

Carvings and Marks

A studio visit with artist Rick Bartow, 1946 - 2016

Step into Bartow Place
and cross the border
into unknown nation
on the Oregon coast
where language is made
by colored marks and cuts
from carving knives.

The artist, tall and shy
in paint-dabbed shirt, welcomes us
to his clearing in the woods,
village of weathered buildings,
mounds of found and discarded objects,
road signs, baby shoes, Japanese inscriptions.
Everything here speaks:
Crow beak glints on tallest fir.
Totem figures lean down like mastheads.
Eye of yellow guardian dog misses nothing.
Spirits lodged in a pile of red madrone boughs
buzz and pick at visitors.

In a defunct trailer,
stacks of hand-made paper
whisper friendships between
Japan and the Northwest.
In the carving studio,
hooked tools line up for work.
A clutter of wooden torsos twist,
big teeth grind. A woman's face in resin,
her golden brow ancient and futuristic,
shares space with a winged salmon mask.
A man's head peers out from a pail at
the grotesque and lovely lodged together.

In the print room, dark tones dominate
on paper and in mask, one eye covered
by a black hand, the other turned away
from unknown terror. The maker
must follow the marks' commands.
They morph into teeth, double rows
around the black oval of a dog's mouth.

He works three drawings at once,
creation's fire moving through arm to hand.
Neon colors and black marks, *little dictators*,
shape-shift in frenetic dance, chalk shattering
onto floor. Erasures whiten charcoal,
face after face slides away.
Layers of Self come to light:
Bear, dog, crow, man.

Color and marks as utterance
*cauterize the wounds and
consume darkness in the spirit.*

Hawk's golden eye is revealed,
a beacon to dispel nightmares.
Mouth breaks into grin,
joy comes through.

~Claudia Lapp

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(Italicized quotes by Rick Bartow, 1997)