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Parabola Magazine

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A Class of Birds

September 13, 2010 by [tracycochran](#)

During the last few years of his life, I paid many visits to William Segal, the painter, philosopher, and publisher. He was the subject of a series of films by Ken Burns, which aired on PBS this past weekend, and along with Burns I regard him as a great teacher. Segal embodied the possibility of living an extraordinary double life. In addition to publishing innovative magazines, promoting trade with Japan after WWII, being a connoisseur of art, wine, fashion and life, Segal was a true seeker of truth—first as a student of P.D. Ouspensky and G.I. Gurdjieff and, later, D.T. Suzuki, who wrote Segal letters of introduction that allowed him to be the first American to sit in Zen monasteries in Japan right after the war. I used to sit with Segal in his Upper East Side apartment, mindful that I sat at the table where Suzuki often sat, and so many others. Although I got to know him well in the last years of his long life, he still conveyed an inner stillness and light: “Bill was a man of many layers and if the outer layer was the man of today, the innermost core was an opening to eternity, ” the great theater director Peter Brook wrote of him.

Segal often told me he admired the Zen ideal of the “old man in the marketplace” — conveying by his quiet presence an opening to the true beauty and wonder of the whole of life that is hidden within seemingly ordinary things. Before he died at 96, he had become that old man, trailing stillness and wonderment in his slow and deliberate wake.

I find myself thinking of Segal now because of an experience I had last Friday evening. I drove down to the art opening “A Class of Birds” at the Sears-Peyton gallery in Chelsea, with the usual mix of happy anticipation and social anxiety. As I’ve written here before, I was very moved by one of Rosen’s hawk

sculptures, and I looked forward to seeing more. Yet there was traffic to drive through and it turned out that many galleries between 24th and 25th Street and 11th Avenue were having openings that night. People poured out into the streets, clustered in groups talking about huge prices, about bright new things. I entered the Sears Peyton Gallery feeling overwhelmed, wondering if I should have slipped in another day.

Then I came to a full stop. Jane Rosen's birds made my heart ache, literally, and stilled all my gnat-like worries and fears. I stood before them as I sat before William Segal. These glass birds had a presence. They brought something wild and fine and utterly unworldly to the gallery, which was wisely spare. Since I don't have to write like a sophisticated art critic, I can just come right out and say it: I had the impression that Jane had been used by the force that created and animated real hawks—that the wild spirit of nature had come through her. The sense of eternity that comes to us in nature was in the presence of these birds. Art can be a way.

Later, I had a chance to tell Jane my impression. "You feel them in you heart? For me, I think it's bit lower," she said, placing a hand on her solar plexus. She admitted to a group of us that she had the sense that her birds were alive. Although she was that crazy about being away from her California ranch, she had the feeling that the birds would be able to hold their own, that she didn't need to explain them and hover near. She is right.

One impression that especially surprised and touched me is the way the monk birds looked from the back—slightly bowed like Buddhists monks, in contrast to their proud hawk fronts. It was as if there were making a deliberate effort to be who they were, and as if they had for a long, long time. It was like the Buddha touching the earth, bearing witness to the lifetimes of effort that had earned him the right to be free. But the bowed backs were also humble, like true monks and animals are humble. It filled me with an unaccountable feeling of homesickness. I remembered that C.S. Lewis had described such a feeling in nature, coming upon some grove or clearing that was ordinary, but wabi-sabi ordinary, William Segal ordinary—that had a glow about it from another world. I wondered if that was what the monk birds had to teach, that there are two sides to effort, noble wildness and humility. Perhaps it is this that attracts grace.

"A Class of Birds" is at the Sears Peyton Gallery from September 10-October 30, 2010.