

Stories from my Father

Bonnie Gloris

“By creating symbolic narratives of her own personal experiences she makes poignant remarks on life and the human condition.”

Bold colors and graphic black line-work cascade across the canvas, defining forms at once supple and sculptural. Figures breathe life and movement as they create startlingly emphatic compositions. With sinuous lines, animals and people are frozen within moments of sublime intensity and spirit. This is the work of Claire Szalay Phipps, an accomplished and well-respected contemporary artist. Her mixed media paintings are personal narratives capturing fleeting moments of time and brief psychological connections. Each painting is based on a drawing her father passed onto her, then transformed by her adventurous use of color and the sleek line work. Each work combines the decorativeness of Art Noveau, the graphic nature of Japanese woodblock prints, and the dynamism of Western graphic novels.

Phipps resides in Southern California, where she serves on the board of the San Diego Museum of Art Artist's Guild and a member of the San Diego Portrait Society. Her work is now gaining enthusiastic recognition in New York City, and for good reason: Phipps' artwork is as dynamic as her fascinating background. Phipps is of Hungarian descent, born in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and later raised in New York City. Both of her parents were artists. Together they nurtured Phipps' passion for image making.

As a master draftsman, fine arts professor, and illustrator, Lajos Szalay recognized the enormous artistic potential in his daughter and sought ways to cultivate it. Initially, they began projecting Lajos' drawings onto canvas for Claire to paint, though they were not completely satisfied with the results of that process. Later, their partnership was briefly put on hold while Phipps attended the University of Fine Arts in Budapest, her parents' alma mater. After Phipps returned to the United States, she renewed her collaboration with her father in the form of several large projects. "After decades of practicing my craft, and with his approval and encouragement, I felt prepared to make my vision a reality," says Phipps.

Modern technology allows Phipps to scan and print her father's drawings onto canvas. She then enlivens the drawings with color, the intrepid palettes giving new life to her father's sketches. "I follow the suggestion of the lines and then literally surrender to the process and allow the colors to add a new dimension, a fresh interpretation, a completely different vibration," she explains. The strength of Lajos Szalay's graphic line-work unites with Claire Phipps' vivid color application to form powerful, narrative works.

Phipps gives homage to her father in the mixed media piece *My Father, Lajos Szalay*, a genuinely moving portrait. Sensuous reds and yellow ochres create a hazy halo over a profile view of Lajos. Hundreds of small, hatched black lines carve the details of his facial structure. His white hair is a beacon of wisdom. His downward gaze seems to reflect a strong and sensitive demeanor. One has the impression that Lajos, no longer with us, is watching over his daughter with quiet pride and faith in her success. This piece is especially significant, as it simultaneously preserves Lajos' physical image, and the artistic teachings he bestowed upon his daughter. Upon seeing this magnificent work, I was reminded of Egon Schiele's *Self-Portrait* (1912). Schiele creates a similar tension in his work. Against a backdrop of white and a bright yellow flowers, Schiele's face is described in dab marks of crimson and white. Fluid, confident black brushstrokes distinguish his hair, eyes, and coat. He seems to glare back at us with confidence and sensitivity. Schiele's portrait is an honest and visceral portrayal of his multi-faceted subjectivity.

Art historian György Sümegi describes how Lajos Szalay "created individual structures, morphologically intricate line textures, drawing apparatus for his figures, whether they be the heroes of Greco-Roman mythology, the dramatic personae of the Bible, the immortals of love (Erato, Song of Songs), or the victims of wars and revolutions. So many sovereign artistic forms for Man elated and tortured by the joys and horrors, the opportunities and restrictions, of the 20th century." In a similar fashion, Phipps creates enduring narratives based on personal experiences. The horses, portraits, and scenes of everyday life are symbolic effigies of transient moments. Her respect for humanity is envisaged in her large work entitled *Face Off*, most recently exhibited at Broadway Gallery NYC's December exhibition series, "Global Art Projects: International Artists at Home and Abroad." Bright magentas



Claire Phipps, *My Father, Lajos Szalay*, 2009. Mixed Media on Canvas, 29 x 30 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

and oranges encompass two supple figures; they lock and face one another. Their hair is depicted in a spiderweb of interwoven black scrawling lines. With muscular definition their heads come into view. Less defined necks and busts create a sense that these are floating heads. Dismembered and thus disassociated, they represent a fleeting consciousness. Such genuine interaction seems to imply infatuation and, simultaneously, confrontation. Either way, the viewer is a spectator in what appears to be a highly personal moment. We are left to decide the narrative of this undeniably heated relationship. In life, this encounter would have been fugitive - intensely real for one moment and gone the next. Phipps' ability to capture this brief point in time translated this piece into a memento mori. D.H. Lawrence calls such engagement the "confrontation between souls." The existentialist philosopher Martin Buber further described this relationship in his book "I and Thou." In this seminal work he describes a relationship that stresses the mutual, holistic existence of two beings. For Buber, it is a concrete encounter, because these beings meet one another in their authentic existence. It is an existence without any qualification or objectification of one another. Even imagination and concepts do not play a hand in this relation. In an "I and Thou" encounter, infinity and universality are actualized.



Claire Phipps, *Face Off*, 2010. Mixed Media on Canvas, 40 x 58 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

Phipps' elegant depiction of female forms and delicate color application links her to other contemporary artists such as Yoshitaka Amano. Amano is a Japanese artist. He began his career as an animator and has become known for his illustrations and character designs. He is best known for his graphic illustrations for the game Final Fantasy which includes influences from Western comic books, Art Nouveau, and Japanese woodblock prints. His beautiful, delicate, and erotic representations of women have made him widely famous.

In works such as the energetic *Ballad of the Moon*, Phipps elucidates on a mythological setting. Underneath a deep phthalocyanine blue sky, a night hunt is taking place. Muscular and gorgeously crude, a woman races head-to-head with a horned figure, possibly her shadow self. With a feverish look, the woman holds an archery bow in hand. In the background, a wolf bearing its fangs keeps stride with them. An oversized owl looks on hauntingly, its feathers entwined with the woman's leg. Phipps employs analogous cool colors of purples, blues, and greens to set a mysterious, sultry mood in this piece. One can feel the hazy atmosphere of the night sky she depicts, as well as the dampness of the grass underfoot. Phipps has supplemented the composition with bursts of orange in the woman's hair, the dog's fur, and the owl's eyes, beak, and talons. The female figure's body dominates the piece. Her positively luminous, soft skin is an interesting contrast to the powerful movement of her body. There are many parts of this scene happening concurrently, yet Phipps is able to unify the various aspects into a cohesive whole, thus solidifying it in time.

Horses are a recurring theme in Phipps' work. "Probably the next greatest graphic artist in the world is a Hungarian by the name of Lajos Szalay," said Picasso in 1967. For decades, the muscular power and enigmatic beauty of horses has been a captivating subject for artists such as Picasso, Franz Marc, and Susan Rothenberg. *Wild Horses* and *White Horse* both showcase Claire's deft ability to portray these otherworldly creatures. Each of these works simultaneously shows the amazing strength and powerful bodies of horses, while also showing their gentle, complex nature. These works are likely derived from the influence of Argentinian culture on Lajos Szalay's drawings, then reinterpreted by Phipps. The life of gauchos and the wars of pre-modern Argentina are a common influence on the country's art. In Argentina, horses serve several purposes. They are a way to travel, bear loads, and they symbolize unfettered spontaneity.

Wild Horses presents a striking tableau of five horses in highly energetic poses. The strong sense of dynamism in the piece is accentuated by the graded detail in which the horses are drawn. The central figure is presented in thorough detail, with crosshatched rendering, bold lines and deep coloration. The figures to either side of center are drawn in progressively looser styles, however, with the most distant figure represented only by a few thin gestural loops and a faint whisper of tincture. The overall composition evokes not only the energized movement of the horses, but also the imperfect psychology by which such fleeting moments are experienced. *Wild Horses* could be viewed either as five horses at a single moment in time, or as a single horse prancing wildly across five moments in time, captured by the imagination on a single canvas.

White Horse brims with vibrant energy, although in this case it is less about the composition of the figure than the execution by the artist. The eponymous horse adopts a classical and fairly static pose, but the lines in which the horse is depicted are bold and explosive with long, sweeping arcs and the occasional spatter. The background hues precisely match those of a hot flame; from a sun-gold center to the deceptively cool blue of a gas jet that rings the perimeter of the work. Closer inspection reveals that the namesake horse is not actually white, but subtly inflected with the blue and gold hues of the background, strengthening the sense of luminosity in the work. One can feel the warmth of the sun on the horse's back, a moment of sheer pleasure and pride for the majestic animal, prolonged indefinitely by Phipps' expressive rendering.

The relationships between men and women are also explored extensively in Phipps' work. *The Letter* depicts complex emotional relationships. A man's grotesquely rendered back, reminiscent of a gangly rendition by Egon Schiele, serves as the focal point for *The Letter*. From this back, with its jagged shoulder blades and protruding spine, the gaze flows naturally along one outstretched arm to where the man's hand points with admonishment to the oblivion that lies outside the canvas. Nearby, a woman is depicted with her gaze downcast and her knee abashedly gathered in her arms against her chest. The gestures and expressions of the figures effectively evoke the emotional relationship between the figures, but it is the mysterious letter that the man clenches in his other hand that provides the key to this intensely narrative painting. Here is a moment quite natural and personal, given voyeuristic permanence by Phipps' representation.

Claire Szalay Phipps is one of the foremost illustrators of the 21st century. Her pieces can be found in private collections around the



Claire Phipps, *Ballad of the Moon*, 2007. Mixed Media on Canvas, 43.5 x 48 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist.

world, including Hungary, Mexico, and Argentina, as well as throughout the United States. Her foundation as a graphic artist merges with her painterly style to make potent images with mythological and psychological content. It was this foundation, infused with an acute sense of line, structure, and movement, that has made Phipps' work the success it is today. The expressive, lyrical nature of her work creates an intensity unseen in most contemporary art. By creating symbolic narratives of her own personal experiences she makes poignant remarks on life and the human condition. The graphic, languid and illustrational quality of her work also makes it highly accessible. Her fearless utilization of bold and vibrant color choices add another dimension to her repertoire of skills. Claire's capacity for representing the transience of emotion, the volatility of relationships, and the psychology of humans and beasts alike, brings all her technical abilities to full fruition, solidifying her family's legacy. Says Phipps: "It is for me both exciting and wonderful... a joy and a passion I wish to share." □



Claire Phipps, *Wild Horses*, 2008. Mixed Media on Canvas, 46 x 62 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist.