

Friedel Dzubas Darkness into Light:
Re-examining *A Black Series*

by Rachel Stella

You can't go wrong calling Friedel Dzubas a consummate colorist. Between 1960 and 1962, however, he painted a number of canvases for which this term is inapplicable. They were not primed; they were brushed only with black or white paint, often so diluted with turpentine as to appear gray. They stand out from the rest of his oeuvre because of their achromatic palette, without hue, neither cool nor warm: Black, white, gray.

To better understand how these paintings place in the general history of New York abstraction, and for Dzubas specifically, a bit of context is in order. The June 1951 issue of *Artnews* carried a brief report about an exhibition organized by loosely associated artists, now famously known as the "9th Street show." Amidst the works by more than 50 artists on display, Thomas Hess, the managing editor of *ARTnews*, perceived gaiety, confusion, and enthusiasm. He used the term "authoritative statements" to categorize the contributions of De Kooning, Pollock, Kline, Tworkov, Hofmann, Vicente, Brooks, Motherwell, Reinhardt. To their tiny audience, these men were vaguely known as Abstract Expressionists. To Dzubas, they were peers he met regularly at The Club, a locale on East 8th Street where artists socialized and organized informal discussions and lectures. Hess also listed some lesser-known painters who "make this exhibition doubly interesting to specialists." Dzubas was not on that list; but a specialist, namely John Bernard Myers, the director of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery, did see the interest. Shortly after the 9th Street show, Myers offered Dzubas--still using his given name Friedebald--his first solo billing in a gallery representing advanced art. It took place in November 1952.

1952 was also the year Dzubas enters psychoanalysis and pauses his studio painting. We find him back on the scene when Leo Castelli opens his first space in 1957, inviting Dzubas to participate in group exhibitions. In 1958, the Castelli Gallery presented a one-man show of Dzubas, which received notices, including in the *New York Times*. A year later, the short-lived French & Co Gallery also presented a Dzubas solo exhibition.

Despite this 4 or 5 year hiatus in painting and exhibiting, Dzubas' integration into the New York artworld was rapid compared to his naturalization as a U.S. citizen. Dzubas finally obtained his papers after twenty years in the USA, in 1959. Of mixed parentage, with a Catholic mother and a Jewish father, he had emigrated from Germany in 1939. With his American passport he could travel to Berlin to reunite with his family. He spent several months in Europe. After his return to New York, Dzubas showed at the Elkon Gallery in November 1960. It was Leo Castelli who arranged this relationship with his dealer colleague, deeming that Dzubas' lively colorful abstractions no longer corresponded to the line he was developing for his own gallery.

Meanwhile in the studio, Dzubas was creating works of a very different spirit. Twelve of them were presented at the Robert Elkon Gallery in 1962 under the title *A Black Series* (October 15-November 2). The announcement-poster depicted, not artwork, but rather a bust shot of the artist at work. Walter Silver, the photographer, captured Dzubas mouth open, half-smiling. We don't see his hands; but he appears to be looking at whatever they are doing. Underneath, the artist's name printed in red is followed by a colon on the other side of which black letters spell out the show's title. The announcement, likely designed by Dzubas himself (he gave up a successful career as a commercial artist), seems to affirm that black is a style concept, not a metaphor for emotion.

The paintings from 1960-62 range in size-- none measuring less than an arm's length, and also in format-- horizontal, vertical or tondo. The brushwork differs greatly from painting to painting.

Sometimes forms are created with broad strokes that dissipate into the unprimed canvas like stains. Some canvases are covered edge to edge with brushmarks often described as calligraphic, as they are directed by the fingers or wrist. We should prefer to call these marks scribbling, as their energy resembles emotional discharge more than writing. No viewer with a few Pollocks from the Fifties in his mind's eye can avoid seeing an analogous treatment of the all over field. But in their directly applied energy, Dzupas' marks differ from Pollocks's dancing drips.

Contemporary critics were attentive, though unenthusiastic. Brian O'Doherty, on his way to becoming one of the most astute critics of his era (*Inside the White Cube* 1976), was still a chronicler for *the New York Times* when he described these works "immersed in a funereal gloom." He concludes "only a few paintings manage to impress, Mr Dzupas is a supple and facile worker, with an highly educated abstract sensibility. He needs to put it to work."¹

More interesting for our iconographical questions is a review for *Artnews* the paintings are described with a slew of adjectives, and finally as 'monochromes'. A photograph of *Walpurgis* illustrates the article. Perhaps the author ignored that the nighttime of revelry and fire on Walpurgis Night in honor of Saint Walpurga is based in pagan rites marking the shift from winter to spring. In any case, Dzupas was more likely referencing one or both German novels titled *Walpurgis*. Gustav Meyrink's novel *Walpurgisnacht* takes place during World War I, in Prague. For Meyrink, Walpurgis night evokes the horror of war as the invasion of the human world by demonic otherworldly forces. Austrian author Karl Kraus's *Third Walpurgis Night* responds to the Nazi seizure of power in 1933. This book was not released until 1952 for fear of reprisals against Jews trapped in Germany.

Donald Judd had not yet shown his sculptures at the Green Gallery when he reviewed the same exhibition for *Arts magazine*. The article begins with some flashing of teeth: "Dzupas' last two shows were bad." Presumably the greenhorn means Dzupas' solo at French & Co in 1959 (11 November-5 December) and the one presented by Elkon in 1961. Judd continues "This one is not bad. Each painting has a single field of black or gray lines scribbled on unprimed canvas, either white or stained. The earlier paintings resembled Frankenthaler's and were remarkably incoherent. These are coherent." Without elucidating what similarity in form or facture incited the comparison with Frankenthaler, with whom Dzupas shared a studio space in 1953, Judd observes: "Continuous fields are not unusual now and the free mesh has a sharp Pollockian quality, but Dzupas' conviction overrides the resemblances. The rotary scribbling produces undescriptive lines possessing the immediate tensility of the movement. At points this "automatism" produces Surreal loops, striations and spiral eyes. As in Pollock's work, the lines have a coolness and objectivity despite their apparent chaos and despite the lambent wash, lighter than the mesh, which Dzupas uses."

No other writer has noted Dzupas' assimilation of Pollock with such enthusiastic parsimony. This long comparison with Jackson Pollock demands pause. We are reading contemporary criticism by an ambitious young artist on the scene in which Pollock-- who died in a car crash in 1956-- is still, or perhaps more than ever, the Man. There is an aspirational objectivity to Judd's flat tone. Perhaps the lack of affect indicates that he sees Dzupas as a contender. "The widths of the lines and the discrepancies in value between the lines and stains, either great or small, form the main differences between the paintings. *Orlando* has hard, black, narrow lines on bare canvas; *Rex*, a tondo has black strokes an inch wide which nearly obscure the dark gray wash. Some paintings have a fringe of sharp strokes-- which seem unnecessary." A reproduction of *Temptation* illustrates this forceful commentary.

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Although Dzubas' grisaille experience caught the eye of some critics, it did not attract collectors. Dzubas returned to a more colorful palette in 1962. Patricia Lewy would explain the apparently anomalous *Black Series* by examining the link between his pictorial production and life story.² She posits that his voyage in Europe was also an emotional journey reflected, if not depicted, in this series of paintings. "These works amplify the equivocation in his relationship to his Jewish and Catholic identities through the metonymic transposition of psychic conflict into pictorial representation... Dzubas's "black drawings" can, and should, be understood as an instance of what Sigmund Freud called *Nachträglichkeit*, a belated response to psychic wounds sustained in early life. It was Dzubas's return to Berlin that catalyzed this outburst of black, gray, and white calligraphy, an obsessive drawing and redrawing of repressed conflict and rage." Noting that these works "can be read both as allegories of his immigration experience and as overt statements of his identification with Christian sacrifice and salvation," Lewy interprets them as means for Dzubas to excavate and reinscribe his personal pain even as he accounts "both for the biblical story of Christ's Passion and for the Holocaust—the near total annihilation of the Jewish body in the Germany in which he had abandoned his family."

Indeed, we can conjure many titles of these paintings to support the identification with the final period before Jesus' death. *Rex, Last Crossing, Last Station, Calvery* [is this the correct spelling? *Calvary* is the site of Gogoltha]. *Betrayal, Temptation, and Gloriam*, evoke incidents in the Passion narrative. Dzubas would seem to concur with such an interpretation in the expansive interview (preparatory to his 1983 retrospective at the Hirschorn Museum), when he mentions that the months in Europe provoked a rediscovery of "certain attitudes that come out of Catholicism as being quite potent in me... I wanted to create an ambiance with my newly discovered feeling for the church and my art, and this black and gray all-over writing was part of it. I just was obsessed to deal with these black things."³

Should we want to search for overt correlations between life and art in this series, no other title is more suggestive and less explicit than *Self-Portrait* (1961). Thick brushstrokes press black paint flatly onto the canvas, or deftly wriggled with the wrist so that the mark ends in a flare, small thin strokes applied with a certain regularity around all the painting's edges delineate a frame, areas of gray clearly made from diluted black paint appear to float mysteriously behind or above the black marks. It's a lush human-scale work slightly wider than tall, which in itself makes it more of a landscape than a portrait. The greatly varied paint handling leaves us guessing as to how Dzubas proceeded. If he was looking in mirror to see his subject, we might avoid misinterpretation by saying it reflects his soul.

On the other hand, a title that doesn't at first suggest autobiography, *AG*, contains a clearer clue. At first glance, this painting is a scribbly thing, made by loading the brush with thin paint and pulling each stroke until the paint is exhausted. This process repeated over and over until the entire canvas is covered. It looks like some piece of obsessive doodling scaled up from a notepad. With a hard look we can see some of the "surreal loops, striations and spiral eyes" mentioned by Donald Judd. But also, at the bottom of the painting, near the middle, we distinguish the letters "AG." Dzubas met Alison Gray in 1961, when she posed as a life model for the class he was teaching at the Scarsdale Studio Workshop. They married in 1963.

Taking into account these biographical considerations, we should return to the 1983 interview in which Dzubas states that the dark paintings had actually been in gestation for nearly a decade. This

²Patricia L. Lewy "Allegories of Surface: Friedel Dzubas's Retranscriptions of Memory in the "Black Drawings" of 1959–1962"

³Dzubas archives typescript

would include the mid 1950's period of hiatus, as well as the late 1950s, when he was establishing himself in the feisty, cosmopolitan downtown scene in New York City. At that time, dark paintings might be said to be part of the zeitgeist. Dzubas said "These black pictures had been overdue for ten years, because ten years before they occurred I wanted to do black pictures like that. I wanted to have an overall linear fabric that could bespeak all kinds of drama and feelings abstractly. But when I had that idea, I knew I couldn't do it the way I wanted to do it...if it's of any significance it will surface again."⁴

Like Dzubas, Barnett Newman did not set out to use the Passion story as the basis for a painting cycle. Yet, between 1958 and 1966, he created a number of paintings which became known as the "Stations of the Cross." The full title included the expression *Lema Sabachthani*-- Why have you forsaken me? -- Jesus's cry from the cross. In a statement accompanying the series during its exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, Newman explains: "Lema? To what purpose— is the unanswerable question of human suffering. Can the Passion be expressed by a series of anecdotes, by fourteen sentimental illustrations? Do not the Stations tell of one event?" Newman did not intend his paintings to represent episodes of a Christian myth, but rather to "stand witness to the story of each man's agony; the agony that is single, constant, unrelenting, will — world without end."⁵

Writing about the *Stations* in a catalog for the Museum of Modern Art, Thomas Hess elucidated these black and white paintings with remarks that seem equally applicable to Dzubas' *Series in Black*. Hess explains that Newman's atheistic stance in favor of culture without cult did not preclude finding inspiration in two thousand years of Jewish mystical thought for the *Stations*. "Thus, the tragic dimension is added to actions and forms which traditionally were based on a secure, common faith, anchored in belief in the existence of Eternal Glory, the coming of Messiah, and the ultimates of justice bliss... [Newman] is the artist as modern man, alone, surrounded by chaos, by social events over which he has no control, a transient material being-- absurd. The arena of the tragic hero opens to him as he realizes and accepts this, but still continues to work like Mallarmé, as if he could believe in man's supreme creation. He chose to live with this contradiction and found images in its tension."⁶ Whereas Newman's *Stations* were eventually installed in a dedicated gallery at the National Gallery in Washington DC, the *Series in Black* by Dzubas has all but disappeared from public view until today.

Only two of the dark pictures were shown again during Dzubas' lifetime, when they were included in a group exhibition at New York City's Jewish Museum (December 1, 1963-February 5, 1964) titled *Black and White*. Director Alan Solomon's catalog introduction states that the exhibition had "no ax to grind other than to stress the widespread involvement of painters with black and white painting since World War II." The artists chosen by the curator Ben Heller ranged from younger artists emerging on the scene such as Jasper Johns, Frank Stella and Robert Rauschenberg; but mainly established painters associated with the New York School--Franz Kline, Willem De Kooning, Arshile Gorky, Hans Hofmann, Jackson Pollock and Barnett Newman. The paintings were *Echo* and *Walpurgis*.

⁴Dzubas archives typescript

⁵THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS Lema sabachthani Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1966

⁶Hess, Thomas. BARNETT NEWMAN. NY: MOMA, 1971.