



G. DANIEL MASSAD

Meninx, 2020

pastel on paper

21 1/2 x 21 inches

In *The Observational Mood*, an exploration of the experiential core of scientific discovery in the 17th century, David Carroll Simon asserts that "...disarray remains a feature of experimental findings no less than hasty jottings in notebooks." The hasty jottings in my own notebooks have always been in disarray, the barest of temporal structures housing all manner of things tossed into what is for me a comfortable and disorderly jumble. Which is why, in the backstory for *Cytherea*, I made the mistake of dating the birth of *Meninx* to a thumbnail sketch I jotted down in the margin of my journal on June 20, 2012. I simply hadn't dug deep enough. Three months earlier, after a visit with Jo Margolis and a long look at her meticulously intricate drawings, I had roughed out a new composition: at the center of a square of black rose a tall plinth, epigraphy all over it, with what was then a mere scribble of things on top. "There's a lure here," I wrote, "a siren call. Expressive language and the look of it, the shapes of letters themselves, 'belles lettres.' That path has been open for decades - at least since college, when words added themselves to some of the clay things I built in Takaezu's classroom, [including] that bit from Tennyson's *The Lotos-Eaters*. It beckoned again ... after Jo's visit, seeing her latest indecipherable manuscripts, webs of word-like knots..." I then scrounged around in the attic and came up with that odd stoneware vessel I'd made in 1968 and discovered that I had attached an "And" to the two lines from Tennyson: "[And] in the afternoon they came unto a land/in which it seemed always afternoon." But I still rather presumptuously preferred my "And," and "&" became the image's provisional title, at least in the confines of my journal.

The much more detailed thumbnail sketch three months later actually included the Tennyson quote, lightly roughed in, along with my "And." To the right of it, a strong "Yes." To the left of it, its tentative handle, "&." To the left of that, a footnote that referred to the broken vertical edges of the stone: "battered but still standing." I knew - as I put it in the *Cytherea* backstory - exactly what I meant by that, but I didn't know, yet, what I wanted to cluster on top of the stone, or whether or not the image would require any other elements. Even making the first full-scale preliminary drawing on the same day did not resolve all the questions I had. As I drew and erased, drew and erased, only a few things were clear: the color palette of the unknown objects, including pale pink, yellow-green, blue-gray, and among them some sort of rounded spherical form - a pear? - with something tall and slender behind it, spire-like. I also knew that the stone itself had to be a mid-range gray, for me an as yet untried mix of warm and cool hues. Two days later, my attention was grabbed by a piece of ancient glass in an antique

dealer's case - a tall and slender vial - which I immediately pictured "on top of the stele in '&.'" And I also found myself agreeing with Scott's preference for a spiraled shell over a pear. But what shell: and what about my vague sense of incompleteness? Out of this fog of uncertainty, *Cytherea* emerged with unexpected clarity and pulled me almost instantly into its orbit. If this is a companion to "&," I thought - and in many ways it is - then "&" will just have to wait until it's all there, and until I'm ready to face the technical challenge of "carving" its 61 letters into the stone.

Is waiting an underrated part of the creative process? In *Catastrophizing*, Gerard Passannante points out that a "dialectic of absorption and detachment runs through [Leonardo's] notebooks, with the artist experiencing the involuntary and then generating a kind of critical distance in its wake." In my case, the critical distance between me and my first involuntary encounter with the idea for *Meninx* & lasted eight years.

But the idea proved to be a magnet, not only drawing me back to it again and again, but also gradually and serendipitously reeling in the objects it needed. It wasn't as if I knew precisely which objects, and deliberately searched for them, but past experience led me to trust that when the right things crossed my path I would recognize them. A year or two later, I found - or was found by - the sawed-off bottom of an old, corroded bottle, its unusually deep blue-green hue conjuring up the breathtaking first time I saw the Mediterranean, Homer's "wine-dark sea," lapping the promenade at Nafplion. The color, the association, the shape - like an unfluted column barrel - seemed to fit "&" to a T. In 2017, casually scanning Lebanon Valley College's vast collection of rocks and shells, I wasn't expecting to find the shell I wanted to cast as the star in "&" - but there it was, glowingly iridescent, throwing off hints of the palette I had seen in my mind's eye in 2012, and inviting my hand to hold it up to my ear to hear the faint roar of the ocean. In 2019, the artist Michael Allen gave me a small box of old glass vessels that he and his wife Jessica thought I might like, among them an ink bottle I pegged quickly as a missing piece in that puzzle of things on top of a plinth so fully given over to the written word. The familiar asteroidal prune plum had been there all along; a vague unknown shape in the front of the shell came into focus as a chunk of olive-green pastel; and a tiny crabapple, the size of a small pea, provided the image with its only touch of pure gold.

My final uncertainty resolved itself when I put the full-scale prelim back up on the drawing wall at the beginning of 2020. The writing that covered the stone now seemed to overemphasize the picture plane and undercut the illusion of deep space, and when I mentioned this to Scott he wondered out loud about adding something at the bottom. Peony leaves that I had photographed at the end of the previous summer fanned out in my mind's eye, in front and to one side of the plinth, and behind them a sinuous curve of honeysuckle vine disappeared behind the plinth and reappeared on the other side. Drawing that vine was a moment of automatic writing.

The Tennyson quote was more than the challenge I anticipated: letter after letter, it was like climbing the Appalachians, ridge after ridge. There was a rigorous pleasure in the work, and it gave me lots of time to think and do a little research on the Tennyson quote. I learned that the island of the lotos eaters, which Odysseus and shipmates come across in Book IX of *The Odyssey*, was called Meninx in the ancient world, and was identified as the island we now know as Djerba, off the coast of Tunisia. The word “meninx” only means membrane in modern English - a potential confusion for some viewers - but I loved the sound of it, and it paired perfectly with the name of the island that gave *Cytherea* its title. The ghostly smudge in the middle of the plinth is Meninx/Djerba seen from the air, wisps of cloud to the north and south.

And there was one more discovery. Thumbing through a catalogue of ancient glass, I found an exact twin of my tall vial, an unguentarium by name. Unearthed only at graves that date from the 2nd to the 6th century AD, the archaeological record does not reveal what they were used for in the burial of the dead, but its presence here made me think again about those 61 letters. It had been a hard year and a half, emotionally. The span from February, 2019 to August, 2020 included the deaths of my sister Carol and Scott’s youngest brother Corey, along with the pianist Richard Neher, Scott’s keyboard teacher and lifelong friend, and the Renaissance scholar Thomas Roche, my undergraduate advisor. I picked their initials out of the letters - as if the plinth were a Boggle board - and subtly sharpened their edges, all the while asking myself: what is this plinth? The sole architectural fragment of an altar? A waymarker in a dark world? A page torn from a book? The collision of painting and writing, my two battling vocations? Or just another gravestone?

All of the above.

- G. Daniel Massad