

CELEBRATING LIFE, DENOUNCING HUMAN VIOLENCE

By: Peter London



Bridge Series #13

Seymour Segal, a painter whose lush women and driven men, whose arresting color and virtuoso brush strokes can and has dazzled us for over fifty years, knows how to create enchanting images that quickly gather one into their world. A world loud with passion and daring, verve and Eros. More than merely visually arresting, Segal's work quickens one, shocking one into realizing that he/she has lived a more more subdued and safe life than realized before visiting an exhibition of his work.

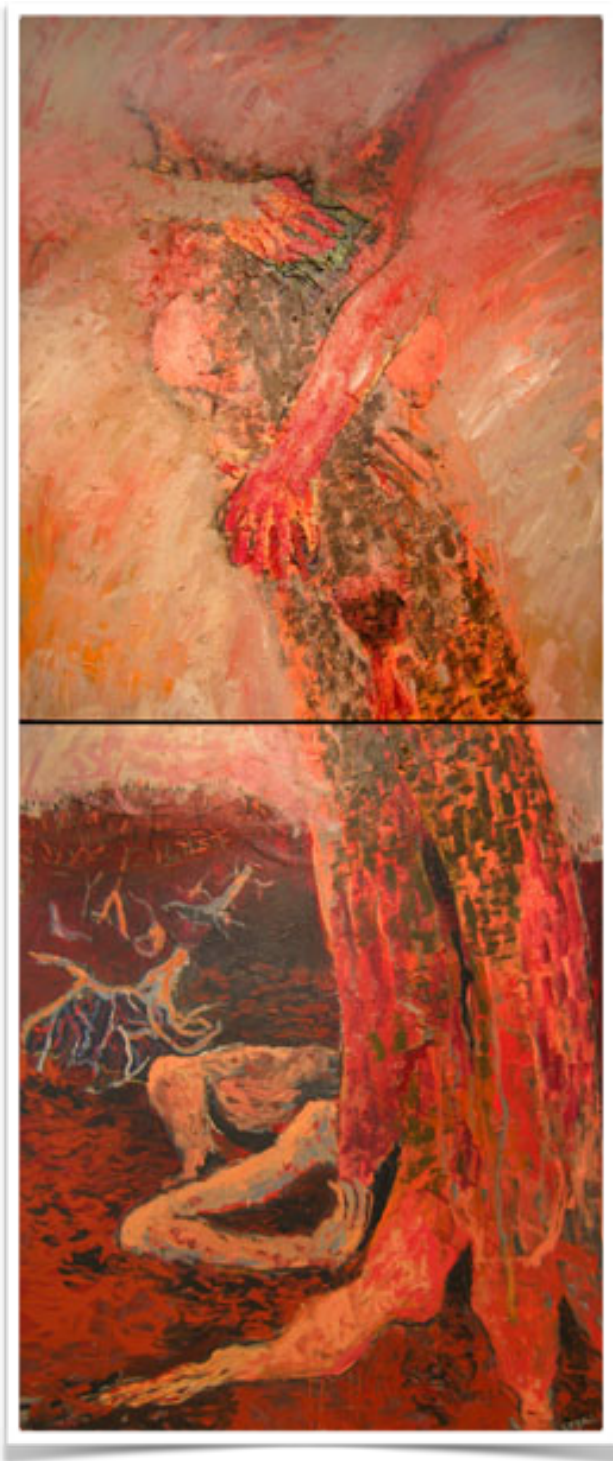
For those who have followed Segal's paintings this half century we have also followed the course of his love life, his friendships, his physical adventures, his introspections, in short his autobiography.

But now we have something different, again.

For what we have now is Segal as the artist who has been witness to the disasters, the human inflicted disasters, that inflicted our times; as we all have, but unlike all too many of us, has not blinked. Not the self referential but the commentator on not only his, but our times.

Our times. The world being what it is just now, and maybe always so, is so rife with self made disasters, that it is no surprise that many in the arts are finding other issues to address rather than to engulf themselves in the enormity of the myriad disasters of our own making. Certainly we have been visited by avalanches, volcanic eruptions, tidal waves, droughts, hurricanes, tornados, and creeping warming that have all brought their miseries to further our own hand-wrought ones. But why dwell on this? Why devote our gifts and precious life to address the suffering that these calamities pour down upon us, especially upon the most vulnerable, the innocent, the least deserving? Such devoted attention cannot help but be debilitating. The issues are endless; the causes seemingly intractable, officials responsible to redress the issues seem incapable of doing so. How is it possible to remain aware, engaged, sane and continue to practice ones art with the dedicated focus the arts require in the midst of this maelstrom?

One response has been to side step brutish times by disengaging with the surrounding field, in the attempt to duck the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and take up loftier concerns; the realm of abstractions or the fantasia of the mytho-poetic, or wax rhapsodic about the harmonies of the natural world, or, just turn out pleasantries – even the weakest of talents know how to do that. (And is likely just this caliber of artists who do turn out such stuff.) And there clearly is a need for escape to the play land of entertainment, even distinguished entertainment. Clever plays, beautiful music, fetching dance



Paysage Paradox #21

and arresting cinema all provide relief, but not merely relief, for they are often brilliantly crafted, fabulously conceived fabrications that do provide awe and wonder, and of course, relief.

The visual arts are no exception. Why not have more beauty, calm, and peace? If not in the world and not in our lives, at least let's have it in our art. And so we have. Marvelously gifted artists in every art form have devoted their gifts to elevating the human experience by creating visions of how we might live rather than the way we have all too often come to live. Lux and calm, as Matisse devoted himself to in the midst of war ravaged Europe. As Renoir as did Cezanne. Nothing wrong with plump young ladies at their bath or with pears, apples and jugs composed just so, but after all there was a war going on and dedicated combatants as well as innocents were having their lives mangled and ripped from them.

Every artist in every era has provided us with these expansive and deepening harmonies often in the midst of their own tragic times, and we have indeed been deepened, broadened refined, elevated by their contributions. But we also have Bach, and Beethoven

Michelangelo and Goya, Verdi and T. S. Elliot, Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Max Beckman who also turned their attention to the profound darkness's of their times with correspondingly deeper tones and more difficult harmonies. Ralph Ellison, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, E. L. Doctorow, Philip Roth, Samuel Beckett, Andrew Wyeth, Lucien Freud, Anna Mendieta, Judy Chicago, Salman Rushdie, also come quickly to mind. In an earlier era, Egon Schiele,

George Grosz, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Primo Levi, took up the cause of casting light on our darkest tendencies.

The problem that addressing the myriad forms of social injustice presents is that the very issues one takes up are so compelling, so maddening that it all but overwhelms the artist's ability to be articulate and not become a well deserved babbling, bawling wreck. Art that is insincere, art that is not a full

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account of the core substance of the artist may be pleasing-for some. But it rings hollow, fails to either charm or convince those whose pay sincere and full attention.

Which brings us back to Segal's work.

One's immediate impression, without yet focusing on any one work, but scanning the whole, is this fellow is not fooling around. This viscosity of the paint, the profligate abundance of it lathered, poured, scratched, smeared, carved onto the surface, is strangely congruent with the gravity of the issue addressed. It is as if the quantity of paint employed and the muscularity of its application were in proportion to convictions of the artist, coupled to the enormity of the issues addressed. Quantity, even proportionally, does not, of course, equate with quality, but unstinting effort on behalf of full conviction is persuasive. Segal's lush employment of media is elevated by his choice of palette. High chroma, saturated hue, broad chromatic scale, raise the pitch of his work to high decibels. The paintings are loud. Not boisterous, but neither are they reticent. All this highly wrought expression might

end up as being melodramatic and even garish in lesser hands, but with Segal what we see are gorgeous, tempered things. Yes, gorgeous. Not damped down expression, to make the disastrous issues and images easier on the eye, but the invention of forms, the dazzling color harmonies, the skillful draftsmanship, concoct a thing of difficult beauty. Difficult. Beautiful.

In front of his works, we are brought right where the protagonists or the event are taking place; leaving no place for us to remain an uninvolved bystander. We feel the heat, the discomfort, the danger, and permitted no appeasement for our sensibilities. This is, of course exactly where the artist stands to these very same scenes, in the maw of this mysterious penchant we humans have for violence in the name of every real and imagined self-righteous cause and adversary.

And here is where the dilemma of the artist with an active social conscience resides; how to be honest and full about grave matters without compromising one's passions for the well made thing. Segal has wrestled with this throughout the course of his life. In his artist's statement accompanying these works he writes, "Fear, insecurity and doubt are my constant companions, their loyal support has encouraged and supported my efforts ... For over fifty years, [painting] has been my privileged process of **celebrating life and love and denouncing human violence.**"

These last works are the look of a beset and honest man at work; always difficult work.

Always
darkly
beautiful.



Paysage Paradoxal #20, 48" x 42"
Leaving - O/C, 48" x 60"

Artist website:

<http://www.seymoursegal.qc.ca/fr/index.html>

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