

Esthetic asceticism pervades works of Rudolf Baranik

by April Kingsley

It often happens that when painters purify their means in order to break through to a new level of feeling in their work, they eschew color and opt for monochrome or black and white. You may recall here Cubism, Matisse of the Piano Lesson, Picasso's Guernica, the great early years of black and white Abstract Expressionism by Pollock, de Kooning and Kline, and the early stages of Frank Stella. It happens too that when painters reach for an extreme expressiveness (or, oppositely its apparent lack), they do so in black. One thinks of the late paintings of Goya, Rothko and Reinhardt.

What is extremely rare is for a painter to spend a lifetime working in blackness the way Rudolf Baranik has. When you think of all the gorgeous hues an artist's palette may include, you realize how very much Baranik has denied himself. His ongoing esthetic asceticism is all the more

remarkable in an age so replete with choices, changes and complexity. Yet each of his paintings is such a complete and convincing self-contained world that you tend to forget what he's had to forget about to create it. Subtle grays and varieties of whiteness, plus an occasional bluish glow or fleshy warm tone suffice to dimly light the shadows enshrouding his imagery. But blackness is the pervasive color, mood, and spirit of the work.

Certainly there are moral implications to this attitude. Black inevitably signifies somberness (death), seriousness, absoluteness (getting it down in black and white) and it functions as a metaphor for right and wrong when used in conjunction with white. So much blackness as there has tended to be in a Rudolf Baranik canvas implies a vision of the world that isn't cheerful, but melancholy; not positivist, but doubtful; not hopeful, but, rather, despairing. It is a world of Viet Nam warfare, Kent State killings, self-induced cancer, napalm and nuclear holocaust; a world where we are fools enough to place a black box which can completely destroy us in the hands of an unstable megalomaniac like Richard Nixon.

Recently, there seems to have been some slight shift into more passages of a lighter tonality in Baranik's work. There is less weighty subject matter as well. Faint glimmers of hope shine through these new paintings like the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel. Every thin ray that flickers into life now in the gloom of Baranik's world has the force of a spotlight given the bleak aspect portrayed in his earlier Elegies. We cherish each one as a good omen for the future.

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