



G. DANIEL MASSAD

Over the Line, 2010 - 2014

pastel on paper

21 1/2 x 14 3/4 inches

In 2006, writing about the sources for *Cairn*, I found myself looking back at two variations of a theme that had resurfaced many times in my journal for over twenty years. “On the one hand” - as I wrote then - “variation A: a single upright uncut stone or post... its surface marked with numbers or words and its shape and compositional structure determined by the golden ratio. On the other hand, variation B: a tall stack of broken pieces of cut stone or brick... and at its base a cluster of ripe fruit. In both variations, the way-marker seemed to poise itself serenely in the heart of a pure trackless darkness...” I had come to the conclusion that *Cairn* was a hybrid of both variations, and that it somehow hit the mark the variations missed, ultimately inspiring other cairns: *Tau*, *Six Wooden Blocks*, and *Studio*. Variation “A”, it seemed, had reached its own satisfying conclusion as a precipitate for even better images, and I abandoned it.

But the idea of a fencepost-centered composition would not abandon me. Blame it on the Canada geese. Every spring, for the last fifteen years or so, again and again I’ve heaved myself over a makeshift stile straddling an old post-and-wire fence on our property line in order to drive Canada geese, pair after pair, from our neighbors’ sheep meadow. With our neighbors’ permission, of course: they were as keen on a goose-free meadow as we were on a goose-free backyard. Whatever the reason, in late August 2010, variation A had returned in a thumbnail sketch with new and crucial changes. The stone stele had morphed into one of my neighbors’ weathered wood fence posts, rusty iron nails fastening a long stretch of thick, delicately undulating iron wire near its flat top, which now supported an intimate huddle of found objects. By early September, I was already mapping the image in a full-scale preliminary drawing, adjusting proportions to square with the golden ratio (1: 1.618033...), thinking indecisively about the objects on top of the post, fretting about the new technical challenges ahead of me, and pondering titles: *Line*, *Property Line*, *Over the Line*.

I can see now that those three potential titles hint at the complex hold this image exerted on me - formal, personal, and metaphoric. The purity of the 2-D line spanning the picture plane fascinated me. The wire itself and its supporting post were ultimately based on photographs of our neighbors’ fence, with some aspects of its surface (including the stamped-in number 1.618033 fading off from left to right) lifted from the telephone pole in front of my studio, where I’ve worked for more than twenty years. And the phrase “over the line” recalls some of the best - and some of the most illegal - moments of my childhood. My best friend and I were inveterate explorers - “exploring” was the word we used for all our outdoor play - and many fences in both our neighborhoods failed to keep

us out of their no-trespassing zones. Other people's ordinary backyards were our enchanted gardens.

We were also inveterate souvenir hunters, pockets filling with bits and pieces found along our path, potent and tangible reminders of our fence-climbing expeditions. With that in mind, it made sense to build on the fence post a miniature cairn of fragments I've picked up as an adult (all of them pocketed legally, I should add) in places I've lived in or visited: among other things, a square of marble from a sidewalk construction site in Athens, a scrap of mosaic from a curbside dust heap in Rome, a worn chunk of 19th century terra cotta from Toronto's lake edge, and on top an Anasazi pottery shard from an untagged ruin near my sister's house in northern New Mexico. Even the Pantheon-shaped screw cap on the far left is another postcard from Rome, which has provided its visitors and conquerors with souvenirs for two and a half millennia. An ominous iron tobacco spear from Lancaster County, PA, rears up behind the central stack. And how could a painter of bottles (at least since 1994) not include one of the many bottles he's rescued from flea market shelves littered with the detritus of other lives?

But *Over the Line* suggests other interpretive possibilities. Since *On the Edge* in 1990, many of my images have played with the boundary between foreground space - well-lit, familiar, carefully organized, mapped in meticulous detail - and the darkness beyond, which can be read as almost any kind of mystery: the next adventure, the forgotten past, terra incognita, the unconscious, imagination, mystery, death. As an English major who wrote his undergraduate thesis on Shakespeare and whose Master's exam focused on Hamlet, it was inevitable that I would look at the deep black beyond the fence in *Over the Line* and think of "that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveler returns." But this image, as metaphor, is as hard to pin down, in my mind, as it was to find on paper. The bellicose tobacco spear can be read as a steeple, the post-and-wire fence as a rough crucifix, and a way forward through darkness is certainly suggested by the holes (stigmata?) in the fence, which constitute a star map of the northern sky, the vermilion crabapple its Polaris. And Great Nature's cyclic return is promised in the timeline connecting the four natural objects on the post's top, reading from left to right: seed, green fruit, ripe fruit, dry fruit - the last a "Japanese lantern" seedpod poised on the edge, solitary, translucent, vulnerable to the least gust of cold wind.

- G. Daniel Massad