

Reflection on Russell T. Gordon's "Hot Dog Bridge"

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While strolling through the KIA's permanent collection with a five-year old boy who is the son of Iraqi immigrants, I was struck by his attraction to 'Hot Dog Bridge.' He said he liked the colors, the rainbow, the clouds, and he liked 'hot dogs, as long as they are halal.' At other times, I have heard adults viewing this lithograph utter comments like, "I don't get that" or "That looks like something from a children's book." I myself find the image evokes a feeling of happiness each time I see it; I smile without knowing – or indeed, needing to know – why.

Russell T. Gordon (1936-2013) was a self-described Philadelphia 'ghetto kid' (whose parents neither comprehended nor supported his artistic gifts which emerged in junior high), a college and semi-pro basketball player, with art degrees from Temple University and the University of Wisconsin, who spent the last forty years of his life teaching at Concordia University in Montreal. Though he taught at several prominent universities and exhibited his work widely, there is precious little written about him save *Over Easy: Metaphors in Series* by Maurice Forget which was prepared in conjunction with a 2010 exhibition of Gordon's work at the Visual Arts Centre in Montreal. This in itself may suggest an intention to let his art speak for itself without explanation by the artist. However, *Over Easy* includes Forget's commentary and more importantly, an artist's statement and interview with Gordon (all quotations herein are taken from *Over Easy*).

Forget sees Gordon's "work and style [as] extremely personal, with few identifiable precursors or followers" although he finds Gordon's later work – more abstract than the pieces in the KIA collection – can be usefully compared to the work of Kandinsky, Miro, and even Mondrian (11). However, I disagree with Forget's assertion that Gordon's work is "relatively simple to read" as a reflection of "his own social, intellectual and moral development . . . most notably [as] an African-American man" (11-12) since Gordon says of himself:

I live within a life and I try to reflect who I am and what I think, regardless of the culture . . . The feeling of the [black] diaspora produces these things [e.g. black life in Harlem, Billie Holiday with a flower in her hair, etc.] and it's like going where you're predestined to go. . . I choose to go where I'm *not* supposed to go. (68)

To me, the joy is in the process. After the joy of the idea. . . Each painting is a representation of me, a collection of my experience – travel, social relations, experience, how self-aware I am about what I want to say based on what I know. Visual language is a complex organization of stuff – a hodge podge. A pastiche. Like music. (74-75)

I believe that images, like words, are in themselves meaningless and are resurrected in context. . . Juxtapositions . . . sometimes

inclusion and sometimes exclusion . . . sometimes sparse and sometimes cluttered. Not unlike a good jazz solo. Not impure or hybrid, but a created, inventive entity. (190)

[My] earlier representational works [like Hot Dog Bridge] . . . are often seen as humorous or surreal. From my perspective they are but another way of using juxtapositions . . . visual metaphors, shifts, or visual dissonances, attempting to resist explication. Anita Dube points out that ‘none of this should lead to closure – a kind of self-referential psychological hole. So what starts out internally as sensation and emotion, expands and returns to the objects and events in the world. That is where the work finds elucidation: in the threading of the subjective into its correspondence, where it begins to have another life, an art life.’ (21)

Anything can be a metaphor depending on who you are, or what you believe. (73)

As regards “Hot Dog Bridge”, perhaps it is helpful to engage the work by first noting one’s ‘sensation and emotional’ response – perhaps delight or happiness, or perhaps puzzlement that wants to interact with aspects of the work like the clouds, the rainbow, the hot dog, the rocks being bridged.

What personal or cultural associations arise from these visual metaphors? What is our context in which these images are ‘resurrected’ to meaning?

- Lying in the grass with my grandchildren looking at clouds on a summer’s day, laughing at what they look like to us?
- Singing “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” and thinking about where home is, where the bridge might be to get there? What’s a rainbow you remember? What’s the gold at the end of it?
- Thinking about rainbow flags in our society and their claim on us?
- What else besides hotdogs are “as American as . . .”
- Do I really wish I were an Oscar Meyer Weiner so everyone would be in love with me? Would that be a good thing?
- Are these universal images that evoke diverse associations and responses?
- What are the chasms that need bridging and how do we do so? By finding loves we have in common – clouds and rainbows and hotdogs?

Said Gordon:

Finally, every day, on a fundamental level, I want to engage you, the viewer, with the painting’s dynamics; I then want to pull you in. The multiple layers, the mix, the collage, the assemblage of elements from many different sources, and the juxtaposition, provide energy and emotional force. It must be this way in my painting because it is this way in my life. (23)