

BORDERCROSSINGS

Enright, Robert. "Image-Grappler: Sky Glabush and the Art of Self-Interrogation," *BorderCrossing Magazine*, Aug. 2018.



Sky Glabush
"Gleanings," 2018
Oil and sand on canvas
244 x 183 cm

The art of painting necessarily engages the act of questioning. The questions can be material ones: What surface do I paint on; what do I paint with; what kind of painting do I want to make? But there are also bigger questions, ones that are consequential in a different way: What is a painter; how is painting different from other art practices; why do I even paint? It becomes apparent as you read the following interview with London-based artist and teacher Sky Glabush that over the course of a practice moving into its third decade, he has posed all these questions, and many more. What is clear is that whatever answer he came up with has been as thoroughly engaged as possible, at which point he moves on to the next question. His natural mode is the interrogative.

Recently he asked himself a question that sits at the core of his being. Glabush has been a member of the Bahá'í faith since he was six years old, but he admits that for a long time he separated his art and spiritual belief. His metaphor for this process was that he "kept the scaffolding of my belief under wraps." So when he asked, "Where do I locate the spiritual in art?" it was the first time he had posed the question so directly. His answer was that "it was in getting up, going to the studio, putting on some music and beginning the process of moving things around and trying something. It wasn't in an image and it wasn't even in the story; it was in my body in the studio."

The discovery represents a double embodiment: it was spatial and corporeal. It allowed him to move forward by "enacting something visceral and immediate." His studio practice, then, became a process of shape-shifting in which he was constantly moving from one art form to another; he would work with clay or weave, or make sculptural objects. "I had my loom, and my weavings were influencing my sculptures and my sculptures were being influenced by furniture. I was actually making furniture."

His principal model in this mobility of categories was the Bauhaus, a moment in the history of modernism he describes as "poignant and important." Glabush's understanding of modernism is that it was less a rupture than the period when constructing art out of the idiosyncratic, the personal and the hybridized was possible. It is a possibility that continues today. In his studio he enacts a free-flowing conversation between the decorative and the fine arts. He calls what he is doing an activity "that puts quotation marks around modernity."

The following telephone interview was recorded on July 12, 2018, to the artist's studio in London, Ontario.

Border Crossings: When you look at your work over the last number of years, are the changes as dramatic for you as they seem to be for viewers who have been following it?

Sky Glabush: Is another way of phrasing that question, why is your work disjointed and all over the place? The answer is I'm not sure but I think it is based on those big landscape paintings that I did when I came to London in 2006. They created a picture of me as an artist that I was ambivalent about and I've never really been able to shake it. But if you were to take that period of time out of the picture, which lasted about five years, then you'd see that the work I did before I came to London occupied a space in between the social design of buildings and furniture and was more like process-based abstraction. I had done a whole series of paintings when I was in Amsterdam that explored the housing projects on the edge of the city in relation to modernist design, and before that I was making abstract paintings. So if you were to see my career over that span, I don't think it would seem quite as radical or as disjointed.

BC: I'm not always an enthusiast for the significant moment that marks a change in an artist's trajectory, what James Joyce would call an epiphany, but am I right in thinking that the trip we took to Israel in 2011 was shaping for you in some determining way?

SG: Absolutely.

BC: Why was it so significant?

SG: I think because I grew up in a Bahá'í household where my dad took his religion and faith so seriously, I had to actually live two separate lives. I always kept the scaffolding of my belief under wraps and it wasn't something that I spoke about

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about much with my artist friends. So when I went to Israel with you and Meeka and her family and Neil Minuk, I was outed, in a sense.

There was no way for me to play it cool or to ignore the connection between my identity as an artist and my identity as a believer. Over the course of those two weeks I was being confronted with that, and when we went to all the Bahá'í holy places in Haifa, it did have a significant impact on me. There was actually quite a dramatic change in the body of work I did after I came back from Israel. I tried to reconcile these competing forces in my own life and in my own psyche and bring them into a closer alignment. A lot of that had to do with the fact that I went there with people who were my friends but, more importantly, people who were deeply aware of culture and art.

BC: So your coming back marked a real engagement on your part in the relationship between art and spirituality. Were you conscious of what was happening?

SG: The word “conscious” is tricky because there is a difference between what you think you think and what you actually enact or perform. Sometimes a concept seems really valuable in your mind, but then it changes when you start to explore it in your body. One of the things I came to trust and to explore more as an artist was enacting the process in my body. Conditions would be created in the studio to ask these questions with my hands, which is very different from trying to explain them or think them through in my mind. I’m not saying there is a split between the mind and the body. I’m saying that thoughts are not abstract, as we think. Thoughts are actually the things that guide action and action demonstrates what you are thinking.

BC: When you call an exhibition “A New Garden,” I can't help but assume that the meaning of that name stretches outside the confines of horticulture. The idea of the studio as “a greenhouse or a garden” makes it a fecund arena for the kind of investigation you're talking about.

SG: “A New Garden” is obviously a very loaded metaphor, so loaded that it becomes didactic. It has this almost evangelical ring to it. I wanted a hint in the title of that desire to transform the world and transform yourself, but the works in the exhibition were actually very open and quite generative and loose. There were these sculptures in the middle of the gallery that were very minimal, but they could also be like planters or the kinds of things people stick their cigarette butts into outside a movie theatre. Here I’m going to go off on a bit of a tangent. I was thinking about the story of John the Baptist where Salome entrances King Herod to grant her any wish and what she asks for is the head of John the Baptist. So they cut off his head and it’s presented on a platter. So then I thought, “What grew from that, what grew out of that when it was put in the ground?” I never told that story in the exhibition, but the portrait of John the Baptist’s decapitated head was in the show. One of the things that grew was my painting. I think it is misguided to decide that only one thing could grow, that the religious is somehow predictable, that when you plant that seed you get this one-dimensional, clearly defined institutional answer, where the parameters are very clear and everybody knows who’s in and who’s out. I think these stories are actually the stories upon which consciousness depends. So it has this radical existence. The story is in the blood. What I’m saying is that the idea of a story has this range and potential, and it’s ridiculous to think that we have moved away from the radical transformative power of story. It is misguided to separate art from these other deeply rooted, archaic and traditional narrative structures.

BC: How does that generative process work? What is it that generates one thing or another when you go into the greenhouse of the imagination?

SG: I don’t know. The show I had in 2011 at MKG127 was the one where I tried my best to come to terms with who I was as an artist. I’ve never laid it out like that before, and that exhibition, while I wouldn’t call it schizophrenic, did have about it a radical polarity. When I look back I realize I had put in motion about 10 different things and none of them were resolved. To make sense of that, in the next exhibition, which is the one that followed our trip to Israel, I did a drawing from a photograph in The Bahá'í World. I discovered that the image was from 1963 and it was in Toronto. I had blown the drawing up and I wasn’t really happy with that, so then I put a mesh grid overtop the drawing. The grid was 2 mm by 2 mm and within these two-millimetre squares were five points, one on each end and one in the middle. The process ended up taking nine months, and I had people helping me with it because I could do only a little section in an eight-hour day. In that drawing I was exploring all these processes of ritual and time and labour and meditation and repetition. It was painful to make physically—I developed all kinds of issues with my

wrist and hand—but it was also painful conceptually because the piece had a huge banner across the front that said, “Say all are created by God.” It was an embarrassing literalization of belief and faith. This thing was confronting me every single day, and three-quarters of the way through I decided I hated it. I had a razor blade and I was going to slice the drawing in half. I called my wife, Julie, and said, “I’m going to slash this drawing so that I can be done with it,” and she said, “Okay, you can do that, but just sit on it for a day. Don’t do it right now. Go back to the studio and do it tomorrow.” I didn’t cut it in half and I kept the drawing. Long story short, this drawing was about the incommensurability of language to articulate what I believe—my faith, my spiritual identity. It couldn’t be done in language and it couldn’t even be done in an image. What was at stake in the drawing was the play between image, picture process and the ineffable. I had dealt with those things not by putting them together, but by totally separating them. They are brought together in the drawing, but they are never in the same place at the same time; if you get close enough to see the dots, you can’t see the image, and if you get far enough away from the image, you can’t see the dots. But when I actually saw it up on the wall, I couldn’t believe that I’d almost cut it in half because it was such a powerful evocation of the things I was grappling with. It caught me totally by surprise. When that show was done I said, “Where do you locate the spiritual in art? If it’s not here and it’s not here, where is it?” I had never asked myself that question before and I realized that where I located it was in the studio. It was in getting up, going to the studio, putting on some music and beginning the process of moving things around and trying something. It wasn’t in an image and it wasn’t even in the story; it was in my body in the studio.

BC: You called your Oakville exhibition “What Is a Self?” To ask that question engages a complex matrix that is aesthetic and familial and spiritual, all things that make up a self. It's not only about art but about how art engages a much fuller sense of what life is.

SG: Exactly. When I was lost or confused or really stilted and I couldn’t move forward, I would enact something visceral and immediate, like working with clay, or carving something and putting foam on it and wrapping that in wax and covering it in paper. I wouldn’t say I was giving the creative impulse free rein because I think that in some ways I’m fairly conservative. Free rein for me is grabbing a piece of wood and slamming it together with a piece of wax or plaster. I wanted to work in a really immediate way, and I had done all these experiments and made hundreds of small figurative sculptures, or sculptures that looked like furniture. The Bauhaus attempted to let all these things influence one another, so furniture designers were also making paintings, painters were weaving. Paul Klee taught the design course for the weavers like Gunta Stölzl and Anni Albers. There was an incredibly interesting dialogue between the decorative arts and the fine arts, and I thought of that period of time where people were moving between categories as this poignant and important moment for art. There was an incredible explosion of artists moving away from stultifying traditions at the turn of the 19th century, and artists were breaking down categories and exercising untrammelled access to their bodies. It was an explosive freedom, and we’re still feeling the reverberations of that big bang. Certainly, the question of modernity has been with me from the very first painting I ever made. I think modernity often gets pitched as a secular reaction to and break from countless centuries of religious domination. Rather than seeing it as a rupture, I wanted to see it as a period of time when the two things were not totally at odds with one another. So I started to enact some of those things. I had my loom, and my weavings were influencing my sculptures and my sculptures were being influenced by furniture. I was actually making furniture. So, in putting quotation marks around modernity, I was opening up the question of where is the spiritual in art.

BC: I'm amazed at the omnivorous nature of the materials you use. It's not unusual for you to use foam and furniture and concrete and clay.

SG: It’s interesting because once I allowed my studio to have a free-flowing conversation between things like furniture and painting, I asked myself, “What the hell am I doing, why am I going in a hundred different directions at once? Is all I’m doing just accessing the creative, intuitive process? Is it a formal art thing, like Design 101, where you experiment with forms and stuff?” And to a degree it was that. That’s why the Bauhaus was interesting to me. I was actually going through some of Paul Klee’s class exercises. I have this book called *The Thinking Eye*, and I spent a year trying to follow his syllabus guidelines for his students. But at another level I have this narrative propensity and so I had to stop. I remember it very clearly. I stopped production in the studio completely. Julie was gone for five days and I had the house to myself and I didn’t come to the studio, I just stayed at home and read and made notes, and in the course of that five days, I realized how I could structure this crazy formalist design sensibility that was moving from weaving to sculpture to painting to collage to whatever. There were 20 things going on at once, and what I realized was that the exhibition was going to be taking place in a house and the house could become a platform. The Gairloch Gallery at Oakville has four separate rooms. So the question “What is a self?” became “How do we structure interior space?” Interior space, the way an interior designer thinks of it, but also interiority, like inner space. I liked being an interior designer and also being someone who is thinking about interiority as a problem in art. So I started to think, what is the scaffolding that allows you to make sense of interiority? How could you

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work through this idea of, say, a moral inventory? I would populate the house with artifacts from my spirit, and each room became different. One room was about writing, one was about memory, and one was about dinner, the communal table. When you came into the exhibition, there was a sculpture called “Euclid,” which had architectural elements like concrete and a cube. It had been made of tiles that were reminiscent of a shower or a bathroom, and the face was a form that was beholden to a Max Ernst painting called “Euclid.” It was like a body that was an architectural space with a foundation and a structure. What was being played out was the idea of a workshop where there is a conversation between craft and design and painting, and then the idea of a house and furnishing it as a metaphor for thinking about identity. All those things were in operation when I was working on that show, which I worked on for two years.

BC: One of the things I have always sensed is that you actually run away from virtuosity.

SG: I think the paintings I am working on right now are trying to deal with that. The artist I have always been haunted by is Matisse, and the last time I was in New York I was in the room at MoMA where they have five or six of his masterpieces. One of them, “The Piano Lesson,” is my favourite painting. I realized that his virtuosity comes from his gift for drawing and his ability to not let the drawing literalize and constrict the painting. The painting is in the drawing and they are in an incredibly rich dialogue. A lot of people will make a drawing and they will fill it in with colour, or they’ll make a painting that is all about colour and it doesn’t have any graphic compositional structure. Which is what I was doing: I was separating them out. “endlessummer,” for example, is just colour. There is a structure but the structure is embedded in the process of its making. I had always kept those things at bay, so when I did those large landscape paintings 10 years ago, I was able to render very well. But the drawing was caught in the photograph. One of the problems every painter encounters is to make a drawing from the photograph and not be trapped by it. It was a problem that Bonnard struggled with until he realized he could never use photographs. So he would make these little thumbnail sketches that were about 3 by 3 inches, like a stamp, and he would work from those thumbnail sketches for years, sometimes 10 years. For me, the problem was I was never going to be able to draw like Matisse, so I went into the photograph and then abandoned the photograph and went into this very process-based thing with the weaving. That show in Toronto called “Display” included that big drawing that, while I wouldn’t call it virtuosic, had representational believability. The image was well constructed but the paintings were all totally abstract. They were pulled apart because I couldn’t quite put together the representational image in the process. But Matisse puts them together in a way that I don’t think any other artist has ever done. At the end, for Matisse, the cut-out, drawing and colour become perfectly aligned. But I struggled with that my whole life because I started making art when I was quite young. That problem was always there for me, and then when I saw the Matisse room again it was horrifying. Everything was going really well with this sporadic, radical moving from weaving to sculpture to painting, and that wide-open space was really working for me. I had a show in New York and people were interested. But in that moment of looking at Matisse, I realized that I had always been running away from the problem and I decided that I should stop running. The reason why it was a terrible moment was because I was aware that I would have to start again, and I mean that literally, I would have to go back to the very beginning. That’s when I started making those little portrait heads you saw in “A New Garden.” They were my attempt to draw and paint using my imagination in an immediate, spontaneous way. I didn’t have a starting point and I didn’t know what the finish would be. I had to let the process take over and all the drawing and the image, the colour and the painting to be in the conversation together.

BC: And were the portraits of anyone in particular? I assume they are invented characters being made up as you go along?

SG: Well, I had the John the Baptist head and one of them was a bit of a self-portrait that was based on a painting by El Greco. But I always wanted to keep the possibility of painting alive. It was only a little hum in the corner, and those little portraits were my attempt to keep alive the dialogue I had described with Matisse. After that show with Michael Klein (MKG127) I began working on these paintings and they are big—like 8 by 10 feet. So the little portraits have now blown up to human body scale. I’ve been working on them for a year and that is the show I am having in the fall. Once is a portrait, one is a garden, one draws heavily on Matisse but also on Paul Nash, Graham Sutherland and a bit of Bacon and Auerbach. Early modernist stuff. These are artists who grappled

with image; they tried to make paintings that were narrative and for whom the process of drawing becomes a really important thing. That’s what happened for me. I started to learn how to draw. I’m not using images or photographs any more. What I’ll do is take a photograph and make a drawing from that, using really bold black and what, and then make a small painting of that, like a watercolour, and then I’ll blow up the watercolour to the 10-foot-range.

BC: And each time you do something, are you learning what the ultimate image will be? Is this a procedure of self-education through process?

SG: For sure. The cool thing about those little ones is that if they don’t work in their entirety, I can start again by pouring sand over them. The sand erases the image but the painting is still alive underneath. I don’t rip it off with turpentine like I used to do. I used to get them to a certain point and if they didn’t work out, I would just scrape them down. Now I pour sand over them or I’ll take paint, like cadmium red or a dark blue indigo, and I’ll paint over the whole surface with a house paint roller. So the painting disappears and then I have to rebuild it, and I rebuild it with colour as an anchor. The architecture of the drawing is embedded in the materials. All of the paintings have gone through this process of getting the structure up through the drawing, breaking it down and rebuilding it through colour.

BC: The pentimento for these paintings would be something to see.

SG: Yes, and the surface is huge. The surface becomes valuable because it shows the engagement with what’s underneath, with what you’re allowing to remain, with what you’re editing out and what you’re bringing forward.

BC: Would it have been possible for you or any other artist to actually go around modernism rather than to have to go through it? Or was it simply unavoidable and you had to come up against it somehow?

SG: Is the question, would it have been better if we didn’t have to grapple with modernism?

BC: I don't know about that. But would it have been possible not to have grappled with modernism or was it just such an obstacle, in both a positive and a negative way, that it had to be dealt with?

SG: I think what happened with me was the studio became a place of play and potential and openness. It became a free place for me, a place of joy. It wasn’t angst, I wasn’t questioning everything; I was just delving in to the process of trying to make something, in a sense to make something beautiful. But in the course of doing that I realized we’re never free of anything, nothing goes away.

BC: So all life is a palimpsest, not just all art?

SG: Yes, everything. It never goes away, ever. The thing is I don’t know that I believe modernism is a category in the way I did when I was in art school. When I look at Gothic art—and I have been looking at a lot of early medieval sculpture, the kind of carvings on the sides of churches and the distillation of the image into a form that can be carved in stone—they look like Matisse and Picasso to me. The thing is, if I’m getting turned on by a sculpture or a painting from the 13th century, is that painting in my time, or is it in a different time? Is it now? Because if I’m looking at it and it’s making my heart beat and I’m blown away by it, what time is it? Is it just a relic; is it an artifact? I think art is always in real time; visual art is always in the present.

BC: I found a lot of the sculptures that you showed at MKG127 to be impenetrable, even inscrutable. They were objects that were so present that they didn't allow you to do much with them other than acknowledge their "thereness."

SG: Fair enough. I think they were pretty raw and I’m not sure that even I understand what they were doing. They were very minimal and really blocky, like Donald Judd done by somebody who doesn’t know how to build anything. I think sculpture has that incredible potential of taking something from the world and putting a force field around it and allowing the viewer to see it again. But I’ve struggled for years with trying to compress that into a painting and I don’t think I have ever been able to do it. That’s what I am trying to do now. So as important as it has been for me to be a shape-shifter, to constantly keep moving, I think it is also time to grow up a little bit.

BC: When you were talking about your 2011 exhibition called "Background," you said you were after a certain tension and you didn't want it to be resolved. Is irresolution a preferable state? And if that is the case, why would it be?

SG: That is a good question. If something is still in a state of becoming, when you look at it you become a part of its realization. It’s not all filled in. It’s hard to get a painting to remain unresolved. One thing I was good at all along when I encountered something in my work that was a real weakness was figuring out how to get around it. I never did something that I couldn’t do. If I was trying to paint

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Sky Glabush
 "The Singer and the Song," 2020
 Oil and sand on canvas
 24 1/2 x 21 in
 62.2 x 53.3 cm

a certain way and it wasn't working, I'd find another way to paint. But in the last few years I've found more of my own voice. Looking back, I could see that there was a way I went about making a painting that was my own. It took a long time to get to the stage where I could believe in it enough. I had a tough time with painting for a few years, and some part of me thought that I would never make a painting again. So getting back into it has been a process of accepting the fact that I have these serious limitations, but also to realize that the limitations and the awkwardness are actually where much of what makes the work my own resides. I can do a photo-realistic painting, but this other element that I'm looking for has something to do with personality, and I think the personality emerges not in the virtuosic painter; the guy admits that he struggles with drawing, but it's that struggle that makes his work really fantastic. There are painters who make absolutely contrived moves that they keep going back to, like muscle memory. So, back to your question about my virtuosity: I have serious weaknesses in terms of making a painting and they are weaknesses that I've avoided from the very beginning because I was embarrassed. And these new paintings have some of that "looking bad" quality, like someone who's trying to figure out how to do something. But what I've developed over the last 15 years is a trust that when things look bad, if you have the courage to go straight at them, the thing will emerge that is worthwhile. It's hard because you might go through a few years of making work that people just shake their head at, but, for me, there's no other way. There's no other way to get to that place where I can find my voice.

BC: Do paintings do some things better and do sculptures do other things better? When you're thinking about making something, are you measuring the resistances or achievements that any one of those particular art forms can provide?

SG: If you want to learn how to be creative, the last thing I would do is try to make a painting. In the craft of traditions in general there is a lot of labour involved and a lot of steps that are super-valuable in learning about the creative process. Weaving is extremely repetitive. You can't totally space out when you're weaving because you're looking and counting and measuring as you go, but you also can't be focusing because you'll go crazy. You have to be in the middle space between being very present and being completely in a dream world. I think sculpture allows you to be present in the world in a way that is especially interesting. I start seeing everything as sculpture; I see forms in a pile of garbage, or in a mound of clothes in a thrift store. So sculpture seems to be a way into thinking about how objects inhabit the world and the way we inhabit objects. And photography has an incredible link to memory and to light. Every medium has that kind of specificity, and I don't think there is a hierarchy of forms or of values. When I was at the Met I saw 12th-century Islamic pots that gave me that same weak-at-the-knees feeling I got from Matisse. That's one of the distinguishing features of any great artist. If you're an architect but all your architecture looks like a stage set, that's one form architecture can take. But with Louis Kahn a brick was an integral thing; the brickness of the brick was intrinsically implicated in the process of the building. That's what I'm after: to figure out what is this language, what are its inherent properties, is it an evocation of a meaningful and genuine search? And if it isn't, how can I make that quality of understanding my place in the world through the lens of art present? That's what I have been trying to do.