

*The Messengers*

Gale Antokal

Gale Antokal's collection *The Messengers*, like much of her previous work, is a gracious presentation, at once poetic and ghostly, of everyday subjects. While this presentation amounts to a fairly dramatic, if also hushed, formal innovation, it is always clear that form is not an end in itself, but rather Antokal's means of gently coaxing mysterious and affecting essences from "ordinary" images that matter to her. Among other things, her works remind us of, and give back, what was lost in the photographs that served as their inspirations — what is always lost when we see with a merely physical eye.

Despite the preeminence of "simple," concrete subject matter — bicyclists, walking feet, a building, etc. — it may be through the formal concept of *space* that these new works (and many older ones) may be most profitably approached. What surrounds her simple subjects mostly recedes into faint softness (disappears, one might say), creating the mutually reinforcing feelings of intimacy and enveloping immensity. Great space can imply great possibility, and therefore hope. But it can also evoke the potential for failure and disappointment, whether through the realization of our insignificance, the futility of individual effort in a world so large, or the inevitable dissolution that awaits us all. Is it optimistic or pessimistic, transcendent vision or denial of painful reality, that Antokal's subjects themselves seem always on the verge of beautifully fading away? Or are these fading subjects an unflinching acknowledgment of our participation in universal flux, albeit one that sympathizes and honors?

There is another kind of space that bears mentioning — that between the viewer's uninformed experience of these works and the historical reality that provides one level of narrative coherence: the murder and victimization of Eastern Europeans in hundreds of locations from 1941 to 1943. *First Shot* is based on a preserved photograph of a small building where some of these victims were most likely rounded up to be killed. Similarly, *Group Shot 2* derives from a photograph of a political youth group whose members will later perish after fighting in the underground. Mostly, however, the paintings express imaginative associations. *Group Shot 1*, for example, evokes an incident in Daugavpils, where women and children were abused and forced to bathe in an icy river. The collection is anchored by images of bicyclists, whom Antokal sees as "messengers" (with the double sense of "angels," another meaning of the Hebrew word *malachim*) journeying to tell the world of the terrible events.

It is not a trivial question to ask why the viewer's uninformed experience of the works seems to be situated at such a great distance from this important history. It is just as central to ask how, precisely, such conceptual space affects the ability of this history to return, speak its truth, and resonate. However we answer these questions, we can recognize Antokal's sympathetic identification with the bicyclists, as both are attempting — they over physical distance, she over time — to bridge the distance between those tragic incidents and the world's ignorance of them.

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