



G. DANIEL MASSAD

Cobalt, 2021

pastel on paper

13 x 21 inches

I took a break from the easel after *Meninx* was framed and on the wall, spending over a month and a half writing about my 72-year-long friendship with my sister. Since Carol's death early in 2019, I kept telling myself that writing - not picture-making - might put me on the path toward that destination all people who grieve hard yearn for: heartsease. One sentence after another, for ten single-spaced pages, got me closer - and, unexpectedly, strong enough to return with renewed energy to the pursuit of the next image.

I've assigned starring roles in my pictures to Toshiko Takaezu's tea bowls since the mid-80's, including clusters of six in *Six Bowls*, seven in *Leal Souvenir*, and twenty in *Yield*. As I've written before, I sometimes work in pairs, and *Yield* was the compositional mirror of *Falls*, the artist's bounty in one, Great Nature's in the other. When I completed *Providence* in 2016, I felt that same familiar tug toward the process of finding its companion, another horizontal rectangle of an image with strong diagonals pushing into or out of the viewer's space, inviting touch. I roughed out a preliminary sketch, tucked it away in my "maybe" pile, and on January 1, 2021, my valentine to my sister finished, I put that sketch from 2016 back up on my studio wall and began revision.

Providence is a harvest of natural shapes and textures: squash, gourd, passion fruit, acorn. Perhaps it was the obvious resemblance between the acorn and many of Takaezu's closed forms, or perhaps it was the memory of the way a horde of apples in *Falls* had balanced so satisfyingly with a heap of Takaezu's tea bowls in *Yield* - but certainly it was my ongoing need to come to terms with her loss in 2010, and her legacy in my life, that inspired me to cluster six of her bowls on the stone ledge in the image that I would eventually - finally - after many rejected possibilities - call *Cobalt*. I used my last hoarded bits of Rembrandt pastel that contain pure cobalt in order to re-enact Takaezu's scene-stealing signature blue glaze on that "bad blue bowl," as Sally McNall tagged it in a text.

The original plan contained the bowls tightly in an intimate space, the darkness abbreviated, as in *Providence*. But when I pushed the rectangle farther to the left, expanded the darkness, and sketched out two descending stair-like levels, my excitement grew. Or, I wondered, were they ascending stairs, an access to the aerie where the bowls nest? But I had other questions I needed to answer over the next five months, most of them resolved in the preliminary drawing, some of them faced much later, as the pastel developed. "Slowly," I told myself, "...amble forward, pause: let's have no regrets built

into the completed work.” I toyed with the idea of placing something only partially visible in the bottom of the blue bowl (a bell? a leaf? - nope); I cut off the top of the back wall so that it could not be read as a plane parallel to the picture plane; an old iron nail landed in the brown bowl in back in order to deepen that bowl’s interior; children’s alphabet blocks filled the golden bowl on the left; and the picture was well under way before I saw clearly in my mind’s eye the color of the gourd and the object in front of it: the wasp nest I had used in *Leal Souvenir*, another nest of bowl-like shapes, turned on Great Nature’s wheel.

I worked from top to bottom, as usual, moving down through the four bowls in the right quarter of the picture, including that “bad blue bowl,” all the while frustratingly uncertain about those alphabet blocks. Which letters, colors, how to arrange them? I erased and redrew them in the preliminary drawing half a dozen times, at one point thinking of removing them altogether, or replacing them with dry leaves or the Anasazi pottery shards piled in a bowl on the floor near my easel. Still vaguely dissatisfied, but about to begin my last revision anyway, I shared my uncertainties with Scott in mid-April. He pointed down to the bowl of shards I’d been pondering and said, “They’re so beautiful.” Yes, I thought to myself. Not maybe - yes. And when I took the blocks out of Takaezu’s bowl and tumbled a handful of the shards into it, I wrote in my journal, “Peace, finally.”

And under “Peace” I wrote: “Heartsease.”

So, it seems clear to me now that writing about my sister wasn’t my only step forward. She was the one who had given me those Anasazi shards years ago, a gift to her from her in-laws, who had found them near their adobe home in Ojo Caliente, New Mexico - which Carol and her husband inherited, where she spent the last 25 years of her life, where the stoneware urn containing her ashes still sits on her desk, next to her reading glasses. Why had it taken so long for that light bulb to go on in my mind - for me to see what my picture needed, to see what I needed? Willa Cather had an answer for that: “Some things have to come home in the dark or they don’t come home at all.”

- G. Daniel Massad