

***Blood Work* drawing performance by Ram Samocha**

January 9, 2010, Red Head Gallery, Toronto

Ram Samocha began his performance with a clean white wall. The artist dipped his brush in bright red paint and started painting at an arbitrary height. He painted horizontal strokes, one after another, and when he got to the end of a row, he would repeat the same act on the next row, with the fresh red paint dripping down the surface of the wall and blending into the new row that he was painting. While painting the first few rows, he made some sighs, groans, and grunts. Later, he hummed the national anthem of Israel. Towards the end, he sang individual notes that came together like a musical scale. When he was close to the bottom of the wall, his daughter came forward to ask him what he was doing. He kissed her, and then continued painting to the uttermost bottom of the wall.

His whole performance was a pessimistic, but moving, representation of the history of humanity. His choice of material, fake blood, set the tone for the performance. The white wall implied that, in the absence of humans, all was pure and sinless; a tabula rasa in the absence of humanity. The bold, red strokes seemed to represent humanity with the artist telling the story of how humans raped the pureness and permanently stained it with their history. The repeating uniform red strokes, were indicative of how history repeats itself, as humans mindlessly engage in war after war. As the paint from higher lines dripped down the surface of the wall and coalesced with the new stroke beneath it, the audience was reminded that hatred was passed on from one generation to another, and that the vulnerable new generation often had no choice but to inherit what was given to it. Whenever the artist arrived at the end of the wall, there was a moment of suspense as to whether he would continue. This moment, during which there was a mild sense of hope for the redemption of humanity, was invariably followed by another row of red strokes. Most of the time, the artist just robotically painted, marring the pure whiteness of the wall. There were moments, though, when he stood back and pondered what to do next. However, these moments of self-reflection never led to any deviation from the main theme.

The audio component was more difficult to interpret. The initial sighs and groans were primitive sounds that could have represented early human history. Some gave a sense of innocence, others aggression. One was forced to think that, perhaps, during humanity's early development, there were actually two destinies we could have chosen. Humans could have chosen peace, but evidently opted for conflict. The artist then started humming the national anthem of Israel. Did he mean to convey the idea of nationalism? In terms of progression of the work, however, the audience was compelled to feel a sense of construction here, given that the pleasant-sounding melody was following the previous bouts of primitive grunts. Then, the audio turned into some sort of a broken musical scale. One expected it to turn more dissonant, but it never did.

There was always a discernible harmony. The artist used the tonic, subdominant, and dominant frequently, and almost always returned to the tonic at the end of a phrase. The audience held their breath and hoped for that moment when the artist would finally broke away from tonal music and attempt to create something extraordinary of his own (even if it meant some futile cacophonies akin to atonal music). It never happened. It was very dissatisfying, but more than likely appropriate, if the artist's goal was to suggest our failure to stop repeating our history.

Was there any hope for humanity at all? That was the question the audience was confronted with towards the end of the performance. As the artist came close to the bottom of the wall and the audience was thinking there was no hope to humanity, the artist's daughter came over and asked the artist what he was doing. (She actually came over twice.) It was an extraordinary moment. The audience was reminded that, after all, each generation is a tabula rasa, and will only inherit its predecessors' hatreds and conflicts if directed to do so. So, at that moment, when the audience was almost convinced that the world would never change, hope was renewed by the youthful innocence that the artists' daughter instilled in the performance. Yet, what happened next? The artist continued to draw his bloody strokes until he ran out of room. So, the audience was left with this feeling that there is no way out. There is no hope for humanity.

The artist is planning to repaint the wall. It would be marvelous if we could collectively erase our historical conflicts just like that.

Valerie Wong, 2010

