

Gloria Massé

There Were Once Wolves At Jericho Beach

"I listen to a tape of wolves howling while I paint."

"WOLVES" 1989
First Wolf Show, series
of six foot canvasses
at Diane Farris Gallery
Vancouver

While Massé considers this work a portrait of the reality of wolf life, for me the images also carry a tough and tender mystery couched in simple observation. Hers is nothing short of unqualified admiration. "I'm taken with their freedom," she says, "and I want it for them."

Wolf: Erect-eared straight-tailed harsh-furred tawny-grey wild gregarious carnivorous quadruped allied to the dog; combines in packs to hunt, abundant in the Northern Hemisphere.

From anywhere within this huge work, we see an almost eighty-foot long panorama of Nature, visceral and vegetable. Wolf panels depicting the animal painted in various combinations of impossible yet seemingly natural colours are connected by large close-up panels of lupins which bloom in the millions at Jericho Beach in Vancouver each summer. These thin lupin panels depict the plant in progressive stages of bloom, seeding and decay. They frame the wolves so complementarily that upon viewing, one knows this panorama is supposed to exist: Nothing is arbitrary or even collaged in the pop sense.

"All animals are mysterious to me. Not mystic, mysterious. I became interested in wolves five years ago while reading books by Lois Chrisler who lived with wolves in Alaska. I came to know how wonderful these animals are. I was never afraid of wolves. I was never afraid of nature. I used to fill my pockets with snakes. Little Red Riding Hood, Peter and the Wolf, and The Three Little Pigs were always a disappointment to me. I knew as a child that these stories had nothing to do with wolves."

Part fantasia, part explanation, part ideal, framed by voluptuous blooming and dying lupins, these wolves are presented lovingly and with the greatest iconographic respect. It could outrage its first audiences for precisely this reason. Who is Gloria Massé to think that the wolf can reach Olympia? Did she take a love potion? Is she naïve regarding wolves? Seeing the work will open a new world, a kind of secular worshipping attitude to the viewer. This world is beautifully accompanied with intensely coloured lupins, not stifling the wolves, but clearly complimenting them, holding them close to Nature and to us, and therein lies our entry.

"I feel now that I can paint my vision of reality, and the unity of things, solid and ether. We have learned about the atoms, how everything isn't sharp, how everything flows. In my painting, from the Units of Energy to the Grass and even the Mangos --- they are running with juice: there is a conscious integration of foreground and background. All hard lines bother me...mechanical drawing. Wolves are an opportunity to make grass run."

Cool-eyed passion from Massé's brush and mind gives us the Simple Idea in overwhelming proportions: Maybe we should embrace the wild things. For here we are facing big concepts like survival, beauty and the harsh reality of Nature. There is even more: a rich contradiction, a necessary contradiction which faces us when coming to terms with Nature. It is at the apex of modern dilemmas residing in disbelief and desperate needs for answers. What is this artist doing? Is it worship? Love? Reality? What?

Some of us carry fear when we think about wolves. Massé tries to put this myth aside and invites us along. Though she does not idealize these animals, she honours them, indeed dignifies them by transformation, aesthetically and culturally transposing them into art. This is similar to and possibly tantamount to worship. For me, this work manifests the artist's (and others') struggle against deification in art and life.

And there is another part to the rich contradiction: Massé exposes some ambivalence regarding pantheism. She is an a-mystic yet eco-conscious artist. We see here visceral, emotionally charged, purposefully non-intellectual images. We are seeing impossibly green and red wolves, no stuffed Audobon-style depictions. Massé wants us involved. Notwithstanding the denials of mystic romanticism, she is clearly drawn to these wolves in non-verbal and ecstatic ways. The viewer sees them clearly as images beyond the norm, more than a documentary by an informed animal conservationist. As with the compelling "Green Mates Red" panel, we are mated to the Simple Idea, the gesture, the compelling howl of Nature, the same call which drives Massé.

for Invitation to Show
By
Tom Graff
Van.