

MELISSA STERN: MEMORY, MARKINGS, THE PAST

“Back to School, “ Children’s Museum of the Arts, 2003

Paul J. Karlstrom

The art of Melissa Stern is deceptive in its playful, childlike quality. She is best known for her highly imaginative (and frequently amusing) ceramic sculpture, usually involving the human figure. Most of her figures, whether sculptural or drawn, call to mind sophisticated illustrations for children's stories. Stern would readily acknowledge the connection many viewers will make between the drawings in this exhibition and those in the best children's books. However, she sees her work removed from specific narrative and functioning instead in terms of psychology and metaphor. As much as we would like a ceramic standing figure--feet nailed to the floor, arms holding aloft a branch upon which large birds perch--to introduce a fascinating if disturbing fable, there is no story to explain it. Or put another way, the figure itself, and the associations it produces in the mind of the viewer, is the story.

Stern is careful to create images strictly from her own personal experiences and concerns, past and present, and the imaginative equivalents they suggest to her. The narrative, if there is one, is the secret world of Melissa Stern. What elevates these images to the status of compelling works of art is her willingness to share her world. She does so in a calculated or strategic way, through fantastic images intended to create for the viewer mental and sensory aids that become bridges to the past. Although Stern is loathe to speak directly to meaning and artistic intention in her work, preferring to allow it to make its magic without interference, it is clear that she is using memory and the past to provide the keys to self-discovery in the present.

During the modern era, especially in recent decades, the most compelling and thought-provoking images have been drawn from personal experience. At the core of such creative endeavor is a preoccupation with the “self” and one's place in a confusing and frequently threatening world. There is, however, a danger in this creative “personalism” that the perspective developed and conveyed may become myopically self-indulgent. Individual anxieties and neuroses, eagerly confessed in autobiographical revelations, seek elevated positions of universal interest and application, the world and life in general then to be apprehended through the artist's own experience and observations. Therein lies the main risk of this mining of the self for glimpses of truth and meaning. But, handled sensitively and with humility, as is the case with these drawings by Melissa Stern, the excavation of one individual's past can provide in art a useful model, a reminder of where we viewers also may look as we seek to understand who and what we have become. Stern's art, in its honesty and directness, accomplishes this elusive and difficult goal. Memory provides the key. (1)

Certainly it is possible to discuss the Stern's art in formal and art historical terms, perhaps making connections with earlier modernist interests in retrieving the world of

childhood as an alternative to adult regimentation and loss of creative imagination. This was a characteristic of the surrealist agenda, and it also is encountered in the work of Paul Klee and others whose work Stern's figures may bring to mind. Such a romantic view of childhood, however, is not shared by Stern. In fact, her memories tend to fall on the darker side. Drawings such as *School Lunch*, *Dance*, *Contagious*, *Bully*, and *Substitute Teacher* all evoke decidedly unpleasant and stressful aspects of the primary school experience, a major site for Stern's unromanticised reflections upon her childhood. In fact, virtually all of these drawings betray in aggregate a world that adults should be grateful they have survived and left behind. Most of us will be reminded of events so painful at the time that we wished we could disappear, or at least move far away to another city or town to escape lives made miserable by unsympathetic, capricious teachers and hostile classmates. Melissa Stern remembers this and reminds us that the typical playground, for many of us, was a dangerous and unhappy place. Her response to it was sometimes nervous laughter at the oddness and darkness of the experience. It is this element of humor that children invariably understand; "they get it," Stern points out. This, of course, is the opposite of the sentimental and nostalgic view of revisionist adulthood.

In considering Stern's drawings and seeking an approach that would reveal their unique character, I decided that to focus heavily on stylistic and related characteristics would be misleading. It is true that modernism placed a special value on primitivism and naivete as signs of expressive authenticity, and the uninitiated might mistake Stern's drawings as participating in this phenomenon. They would, however, be wrong. Her art is sophisticated in its awareness of fine art and the various available means of expression and in its objectives. She has made a conscious decision to align herself with two of her great enthusiasms, non-Western and outsider art.

Among the variety of artists whose work she has admired are Giotto, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Max Beckman (whom she describes as her "all-time hero"), Clemente, Susan Rothenberg, Basquiat, Ray Johnson, Anselm Kiefer, and anonymous photographers of carnival and circus performers. She professes to be "deeply moved" by the work of Northern California clay sculptor Robert Brady. One might also draw comparisons to Jean Dubuffet and Art Brut, but that too would miss the point. Whatever figurative and stylistic similarities may exist, I believe the meaning of Stern's very original imagery is to be found in the premium she places on memory as a means to an expanded understanding of the self. With this in mind, I opted to examine the work from a psychological perspective, seeking meaning in the artist's history and emotional life. And I decided to go directly to the source to gather the information I needed.

Over a period of several months I informally interviewed Melissa Stern, and the following observations are based on our conversations as well as an extended look at the work itself. (2) The resulting insights may not explain all aspects of her art, but her statement provides assurance that we are on the right track:

This series of drawings is about my memories of grade school. Like most children, I loved and hated school, couldn't wait to go on Monday and couldn't wait to leave on Friday. This push and pull of feelings is my central memory of childhood. One tends to think of children's emotional lives as relatively simple, even "elementary" as the saying goes. In hindsight, our inner lives were as complex and layered as they are today. We just use bigger words now. (3)

The following fragments from our recent discussions provide the essential clues to the meaning of the drawings. Despite Stern's resistance to talking about her work, characteristic of many artists, through these verbal exchanges the images take on a new life rich with associations and implications that might otherwise be missed.

The extent to which Melissa Stern lives just beneath the surface of her art becomes clear as she describes her relationship to it. According to her, at the core of her art making is the desire to be "known in the world"—as a person, not necessarily as an artist. Yet set against that impulse is fear of rejection and being judged, of not being accepted. This wanting to be known but being nervous about it is, for Stern, a reason to make art. Afraid to reveal her secrets, she can let them "sneak out" through her drawings. Uncomfortable and silent about many of the concerns she harbors, including the gender and girlhood issues that appear, the artist expresses them in pictorial code, what she calls a "sneakier way." The tension that this conflict creates explains, for her, the unsettling and disturbing quality in her art. This psychological dimension appears throughout the drawings, notably in examples such as *Dance*, *Lost*, *Mommy*, and *New Girl*. In fact, most of these drawings betray an almost palpable anxiety.

One of the most revealing drawings, both literally and figuratively, depicts a standing nude girl, looking directly at the viewer with her right hand on a shapeless hip. One suspects that *Most Likely* is a self-portrait, and its message is youthful vulnerability and growing self-knowledge. The little girl with words (text from an old psychology book on hypnosis) for hair, budding breasts indicated, is a proto-sexual being, a Lolita type who is approaching awareness of the womanly powers that await her. But it is significant that this image, as is the case in much of Stern's sculpture as well as the drawings, is without genitals. This feature of Stern's figurative iconography more than invites Freudian analysis; it demands it—especially when one considers that all of the male figures are also deprived of genitalia. (4) Whatever one's interpretation of such anomalies, there seems to be no question that the nude (presumably) pre-pubescent girl represents the sexual insecurities and anxieties that accompany growing up.

The main theme, the need to make connection with others, to be known fully and intimately, coupled with the basic fear of rejection, is reiterated throughout the various figural images, in ceramic sculpture as well as in the drawings. Stern sees this dilemma as true for both children and adults. And the result, as she sees it, is a "doing and not doing," showing but doing so indirectly. Working with symbols one cannot be pinned down. The invitation implicit in her work is to get to know the artist through the

clues offered. But the real goal, according to Stern, is to provide effective means for viewers of her imagery to better know themselves, to recognize elements in their own pasts that help to explain who and what they have become. Stern insists that her main objective is to hang onto the past that is reified and secured through art. Through memory, she says, the desire to know oneself is fulfilled. She sees herself as a dog with a bone or rawhide who “chews, chews, chews.” Her image supplies an arresting and revealing portrait of the artist. Stern goes on to describe her images as “triggers” that create an ambience, a visual context in which memories of childhood emerge. And her stated primary goal is to transport the individual viewer into the past. For that task she has developed various strategies, a calculated approach beyond the powers of children, folk artists, or the insane, all of whom take a much more direct approach to image-making. She feels that her work is subversive in that it sets up the viewer to participate in her chosen program. She describes the process as one of gradual discovery in which the viewer, imagining he or she has “gotten it” (uncovered the meaning), discovers something else that says “stop, go back to work...look again.” Her creations are parts of a short story that the viewer then writes, completing the narrative through personal memory and experience. Perceptive viewers will understand that they have had the good fortune to encounter a generous collaborator in Melissa Stern.

Stern's intriguing art and imagery are about the “examined life” and the role of thought, reflection, and introspection as sources for meaningful creative expression. As an educated thinking person, she has integrated art-making into her life as her chosen means to understand herself in the world, to accept who she is and to realize her desire to be recognized by others. At its best, she believes her work assures us that we are not alone--that, despite the fears that beset us, child and adult alike, we are “okay” after all. She disagrees with the therapist's goal for the patient to come to terms with childhood memories, to “acknowledge and move on.” And she is outspoken in her determination not to move on. The past is to be valued; to lose it, and the feelings associated with memory, is to deny ourselves and what formed us. To understand the past is to understand oneself. That is the big idea to which these drawings are dedicated.

In addition to the determining influence of these overriding goals, Stern's art is also the product of her own intellectual life and educational experience. Her father directed her away from art school, believing that good art depended upon the development of the mind and writing skills. (5) He insisted that artists needed to be “smart.” As a result, she studied art history and anthropology. Her undergraduate honors thesis in anthropology at Wesleyan University was entitled “Art and its Ritual Context,” an entirely apt subject for the future artist. She was interested in why we make art at all, and she concluded that the purpose was to evoke the past, to stimulate and foster memory. This experience led her to abandon pursuing a career in museum work, a one-time goal fostered by her childhood visits to the anthropological museum at the University of Pennsylvania, just a few blocks from her home. She recalls the sense of awe and mystery that the experience engendered. Those visits, and her experience as a

teenager in a low-level job at the Philadelphia Art Museum, brought her into contact with objects from different cultures and periods. This was followed by exposure to Pop art and San Francisco Bay Area Funk. Robert Arneson was an important influence at that time. She describes her teenage period pieces as “funny and sarcastic,” qualities that have carried into the present.

After college she wanted to make things rather than study them. Abandoning the cerebral approach to art, she became interested in how creativity functions beyond repositories of ideas. In other words, she decided to devote herself to finding ways to draw personally upon the power of art to make people feel. To arouse the subjective response that is frequently lost, or stifled, by an academic approach that reduces art to mere illustration of intellectual history. Melissa Stern came to see her creative task in terms of fashioning contemporary artifacts that have the power to connect to the past. And she now understands her role, the role of the artist, as modern day priestess or shaman. She and her fellow artists are then conveyers of a specific area of truth and knowledge that lies beyond and outside the rational world in which most of us in modern Western society function.

Finally, Melissa Stern consistently deploys pictorial means—style and working method—in the service of a fundamentally humanist art, of which the drawings are a significant part. She recycles her drawings in an ongoing process of experimentation and discovery, frequently introducing collage elements from Life magazine of the 1940s and 1950s, as the old becomes the new. The individual identity of each drawing, maintained over time and through various changes, is entirely analogous to the connection Stern seeks to reveal between the past and the present. The adult achieves greater sense of his or her place in the world by remembering how that awareness was first developed and negotiated as a child. It is interesting, if hardly surprising, that Stern's own childhood drawings and sculptures were, according to her account, very similar in expressive quality to her mature work. (6)

The process of building the drawings is laborious and time-consuming. Stern works on each one for months. They are typically thickly layered, with subtle color and texture reflecting the emotions that she intends to convey. The work is laid down or built up, drawing upon drawing, one placed over another. Then a thin white or gray wash is applied, covering the image but revealing, almost as *pentimenti*, what lies beneath. In Stern's words, hints of earlier layers that lie beneath the surface, are allowed to “sneak through.” (7) This provides a perfect technical metaphor for the passage of time, operation of memory, and the slow retrieval of earlier experience. In any event, to make the drawings look simple is difficult, requiring considerable time. And so we return to our starting point, the need to understand the artist's intent to better appreciate that profound and ambitious goals lie, only partly hidden, beneath Melissa Stern's deceptively simple surface imagery.

Paul J. Karlstrom

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Notes

(1) Memory has increasingly become a subject of study in many areas, including the arts. An especially relevant anthology, part of the Routledge Studies in Memory and Narrative series, is *Art and the Performance of Memory: Sounds and Gestures of Recollection* (London: Routledge, 2002). Edited by Richard Cándida Smith, the volume includes the author's essay "Eros in the Studio," in which memory is central to how past experience is reconstructed to create self-conception in the present.

(2) Although I have talked with Stern about her work over a period of at least ten years, most of the comments and responses that are included here, unless otherwise indicated, come from a long phone conversation that took place on 2 September 2002 and a shorter one on 20 October 2002. The basic conceptual framework also reflects ideas about image-making as a means for children to gain control of their worlds. My essay on the subject appears in Elizabeth Goodenough (ed.), *Secret Spaces of Childhood, Part 2*, a special issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* 39:3 (Summer 2000), 459.

(3) Artist's statement, e-mailed to author 19 September 2002.

(4) One may safely assume that her figures are less a commentary on men than another acknowledgment of her own childhood fears and apprehensions.

- E-mail from Melissa Stern to the author, 20 October 2002.

(6) *Ibid.* Unfortunately, none of the drawings were saved. Several sculptures, however, are extant; one example is reproduced here.

- *Ibid.*

(7) Artist's statement, e-mailed to author 19 September 2002.