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Who Went There?

A treatise on *Unsalvageable*, by Monika Duersch for *Ekprasis 4*

By Mike R Hunter

“Who Went There?” was the caption to an editorial cartoon in the 1960s. It depicted a soldier peering into the darkness through the scope of his already smoking gun. It came to mind as I tried to unravel the ironies in Monika Duersch’s painting, *Unsalvageable*.

On one level I perceived a sinister cacophony of elements suited to the grim subject of clearcutting, but she made use of a printing technique known for its sparkle and more often enlivens subjects, rather than to deaden them.

Depending on one’s perception of the world, or perhaps their mood, there’s a lot to process in the painting. No single element grabs our attention more than the owl, which for my purpose here I will name Otto. I would have called it Waldo, but feared being attacked for copyright infringement. Otto almost rhymes with Waldo and is also of German origin, the meaning of which is “wealth,” against which impoverished background this owl is juxtaposed.

Otto captures the soul of the whole scene, creating a cognitive dissonance as to whether it is meant to be real or is carved out of a tree trunk – a chainsaw carving popular these days – and therefore both soulful and soulless.

Whether real, or at least true, Moni paints a sorrowful portrait indeed – the last lost soul in a scene of destruction. Those eyes! Moni has an artistic gift of expressiveness in the eyes of her subjects, many of which are crows. Highly intelligent and expressive creatures are crows.

Is that fear and sadness? An expression of loss? In the eyes of Otto, do we see ourselves reflected? We are compelled to both stare and look *away*, the way we avert our gaze lest someone catch us looking at them.

Otto implores us to scan the many other elements of destruction that surround them, the eyes now fearful, now pleading with us to consider the whole scene of loss. In the distance are the plumes of prosperity, symbols of human “engine-uity” thirsty for fuel. In the foreground are tools which in turn draw our attention away from the devastation in search of lost beauty and meaning.

Is Otto a thing of beauty? An artistic creation of beauty we can know and appreciate? If a thing, how ironic it is to turn tools of destruction to tools of creativity able to alter meaning – a chainsaw carving. If a creature of beauty, how sad those eyes. And looks at that other creature in the tree trunk, grotesque and pained.

All of these are of course impressions of my own making – impressions I can process as Monika’s artistic expression of reality. Others – especially those who have studied such things or whom have some other authority – may see it differently. The objective of art is to make us feel something.

I have allowed wise owl Otto to lead me on a thoughtful journey – and you along with me.

As in Ottos' case, there are degrees of invisibility that the artist helps us to "see." To be at home in nature's forest is to lead a double life – to be at once predator and prey. Visible and invisible. In the wild forest, the goal is surely to survive, to be invisible, to blend in. Otto exhibits traits of both, at least the eyes portray both, perhaps it depends on the mood or perception of the viewer. We humans are the omniscient other in this – seeing all, judging all, but acting not.

Clearly, the artist wants us to perceive Otto's position as hopeless, Otto as fearful, their world "unsalvageable."

Attitudes differ about clearcut forestry depending on the position of the viewer. Those of us who think we are enlightened about such matters react strongly with the imagery – the scene of destruction overshadowed by the smokestacks in the distance. That's why, in our world, a roadside buffer of foliage is supposed to be left between human onlookers and the destruction that so disturbs critics.

Others who, in their need to make a living, see not the barren, lifeless landscape, but one in equilibrium. While scarred, this space will be rejuvenated and reinhabited (and perhaps re-exploited). (How healthy it will be is for others to manage.) Otto, on the other hand, being so violently evicted from the harvesting process sits there wide-eyed, fearful for the future and all but invisible.

Art requires us to think, to imagine, and there's a lot to consider here.

Believe it or not, my subject today is not Otto at all, nor is it about clearcutting, or nature or commerce. It's about the line between visible and invisible. I want to take advantage of our emotional reaction to Otto's invisibility, vulnerability and in particular bewilderment.

Some *people* are invisible too, or are made invisible by others. Like Otto, sometimes, *people* are dislocated, become disconnected from meaning, are disoriented.

Over the past few years we have been inundated with images and statistics around unhoused humans, many of whom were virtually invisible even *before* COVID. Sure, most of us have seen the odd panhandler on Spring Garden Road, or that very odd person talking to themselves in the park or on the street corner. (Ironically, encountering someone seemingly talking to themselves has these days become commonplace with so many people conversing via their mobile phones – no strings attached!)

The enormity of the issue of under-housing is staggering – so great that we have no real idea what to do. But so much so it cannot be ignored, as has been our practice for millennia. Not ignored by everyone, of course, saints do walk among us, but ignorance on the part of the vast majority pushes some people to the margins.

So, what do we do with such large numbers of previously invisible people? Well, in some areas we do our best to make them disappear, to remain invisible; we do our best to herd them back toward the margins whence they appeared. If that's too unpopular, we strike up the band wagon and gift them shelter – at the margins.

But what about the *problem* of invisibility? What about all those figures in the bigger picture?

We can find “Waldo” if we look hard enough and long enough and if we ignore all the colourless, anonymous figures we passed over in search of *the one*.

Interpersonal communication highlights the importance of *affirmation*, of being confirmed and of confirming others – acknowledging someone's existence. Yet most of us do our best to *not* see. And even *unsee*.

Not just the unhoused, but everyone we don't at first understand, or who talk too much, or are too loud, too slow, or who talk not at all. Our world is a confusing place seemingly controlled by people and ideas that move so fast some of us are coming apart trying to keep it together – trying to find even a small space to which we belong.

Would it surprise you if I were to say it's all quite natural? The world is spinning and like the turntable in a playground, some can't keep up – some who fall can't *get* up – even if we're only a little off balance. Whether creative or otherwise some of us just have a hard time getting up when we fall.

Some years ago, I got into a rather heated discussion with a colleague, a published author who freaked out when I suggested that society's exponential growth, rampant consumerism and crass commercialism are normal characteristics of normal life on planet earth. "NORMAL?!" He bellowed. "Hyper capitalism (blah, blah, blah) is NOT normal!"

He wouldn't let up, so I did not get to explain my comment. It's like this. All living things share an orb that is spinning at about 1,600 km per hour. In addition, the planet orbits our sun at 107,000 km/h. In turn (pun intended) our galaxy is moving through the void. We are all in perpetual motion forward (forward in a physical sense, not necessarily in a social sense). Everything flows, nothing abides (Heraclitus, 540-480 BCE) is the order of the universe.

Likewise human intellect and ingenuity. Once something is articulated or invented it cannot be undone, only amended for better – or worse. Likewise, knowledge. Yet for some reason, with humankind's vast store of knowledge, experience and knowhow we can't solve even a basic human problem. We continue racing outward – forward in the physical sense. All things flow, nothing abides.

We can't go back. But, even though we are all physically moving forward at the same rate on the same planet, we are not even on the same page. Other aspects of our shared nature are pretty deadly, but how can it be that with our great intellect and perseverance we cannot find ways to truly comprehend the world or life upon it.

Of course, how can we? We can't even acknowledge each other, let alone our plight. Ask yourself, who is "unsalvageable"? Or, as Otto might ask, Who? Who?

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