

About the Cover Art

Cover Essay: The Haystack

At the very beginning of the 16th century, a stern moralist by the name of Hieronymus Bosch depicted a traditional Flemish saying: “The world is a haystack and each one takes what he can” (“The Haywain,” oil on panel, c. 1501, Museo del Prado, Madrid). Both the saying and the painting expressed a blunt opinion: Plain, selfish greed rules the world. It is all going to hell. Bosch portrays each player of the drama in detail. We recognize the good and the bad and the weak and the strong, and the very few wealthy at the top of the haystack, dreamy and oblivious, having a good time. There is also the desperate angel of God, and the merry old demons pulling the wagon and leading the way. It looks fantastic to us, but in the eyes of his contemporaries, Bosch was portraying reality as well as a bold and timely political stance: The devil existed, his actions and agents were individually recognizable, and responsibility was a personal issue between oneself and the Lord.

Half a millennium later, we stare at Ecuadorian painter Nelson Román’s reinvention of the haywain in a perplexed fear of sorts. Greed still rules the world, and each one takes what he or she can. But is it a haystack? Or is it some unnamed and unnameable burden? Are those people on top or are heads without bodies and bodies without heads? Are the ones all around the yellow blotch tumbling down, climbing up, or supporting the load? Who are the good, the bad, the weak, the strong, the demons? All look the same, turbid and miserable under looming skies. Is the whole thing moving somewhere? Maybe there is some chaotic quality to the movement, like that of ants pulling a breadcrumb to their nest? Is it a world going to hell? No, it is a distinct vision of hell. It is the certain picture of an uncertain world gone to hell. Five hundred years have changed the universal artist’s view of humanity from that of weak but credulous and certain beings, heterogeneous and individually identifiable, into an uncertain bunch, turned

anonymous and homogeneous by some kind of common, ulterior sin.

Bosch did not portray the world as a bed of roses, but for some reason his moral eye depicted a healthier world than Román’s moral eye does. There is a bubbling sense of humor, an ironic dialogue (and therefore hope) in the playful and musical demons of Bosch’s oil, the pathetic and emasculated angel, the biodiverse ugliness of the sinners below, the trivial and ridiculous sophistication of the people on top. Nothing to chuckle about in Román’s engraving. The innocent smile of a child who looks at us surrounded by the greedy smiles of adults only adds to the sense of irony and despair. And the anemic, black-blotched sky could be an X-ray shot of our ozone-holed atmosphere. There is also, in Bosch, a distinct presence of a higher destiny for humanity: Jesus (the god-man) watches over the scene. In Román’s, we CNN-feeble humans are the only witnesses.

Art critics recognize in Román’s work the expression of a perplexing, collective horror about our contradictory reality. For a political ecologist, what counts are the sources and the paths of such horror. For an ecologically illustrated healer, there is a layered, complex disease to worry about, but the disease is, at its roots, as much a moral as a physical one. The globalized loss of the sense of individuality and the loss of faith in our individual capacity to affect our collective destiny configure a political, ecological, and moral malaise. We still act, we partake in the mess, but we perceive our actions as the actions of a witness in despair. Being responsible, we don’t feel responsible because we are overwhelmed by the violence of our world, which is loaded upon us with every breaking news story (spirit-breaking, corporation-controlled news). News that is articulated in such a manner that a car bomb and a tsunami are both treated as natural

disasters and as virtual shows: things we are not really supposed to react about, because they both respond to forces well beyond our reach and because they belong to a virtual reality of sorts, the artifactual reality of things we watch on a screen (screened things). It is a terrible, socially constructed unreal world, and we'd better just watch and take what we can while we can. It is we who crank up the air conditioning, but we feel unarmed to fight global warming. It is we who beat our wives and consume child pornography, but we wish the world was still a safe place. It is we who build and raise corporations and protect them with rights beyond those of any human person, and turn them into monsters, but it is also we who claim that there is nothing personal in our actions to glorify them and let them step upon whole cultures and nations.

In days when the leader of the most powerful army in the world claims that his war on terror responds to a higher calling, and faceless warnings of permanent fear shake the moral foundations of the "land of the free," justifying the violent seizure of other people's lives, Román's unheavenly world (the pale, tainted sky; the pale, mushy people; the pale, yellowish burden or booty) is as much denunciation as it is bitter medicine. There is an ecologically healing function to art, in that art helps us to remember connections and relations that we have learned too well to bury. Art reconnects us to nature, particularly to human nature (not just to greed, but also to the ironic passion that gives birth to art) and therefore heals. And that is the very definition of a healthy and wholesome human being: a being connected and interactive with its environment, a solitary being that establishes creative partnerships with other people, animals, plants, clouds, stars, concepts; a responsive and therefore a responsible being; a dissipative structure consciously choosing its links and fighting entropy and not going to hell—or at least, not yet.

We may each take from the world's haystack what we can, but this need not all return to individualism and greed. Some of us remember the warmth we get from each other, which we give out, collectively, and which the hay-pile in which we sleep returns to us on a winter's night. Some of us still remember the pleasures and the costs of growing new crops of hay. If we are repulsed by Román's bleak vision of our collective failure, we can still reclaim our productive and creative selves. In this understanding, in our knowledge of who we are on this planet, is power, and our hope for

healing. Never mind the breaking news, go watch a painting, hold a child by the hand; then return to the world, in anger, hope, and knowledge. We're not finished yet.

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THE ARTIST

Nelson Román (Latacunga, Ecuador 1945–) is one of the important Latin American artists of the last four decades. Nourished by an anthropologic imagery, Román's work provides an aesthetic testimony of a wide variety of themes related to the human adventure: the New World's conquest; Dante's *Divine Comedy*; *Don Quixote*; and the contemporary life in the streets of his world. His sources of inspiration are the world of dreams, myths, and magic, building through images of stairs, mirrors, and mythological demons and animals—especially birds—that presage disaster, a projection to the future of virtual human destruction. The engraving on the cover of this issue shows some of the traits that made Román well known: a social critique based on allegory and satire. The engraving portrays expressions of collective horror and perplexity about our contradictory reality. Román's oil paintings and engravings mark important private and public collections throughout the world, and have been presented as individual exhibitions in prestigious galleries in more than a dozen Latin American and European countries. A painting by Román, entitled "Codice del Fuego" was a millennium gift to the United Nations Secretary General from the government of Ecuador at the end of the 20th century.

The cover image and information about the artist were provided by Dr. Jaime Breilh, in whose private collection the cover image is held. Dr. Breilh is Director, Centro de Estudios y Asesoría en Salud (Health Research and Advisory Center), Quito, Ecuador, and a member of the Eco-Health Editorial Board.

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Unnamed Engraving (12 of 16) by Nelson Román, 1974

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