ART: THE LANGUAGE WE USE WHEN THERE IS NOTHING WE CAN SAY

Peter London

Bio
The patriarch of my family dubs me; “Pete the artist.” I take the name and the work.
—Peter London, Chancellor Professor Emeritus, Art Education, The University of Massachusetts Dartmouth

The day after an elderly and proper gentleman neighbor of mine died I visited the home of the bereaved family. While sitting with his widow, after the funeral and burial, she told me about what happened the night he died. She had an advanced stage of Muscular Dystrophy and as a consequence slept downstairs in a hospital bed while he slept upstairs in their bedroom. “That evening,” she said, “sometime after he saw to putting me to bed and retired to his own bedroom, he came downstairs again and said to me, “Beth, may I join you in bed tonight?” I said, “Of course”, and we made room for one another. A short while later he said, “Beth, would you hold me close?” And I did so. Then he said, “Beth, would you sing to me?” And I said, “My dear, I can hardly talk now, no less sing.” But he said, “That’s OK, sing anyway, sing anything.” And I did, I sang something from our youth. When I had finished, he sighed, shook slightly, breathed once more, then he died. Now, Peter’ she said, “What do you make of that?” At the time I could think of nothing to say, and simply took her hands in mine.

Here is what I now make of that. When matters of ultimate concern are upon us, the language with which we ordinarily negotiate life reveals its limitations. At these pivotal moments of life, we spontaneously yield to tears or laughter or song or silence. At these high moments reason no longer feels sufficient, is too slow, too pedantic. In these moments we shift inexorably from walking to dancing, from speaking to singing. We rely upon song to console us, we believe in song to hold us steady, to carry us past or closer. We rely on art, these seemingly flimsy things to save us.

Moments of ultimate concern are sacred moments. And the language with which we express ultimate concerns are the language of the arts. In this fundamental way the arts are sacred languages. No matter how art is misconstrued, made shallow, made to serve merely the manufacture of pretty things, no matter how weakened by the diminishing of its actual powers to devolve to a distraction, an entertainment; religion and sex has suffered much the same, in the great moments of life, when the ordinary shudders under the weight of the sheer wonder and tragedy and mystery of being and non being, when in moments when intimacy blurs all distinctions, we simply cannot help but to burst into the domain of art, to sing dance, gussy up, to create and participate in art.

Art is the natural human response to life’s high moments. Life’s high moments are invariably spiritually evocative ones. The practice of art, giving it everything you have, naturally imparts a spiritual richness to the experience and this dual reward of a practice will be a constant leitmotif of our treatise.
Joining Heaven and Earth. 4” x 4”, oil sticks and colored pencils on paper. P. London, 2020
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