

Two Cultures

Dirk van Nouhuys

I had some time to kill. I went
to the Los Angeles County museum,
a noble, spacious, cranial venue.
It had a dozen major shows,
as varied as the scattered city.
I picked two adjacent to each other.
The first was the work of the Jains, ornate,
like Hindu art, tapestries
that show a world in detail, banners.
No threatening godhead here, but chattels
of incarnation who nurture the wheel.
They hold the least of creatures sacred
and hide from harm their mouths,
opaque behind gauze, to spare inhaling
flies. Time darkened, shined, the bronze
endures: animals, dancing gods,
the twenty-four gurus, six women,
who meditate, most in the lotus
position, but some erect. You might
destroy a life as you settle your butt,
so many stand to shrink their print
on the earth — thin, sparsely dressed
or nude. Their knees are slightly bent,

they stare, avoiding other's death,
elegant figures fined with the gloss
of devotion and sediment of time.
No Kali Durga here with necklaced skulls.

The second was Mayan ceramics. How
did they survive? Eggshells among
the roots that heaved the five-ton blocks
with the slow violence of growth,
the massive, writhing images,
cylinders the size of a quart jar
but thinner stuff and painted stylishly
with images as heavy as
the stones. Blood spurts from severed necks,
feet kick skulls toward the deadly goal
while rows of prisoners crouch
for death as bloody as their gods,
aristocrats who chose to drag
thorny sinews through their tongues
or genitals. Their thickened cheeks
make gleam the eyes of the kings because
they know that only blood can grease
the wheels of being.

One universe
is as sacred as the next.

If time and place were killed, I see
a solid Mayan nobleman
or woman with a conscious trust

to suffer, let blood, who sees emerge
from the vines and trunks a skinny guy
with ragged wisps around his mouth
preaching the sacredness of life:
a metaphysical saboteur.

Adjacent, adjacent, adjacent! like two
dreams in one night's skull, or two
verbs in one sentence, disjunct,
inseparable.

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