

A Bird's-Eye View

Ella Bern

My artwork consists of collages, paintings, and poetry that I have done over the years in the course of my work as an analyst and analyst-in-formation. Each piece emerged at a different stage in my analytic experience, while also working with others in an analytic framework, often in response to facing something I had no words for. When words encounter such a limit, it is in this act of artistic creation that I am able to find a path for what remains unsayable or out-of-language. The act produces an image, linked to a word, linked to an experience buried under years of silence. These pieces give shape to unconscious, censored or unsayable moments of my life in chronological order, in two different cultures, undergoing an analysis in two different languages with three different analysts. Starting with the painting of the “Blue Bird” that I did at the end of my first analysis, and ending with “The Borderline” that I wrote just recently, I think of my artwork as a tangible expression of the feminine.

Red lips, a mouth, a breast, eyes, a phallus — partial objects related to the work of the free drive in my body find a form of expression that otherwise escapes my grasp. It feels grounding and cathartic to cut pieces, arrange them, glue them together, smell the perfumed Vogue magazine pages, and imagine a scene other than the one I am in. Yet, each image is speaking of a past pain, in bits and pieces, fragmented, like the collage itself. Putting the pieces together during my analysis allows me to trace the link between each but only retroactively, sometimes years later. I could have stopped speaking many times. I could have left it at the level of the collage, or the painting, or the poem. But there is something that keeps pushing forward — my desire to create a visible fruit of my labor and that of others. Like a photograph, a piece of art captures a time in space, a piece of my subjectivity, my singu-

larity at that point in my life, connected by a string of signifiers to a past lived and a future unknown. In this time-space-continuum of my unconscious, the beauty in today touches on the ugly of yesterday. The “Romance” of the present covers the fear in the past, like a silk sheet spread over a field of thorns.

When I created each of these pieces, they were not meant to be seen by others. Some hang on the walls in my home — in the kitchen, in the bathroom, in my bedroom, and in the basement. One hangs on the wall at the bottom of the stairs, the staircase ceiling casting a shadow over it so that the memories can remain in plain sight, yet concealed by darkness. Sometimes, I sign my artwork and sometimes, I don't. Sometimes, I give titles; sometimes, I won't. It is only after the fact, that I am able to connect them to the larger process of my analysis, the different stages I have gone through in order to have access to this part of me that is unaddressable yet wants to speak, loudly. The act of creating for me takes different forms and modes of expression from art and poetry, to clinical work. This desire will ever recreate and rediscover itself like a shapeshifter, and in its act I feel the beautiful appear; an act that hopefully touches others and makes them see. My work is not done yet. In fact, it may be just beginning.

A Bird's-Eye View

I am a bird with no home
Domesticated.
I am a bird with no nest
Mother of many.

I am a bird alone
Claimed.
I am a bird soaring free
Chained.

I am a bird with no wings
Flying with the wind.
I am a bird on my flyway
Lost.

I am a bird with piercing
eyes
Short-sighted.
I am a bird singing
Suffocated.

I am a bird wounded
Healing others.
I am a bird looking closely
From a bird's-eye view.



Ella Bern, *Blue Bird*, Oil on canvas, 12x16in, 2012 © Courtesy of the artist.



Ella Bern, *Romance*, Collage, magazine clippings on paper, 11x14in, 2017 © Courtesy of the artist.



Ella Bern, *Montage of the Sexual*, Collage, 11x14in, 2017 © Courtesy of the artist.



Ella Bern, *Paris*, Collage, magazine clippings on paper 11x14in, 2017 © Courtesy of the artist.

The Consulting Room

I.

If the couch could speak,
It would tell you about callous hands
Reaching for the soft black velvet
As if holding onto a life raft, trying not to drown
In a sea of tears.

It would tell you about a letter written
But never mailed that floods the mind
With memories of holding hands, living
through a body in pain, heavy as it floats away
In a sea of tears.

II.

If the walls could speak,
They would tell you about laughter echoing
Years of friendship that vibrates through the air
Like a humming bird's wings right before consuming
Years worth of flower nectar.

They would tell you about a child's silhouette
As afternoon sunlight comes through the windows
Reflected in the orange brown hues of Mel Allen's "Ullswater"
Still and quiet dawn.

III.

If the plants could speak,
They would tell you about humming vents
In between long exhales after inhales
In the pauses that say
More than words.

They would tell you about the noise and chatter
That silence the soul and
Sever the spirit that hides behind
A deep deep breath.

IV.
If the toys could speak,
They would tell you about families
Torn apart by angry beasts and inherited monsters
Who fought superheroes and soldiers on solid ground
Where dead bodies resurrect battlefields.

They would tell you about young people
Held together by superpowers
Brought alive through stories in play
Where trembling fingers turn to magic wands.

V.
If the armchair could speak,
It would tell you about the weight
That keeps it grounded
In a whirlpool of fear
Tossing shipwrecks into island shores.

It would tell you about my broken body
Mended by threads of words
That paint pictures of golden sands
To ward off drowning in a blood filled-bath.

VI.

If the room could speak,
It would tell you about an embrace
Of words shielding the mind against slits and bruises
That cut the soul and mark the body
Like thorns through silk.

It would tell you about big voices
Bouncing between its walls that thunder
Through the clouds and storms of the past
To clear up room for the sunlight and raindrops of tomorrow.

VII.

If I could speak,
I would tell you about floating heads
Blown away by the wind like balloons
As I trace the strings of their stories
To tie them in a knot around myself like to a rock.

If I could speak,
I would tell you about armies of kisses
Invading the mind like nightmares that repeat
In a cycle of words whispered softly like velvet, listening
As I try not to drown in a sea of tears.



Ella Bern, *You Just Have to Hustle*, Collage, magazine clippings on paper, 11x14in, 2017 ©
Courtesy of the artist.



Ella Bern, *Medusa*, Collage, magazine clippings on paper, 11x14in, 2021 © Courtesy of the artist.



Ella Bern, *Adolescence*, Collage, 11x14in, 2021 © Courtesy of the artist.



Ella Bern, *We Believe All Survivors*, Collage, magazine clippings on paper, 11x14in, 2021 © Courtesy of the artist.

The Borderline

1. characterized by psychological instability in several areas (such as interpersonal relations, behavior, and identity) but only with brief or no psychotic episodes; a borderline personality disorder.
2. being in an intermediate position or state: not fully classifiable as one thing or its opposite
3. situated at or near a border¹

In childhood:
Drawings on olive skin
Shine under overhead dim light,
The memory of love in a glint of an eye
Spreads through *the body*
Like cancer.

That same *body*, still untouched,
Penetrated by disease
Of ill-man's kiss that kills cells
Left with scars to rot the tissues
Like the plague.

Childhood no more.
Faces turn to skulls;
Rainbows, unicorns and mermaids
Hiss deathly omens that drown dreams
In pools of liquor.

¹ "Borderline." In *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved 13 December 2022. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/borderline>

In puberty:
The body, no longer virgin
Sore in its core flips and turns,
Thigh-Stand, Toe-Touch, Pike.
Audiences cheer clueless claps
Silencing a severed soul.

That same ill-man's kiss, like rotten
Teeth stinks up the air, a seal of silence
Binds *the body* in torment
that can't be broken,
Drowning dreams in pools of liquor.

In adolescence:
Unfinished drawings on white paper sketchbook...
Skipping breakfast, skipping lunch
A new *body*, left alone angry.
A kind boy's kiss kills the memories
Of disease that spreads like cancer.

The body, starved and sick,
Skipping dinner, skipping class,
having sex and smoking pot
Under bridges, under stars,
Drowning dreams in pools of liquor.

In recovery:
A *body* disconnected,
Sad dissociating flashbacks.
A blade to make it feel
Alive.
I am A witness to the black shadow that was once
Childhood.

A semicolon tattoo,
A white rose on fire
Adorn the skin to cover
Scars of ill-man's touch.
I am A witness to the dream-haunting beast that was once
Puberty.

Recovery is a cloud
Of hope, two hands reaching
For pencil instead of pills -
Black-horned angel, wings spread like bird.
I thread The Borderline between *the body* and me
to fly towards what will be a new
Adolescence.

Ella Bern is a clinician, analyst-in-formation and a member of the Freudian School of Quebec in Canada. She is an adjunct faculty at DePaul University's Counseling Program and a lecturer in the Art Therapy Department of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. She owns a counseling private practice where she works with children, adolescents, families, couples and young people, who struggle in their relationships to others or have experienced trauma in their lives. She does visual art both in her clinical and personal work as a means to express what comes from the out-of-language. In her free time, she writes poetry, creative non-fiction, fiction and children's stories. She is interested in the intersection between aesthetics, psychoanalysis, culture, sexuality, trauma and art.