

History Lesson (an arrangement)
Scale/Mirrors/Painting/Carpet/Box

for Tadeus Kantor

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The carpet laid out on the gallery floor belonged to my mother and father who had a love of oriental carpets in the tradition of Eastern Europe's obsession with the Orient. They themselves were of an early Middle Eastern heritage, transplanted to Eastern Europe many centuries ago and via many cultures and ethnicities. I always imagined the carpet as a magic link between the "pre-Enlightenment" cultures of the Near East and Middle East, and the "post-Enlightenment" cultures of Europe, from oral tradition to reproduction, from dreamtime to pragmatism and the myth of progress. The absence of the former became abundance for the latter. My family's identity as in-between was fodder for my imagination, which loves to journey in the crevices via daydream.

The painting on the easel is by a very famous Polish painter Wojek Kozack, 1920, depicting the deeply embedded Polish identity of battle, in this case with the Russians. Poland, home to my family for several generations, was under occupation for over 300 years, always in battle with an occupying force, always with shifting boundaries. I see now with a studied eye that the painting is bi-furcated on the diagonal, with modes of locomotion as the grand divide between the industrializing Russians riding a train up ahead, and the pre-industrialized Poles riding on horseback behind.

This was my father's favorite painting, one of many such paintings I grew up with from Tel-Aviv, Israel, to Montreal, Quebec, Canada. I was frightened of, alienated from, even embarrassed by this picture, as it did not reflect my transplanted reality. The violence both confused and confounded me. I was obsessed with why these painted men looked just like one another and yet were killing each other.

My first inclination at FabLab, was to defrock the painting, take it out of its gold gilded frame and allow it to be vulnerable, unframed and in question. Strangely, when I did so, the gilded plaster on the frame began to splinter and fall off in small sections. I kept each bit lest this be a bad omen, and repositioned them onto a contemporary acrylic picture frame. The parts are the parts and the whole keeps changing. The painting now seems to float, suspended as it is on an easel, to be looked at, to be in relation to other objects, other bodies, conversing silently and with a kind of equity of presence, not above, nor below, simply in relation to. The frame becomes an equal partner, separate and in proximity but no longer wedded to the painting. With its scarred surface it seems naked and vulnerable, experienced and wounded. It has done its job for years highlighting and imbuing the painting with a signification of grandeur, worth and prestige. Here, it can now rest.

Across from the painting and on the carpet still, I have placed a "Grove of Mirrors", bathroom vanity mirrors with one side a 5x magnification for closer looks. There are 7 of them with round mirror heads bobbing on flexible electrical conduit bodies that are held together with a piece of fabric wrapped around their middles, resting their small pedestal feet on the carpet. They are very like a chorus of singers singing, a summer bouquet of sunflowers glowing, a gaggle of faces reflecting and refracting in all

directions. They simply must be here in the conversation with the painting, the carpet, the scale, and the storage box. Trust me, they must be here.

The scale is like a skinny cold-blooded serpent waiting patiently for a body to be weighed. Its metal skin, like fish scales out of water now drying in the light of the overhead gallery lights, still seems moist as if it had been in a recent encounter with a liquid. At its base there are inscribed letters in a script type, like a tattoo, spelling the word "History", as if we didn't know. How can we not know that a body's weight is the weight of an experienced history, a life with measured paths through highs and lows, interiors and exteriors, very, very private and oh so public.

So, now at FabLab when a body steps onto this scale, its weight triggers a small video camera embedded above the number dial, and records the image of this body from its feet upwards towards the head, from the bottom up. Unknown to this body, its image is projected onto a screen placed away and behind the scale to be seen by other bodies moving through the space. Others can view the bottom-up body, but when this body turns to see itself, it glimpses its distorted body without a head. The head now turned backwards, you see, is out of range of the camera that is in front of the body. One can never recognize oneself in the image taken by history, but others will forever accept this image/trace as the person him/herself. Such is the story of history.

And why the storage box? It is a box that has been used to safely store the "History Scale" since the year 2000, and will be used again after FabLab is long gone. History, with a scale as its judge, is always being stored, protected from the present and separated from any future light. Here though, now it benefits us that the History Scale Storage Box hangs suspended, hovering above the ground like a magic carpet, seeming to straddle time and space, somewhere in-between, perhaps like my family transplanted so many times, or like the suspended painted battle pointing to the reader's position of weighing meaning, deciphering narrative, trying on bits of story like second hand clothing recycled in a thrift shop, reflected this way and that, somewhere between dream-time and pragmatism. This box is us.