never been associated with any group or stylistic tendency. He has pursued a path that is all his own, and that is what we should keep in mind when looking at his work.

I would like to further contextualize this observation. What further distinguishes Pogany’s work from his contemporaries is the fact that he grew up in Italy, and experienced a different physical and cultural landscape than many of his American peers. He did not go to art school, but it would be wrong to think of him as an outsider artist because he received no formal art education. Moreover, as an artist who first gained attention in the early 1980s, when he was in his mid-30s, Pogany did not employ any of the stylistic tendencies associated with that hyperbolic era, which has been characterized as the “Return of Painting.” Pogany was neither a Neo-Expressionist nor a Neo-Geo artist. I think the only way to see Pogany is as an independent artist who has always followed his own vision—one that speaks to our feelings in the face of fragility, solitude, and anxiety. This leads me to make one more observation about Pogany’s work, which renders the discussion about the difference between abstraction and figuration moot. Rather than comfortably belonging in either category, his work occupies both. This inability to place his art in any of the categories we are accustomed to applying to an artist’s work is consistent with what I believe is his sense of the diaspora; it is not a collective experience, but an individual one.

Made over a span of four decades (1982 – 2022), the works in the exhibition convey the breadth of Pogany’s approach to materials, methods, and subject matter. They include paintings, monotypes, etchings, many of them hand-colored. As an artist who has often worked with an enigmatic and allusive motif, monotype seems a perfect fit, as you make only one example rather than an edition. By using

monotype, Pogany can go back to the motif to both rethink and see it anew. His engagement with a motif is one of the currents running throughout his work, starting in the early 1970s. In his acclaimed series *Klarika* (1972 -), Pogany articulated a highly mediated abstract form, which alludes to an enigmatic figural presence. The enigma is due to the fact that although the image clearly represents someone, it is impossible to say whom. The essence of *Klarika's* abstract form is standoffish, angular, sensual, sturdy, and ghostly. It is physical and ethereal, palpable and elusive. Pogany's form stirs up unexpected associations, as in the moody "First Memory of Tahiti" (1985). This unlikely synthesis of the physical and ethereal is true of all of the motifs that Pogany has explored during his career.

Seeing these works gathered together, I am struck by something that I had not fully considered when I first wrote about Pogany's work in 1985 and again in '86; his attention to scale. I know from writing previously about his work that he has made works that are more than 6 feet high and 4 feet wide. At that time, what I did not see clearly enough to call attention to is that the work's physical scale was determined by the extent of one's physical grasp. That measure is one of his guides. He does not seem the least bit interested in continuing the legacy of monumental scale that his generation inherited from the Abstract Expressionists and the Minimalists, and has become a commonplace marker of an artist's seriousness. I suspect this is because Pogany recognizes that working on a large scale has devolved into a celebration of material wealth.

With their combination of post-and-lintel structures, attenuated triangles, rectangles, lines, scimitar-like arcs, and French curves, Pogany's motifs seem to have been inspired by European architecture, the geometric compositions of Piero della Francesca, the diagonal dynamics of Russian Constructivists, and the serial abstraction of Richard Diebenkorn. Color is used to evoke a season, a place, a surface, or a specific kind of light.

An artist whose work often alludes to memories of places he has seen and lived in, Pogany's interest lies in what traces of our experience remain with us. With collective and individual titles such as "Acoma," "Walpi," "Kawestima," and "Mimbres," one loosely related group of etchings derive their titles from Hopi and Navaho pueblos, and the prehistoric Northern American people of the Mogollon culture, who settled in what is present day New Mexico. The pink, turquoise, and other tones convey the color and light of these isolated settlements. In other works, Pogany's titles refer to medieval cities, towns, and sites in the regions of Tuscany and Veneto. As much as these two bodies of work are about places the artist has experienced, they are also about time and change, what persists and what dissipates.

When I consider the three bone-white shapes in the painting *Floating Homes by the Arsenale*, 2011, what am I to make of the tension between the houses' flat facades and the fact that they are windowless? While the formalist emphasis on flatness and painting's two-dimensional surface has long been considered central to postwar abstract art, Pogany's depiction of the three buildings does not strike me as a purely aesthetic decision. The attention he pays to placement, color, contour, and their distinct shapes comes from some deep place of feeling in the artist. Look at the color of the sky in *Floating Homes by the Arsenale*, and the spaces separating the houses, and a feeling of solitariness inflected with foreboding becomes evident. And yet, nothing is spelled out. The painting remains mysterious.

Through his synthesis of linear structure and nuanced color, Pogany is able to evoke fleeting states of intense feeling, those poignant states of recollection that remain with us long after the moment has passed. In works such as the hand-colored monotype *Iris pour Mondrian* (1994) and the monotype *Iris from Torcello (2)* (1995), he calls out to art and place, while contemplating delicate and vulnerable reminders of the impermanence of material beauty.

The muted colors of *Iris from Torcello (2)* seem to be fading before us, underscoring the transitoriness of life. Instead of expressing sorrow over this inescapable state, Pogany invites the viewer to reflect upon this condition without looking away, and to celebrate. Despite his lifelong feelings of loss and displacement, he infuses his commemorations with feelings that approach joy.

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