

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 43 – Marek Ranis – Ecological Landscapes

Art as Crucifixion

And now a personal word,

Marek Ranis is an artist who considers cultural and environmental events from a perspective suggesting ecological time. His work addresses changes in the landscape and our place in it. His art is varied and prolific, from wood plaster graphic sculpture resembling additive layers of clay, to ice blocks dripping through cotton draped over a steel edifice, to oil paintings of glacier-like images on aluminum, to gold mylar hung from a ceiling-wide scaffold, to strips of black oak bark held together by grommets over mesh wire. Then there are the interpretations of satellite photographs of the Arctic tundra and videos comparing seascapes in different continents. There is a weight and weariness, a heaviness, to his work bearing names such as *Substance*, *Panzerwerk*, *Kunstwissenschaft*, and *Melancholia*. Marek says his art expresses grief about the world, what in German is called *Weltschmerz*, a feeling of pain and suffering arising from reality as it is apart from what it could and should be. There is no pretense in his work that his art will change conditions, only that it will draw attention to the plight of people and nature. In that awareness, there is optimism, no matter how tenuous that optimism may be.

Marek talks about his art as expedition, that he is an explorer of new lands, testing himself against the environment, challenging himself with new forms of expression, beholden to idea and less to craft as he moves on to the next adventurous quest.

I think of his art differently. I think of it as art as crucifixion—crucifixion in the theological sense in that it bears the weight of our sins, that his installations take us down the Via Dolorosa, or the Way of Grief or Way of Suffering to Golgotha or Calvary, where crosses were mounted to execute the condemned. In the Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, Messiah and king of the Jews, was nailed to a cross and killed, his death foretold, the lamb of God sacrificed to redeem humanity from the original sin of Adam and Eve. Whereas Adam and Eve disobeyed, Jesus obeyed. Jesus consents to his crucifixion. The crucifixion of Jesus is a supreme act of submission to God's will. Because of the perfection of his life, his voluntary death, and the glory of his resurrection, Jesus defeats the fallen archangel Satan. Humanity is no longer bound in sin but is free to rejoin God through faith in Jesus.

So the Christian narrative goes, and so goes how I see Marek's art, at least to some degree. I have no idea whether Marek sees his art in the same way. That's one question I didn't ask. But I see his art as dense with our sins against nature. His work contains our crimes against the planet. They are embedded with darkness. But his art does not end there. Like the cross, his art redeems. In gathering our sins, his installations are vessels for our salvation. His art suggests that harmony with nature is within reach if we repent and devote ourselves to life, that humanity can return to an environment in balance, that grief for the world can be replaced with wonder and light.

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