

Paul Manes' Blues

By Leigh Arnold

"The Past is a constant accumulation of images, but our brain is not an ideal organ for constant retrospection and the best we can do is pick out and try to retain those passages of rainbow light flitting through memory. The act of retention is the act of art, artistic selection, artistic blending, artistic re-combination of actual events." - Vladimir Nabokov, Strong Opinions.¹

"The world is so beautiful in all its horribleness. We're just passing through. Art is the only recourse. Images come from anywhere. Developing them is a speaking beyond the confines of the alphabet." - Paul Manes²

Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov claimed to think in images rather than ideas.³ As a writer, this distinction reveals the author's incongruous affinity for images over language. Perhaps this mode of thinking comes from the writer's childhood training in the visual arts, something he continued to explore throughout his life, becoming particularly skilled in rendering butterflies. As an adult, Nabokov studied paintings in depth, searching for and documenting depictions of butterflies in art ranging from antiquity to the 1700s. This research developed into an extensive catalogue of paintings that depicted butterflies, which he intended to publish as a book titled *Butterflies in Art*. Nabokov's interest in the visual arts spilled over into his writing where he included references to works of art by hundreds of artists as diverse as Vincent van Gogh, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Rembrandt van Rijn, and

¹ Vladimir Nabokov, *Strong Opinions* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990): 186.

² Paul Manes, email correspondence with the author, September 4, 2014.

³ Thomas Seifrid, "Review: *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting* by Gerard de Vries, D. Barton Johnson, Llana Ashenden," *The Slavic and Eastern European Journal* 50, no. 4 (Winter, 2006): 741.

Hieronymus Bosch.⁴ Alongside his well-known career as a writer and lesser-known interest in the visual arts, Nabokov quietly became the world's foremost (if unrecognized) expert on a particular species of butterfly. Known as the "blues," Nabokov spent his life studying the evolution of the *Polyommatus* species and developed a theory on how they came to the Americas from Asia in a series of waves over millions of years.⁵ During his lifetime, his work in the field of lepidopterology was unrecognized at best, and at worst, dismissed as that of a dilettante.⁶ Only after his death was his theory proven correct. Though Nabokov has been posthumously vindicated for his work on the evolution of butterflies, he is still most widely remembered for his gift to the world in the form of the serious, albeit salacious 1950s novel *Lolita*. As Paul Manes' recalled, *Lolita* was somewhat of a cultural phenomenon and left an indelible impression on the artist, who passed the popular novel among his all-male classmates as a teenager in military school.

Manes' painting Nabokov's Blues is an homage to the author who was much more than the singular work of fiction that made him famous. Manes appreciated Nabokov's interdisciplinary endeavors and delighted in the surprise of learning about the author's relatively unknown second profession. Through the title and the depiction of one of Nabokov's "blues" in the top right-hand corner of the painting, Manes draws connections between himself and the novelist. Like Nabokov, Manes' career defies strict categorization. The variety of motifs, styles, and symbols that appear in Manes' work—lumber piles, anvils, raindrops, bowls, Buddha figures—makes it difficult to distill Manes' oeuvre down to a single style or theme. To discuss Manes' work is a complex undertaking. Heavy with symbolism and references that delve deep into history and literature, Manes' works encourage curiosity and require prolonged attention from their viewers. Clues to meanings come in the form of repeated images and titles, giving the viewer entrée into the inner psyche

⁴ Gerard de Vries, Donald B. Johnson, and Liana Ashenden, *Vladimir Nabokov and the Art of Painting*, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006). See appendix titled "List of Passages in Nabokov's Novels, Stories or Autobiography Referring to or Alluding to Paintings," for a listing of the various paintings that appear in Nabokov's writings.

⁵ Carl Zimmer, "Nonfiction: Nabokov Theory on Butterfly Evolution Is Vindicated," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2011, D3.

⁶ Carl Zimmer, "Nonfiction: Nabokov Theory on Butterfly Evolution Is Vindicated," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2011, D3.

of the artist who looks to esoteric sources like James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake* or Randall Jarrell's short poem "The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner," for inspiration. Otherwise benign motifs become metaphors for human existence.

With Nabokov's *Blues*, Manes provides a type of Rosetta Stone of iconography. As if to depict a snapshot of his entire career in a single painting, Manes adopts the method of a lepidopterist and "pins" the images to the canvas, resulting in a collage of elements that represent specific periods of his career. The composition is chaotic, with no sense of perspective. It is a manifestation of the subconscious with images appearing to float in and out of the foreground. Manes' paints like Nabokov writes, with the image coming ahead of the idea. Two World War II-era fighter planes catapult through the picture plane, disrupting the serenity of the adjacent Buddha figure tilted on its side. Faded outlines of poppies remind the viewer of Manes' series of naturalistic landscapes of Texas. Bowls and raindrops punctuate the composition, fading in and out of the foreground and background, adding depth, while the dolphin cartoon and chattering teeth lend elements of Pop and Surrealism to the work. The images in Nabokov's *Blues* refer to distinct motifs that the artist returns to cyclically, while the anomalous images of the dolphin, chattering teeth, and butterfly hint at future bodies of work and the evolving interests of the artist.

Manes is probably best known for his paintings of stacks of earthenware bowls. Rendered in the artist's characteristic earthy palette, the surfaces have a texture achieved by the build-up of materials like India ink, gray French chalk, black gesso, and kaolin—a type of clay that is the primary ingredient in porcelain. To further the dimension, Manes' applies layers of burlap to the canvas. Looking at prototypical examples from this series, such as *Harvest (Bowls)* (2014) and *Untitled (Grey Bowls)* (2007), the compositions' are cluttered by multitudes of precariously stacked bowls, teetering on the verge of spilling out of the canvas. There is a sense of viewing the composition through a camera's viewfinder, as though the image has been cropped from any context that might exist beyond the edges of the canvas. The title *Gasterbeiter (Guestworker)* (2014) relates to Manes' idea of bowls as metaphors for humans. Manes describes:

“Every human on earth is a bowl and every one of them has something different and some of them have too much, but most of them have not enough and from there you can interpolate all kinds of things.”⁷

Notably, all of Manes’ painted bowls are empty, suggesting the imbalance of resources and the emptiness of a life lived in want. The title *Gasterbeiter* (Guestworker) also suggests a context for the stacks of bowls – is it a sink full of dishes to be washed (presumably by a low-wage worker)? Other titles, such as *Harvest* suggest something more hopeful, as though the stacks of empty bowls were recently full of the fruits of ripened crops.

Titles play a significant role in Manes’ paintings. They offer the viewer an entry point into the work, giving us insight and context for otherwise mysterious or seemingly benign images. Manes’ process for deciding on titles is relatively straightforward, they can either be the source of inspiration or an afterthought, as the artist describes: “From time to time I’ll come up with a title and the painting will develop. Sometimes I’ll come up with the idea and the title will come from the idea in the painting.”⁸ For Nabokov’s *Blues*, Manes came up with the title after reading about the author’s recent vindication and the painting followed (Nabokov’s 70-year-old theory on the blues was accepted in 2011). Other titles reveal the depth and range of Manes’ interests and influences, as well as the array of meanings a single image can evoke.

Looking at two paintings from the artist’s series of foreshortened logs reveals the multiplicity of meanings that can be drawn from a lone image. For *Mantegna* (2006) and *Appomattox* (2014) both depict log piles and are, ostensibly, studies from nature. Through the titles, however, Manes imbues these works with meanings that go far deeper than natural studies. For *Mantegna* is in reference to the well-known painting by Andrea Mantegna titled *Dead Christ* (ca. 1480-1500), which depicts a foreshortened Christ figure the moment after he was taken down from the cross, with his feet pushed to

⁷ Paul Manes, telephone conversation with the author, September 6, 2014.

⁸ Paul Manes, telephone conversation with the author, September 6, 2014.

the forefront of the picture plane and his body reclining and receding into the background. With this image in mind, Manes' stacks of lumber are anthropomorphized and the composition becomes a meditation on mortality and the human body. Likewise, the title Appomattox (the Battle of Appomattox Court House was pivotal in that it signaled the end of the Civil War) conjures associations between stacked lumber and the body-strewn battlefields of Mathew Brady or Alexander Gardner.

When discussing his work, Manes describes his desire to create objects that are weighty in subject matter. While traveling abroad in the years before he began painting, the artist was drawn to the work of Francisco de Goya and Diego Velasquez – Spanish masters who were “painters’ painters” according to Manes. Goya’s print series *The Disasters of War* (ca. 1810-1820) was particularly influential to Manes, as he recalled fondly the story of passing through Zaragoza, Spain and viewing the series in its entirety on a rainy, Monday afternoon at the Casa Museo de Goya. The weighty subject of war, treated by Goya with such honest brutality impressed Manes, who was also influenced by the earthy palette employed by him and other Spanish Baroque painters.

Manes’ tonal method of painting can be further attributed to his color blindness. When the artist was sixteen years old a trip to the eye doctor revealed his inability to name a number on the colorblind test page. As Manes describes his view of the world: “On a ski slope, the blue jacket is the brightest jacket to me, not the red one. And, the red jacket – I see that it’s red, but it’s not bright red like it is to other people.”⁹ Color blindness never inhibited Manes from seeking out a career as a painter, though it did contribute to his favoritism of the tonal palettes of Jackson Pollock and Anselm Kiefer over the more colorful canvases of Henri Matisse or Paul Cézanne.

Listening to Manes discuss his work and influences, it becomes apparent that he is an avid reader. A general discussion of his work becomes a lesson in literature and philosophy, with the artist dropping quotes from sources like Dante Alighieri, Samuel Taylor Coolidge, and T.S. Eliot. Like his cyclical return

⁹ Paul Manes, telephone conversation with the author, September 6, 2014.

to reoccurring motifs, Manes also returns to different literary sources, which manifest themselves in the titles of his paintings. The 2011 series of bowl paintings on paper, titled Canto refers to the divisions of long poems, which is a clever title for a series of paintings that together form a greater body of work. Both Dante and Eliot were famous for employing the canto in epic poetry.

Manes enjoys creating work that is unexpectedly complex and full of meaning, while also a pleasurable technical exercise. Though his titles are added to give dimension to his paintings, Manes is open to interpretations on the meanings each viewer brings to the work. In reference to Nabokov's Blues and what meanings one might take from looking at it, Manes used a quote from Eliot to explain how ideas and interpretations are best "formulated, sprawling on a pin, wriggling on the wall"¹⁰ so as not to lose track of them. Meanings evolve over the course of time and Manes recognizes his own evolution as an artist, with changing influences and inspirations. His use of Eliot's passage is good advice to any artist or viewer of art: to treat ideas and interpretations like a lepidopterist treats his objects of study and veneration: get them outside of the mind and pinned to a wall, to be studied and considered like the prized possessions that they are.

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" (1915). Quoted by Manes in email correspondence with the author, September 3, 2014.