

## Measured Beauty

Thoughts on  
Theodora Varnay Jones'  
Exhibition

**Vasarely Museum, Budapest  
July 18– August 25 1996**

Recently, with reference to one of my film projects, I am thinking a lot of Mark Rothko. As bashful intrusion unfolds in the monochrome images of this artist of vital instinct and death wish, as the poet of exposed secrets battles with life and death, he is – to my taste – depicting a possible end of artistic expression. I don't think I saw an oeuvre of purer suffering, than demonstrated by his works. He was not touched by his contemporaries' macho self-destruction, the cruel and heroic decay that was transferred into their images; he was beyond isolation and esotericism hidden in other's calligraphy. I visualize the Rothko Chapel's violet and black panels in Houston – what I never saw – and I do feel that this man seriously thought about God.

When I'm rejoicing in the art works of Theodora Varnay Jones, our compatriot from San Francisco, my first comprehension – evoked by her monochromes which fade or tend to vanish into other color domains – is a woman's sensibility. Such attentive methodical lyricism penetrates through her images as if someone would do house-cleaning in my senses. As the drug-like sweetness of certain emotions coats our perceptive endings, making the world our home, this inner world of images unfolds. While Rothko empties out or rather empties into Nirvana, Varnay Jones leads to, merges into her surfaces.

It is a surprising experience, because most of the artists (especially female artists) with minimalist style – similar to Varnay Jones' – are confusing minimalist aesthetics with minimal sensibility. They are emotionally stripped, self-restricted, self mutilated, forcing themselves into a

The other great example that came to my mind walking through the Vasarely Museum, was Jasper Johns. The darts, flags, beer cans and light bulbs shoved into the face of the world. The metaphoric provocation of the object. The St. Vitus' dance of a flying gesture, and the halt of the eye. In contrast, if I look at Varnay Jones' incense burns, real tea bags or razor blades, I feel as if I am in a Japanese temple or in a gracious religious procession. It does not provoke; it invites. It does not hit; it caresses. It does not convince; it receives.

I feel a special closeness to her incense images, the flag-like tableau with marks burnt into the paper, and the diary documents. Not only because the hovering, almost unsubstantial, soft Japanese rice paper – in itself with its lyricism and closeness to nature, when the wind blows – has some significance beyond art and moreover "exhibition"; and also not because its coexistence with strips of a thicker, pressed French paper coated with metal powders – for instance in *Surface-84 Incense Burns* is a reminder of Japanese religious flags – at least to the person unfamiliar with that liturgy. The reason for my fascination with Varnay Jones' images is that dignity which materials and materialized surfaces receive from her visionary affection. The vertically and horizontally situated pieces' lateral expansion is the evident phenomenon of their existence; in each work the style, atmosphere and the domain of associations are differentiated. As the above mentioned threefold vertical *Surface-84 Incense Burns* recalls a Japanese religious flag, the Kyoto diary *May 16 – June 6 1995*, although it contains many similar motives, it evokes in me a rhyme to Kandinsky's unrestricted, light, playful bagatelles.

One of the most attractive characteristics of Varnay Jones' pieces for me is that I can't differentiate between the micro and macro provinces, but indeed as indicated by her titles, I recognize slight differences, driftings, in comparison with the whole, and furthermore, I see each complete surface unit in relation to natural surfaces of the existing outside world.

To walk through Varnay Jones' exhibition is ballet for the eyes. The rippling of verticals, horizontals, color hues and the constant divisions arouse the impression of someone observing the

The dispatchers are singing. *Theodora Quelle*. Clear spring. Definable.

The spontaneous ballet is most evident in the *Connections-Vertical/Horizontal (1-10)* ceramic ensemble made in 1995. Varnay Jones produced these individual pieces by kneading the clay with rapid gestures, then she left the *came about* shapes to their own existence. Because in the soft clay, natural horizontal and vertical deformations remained, these pieces – when installed side by side – already in themselves, by their waviness include a ballet movement for the eye. Then again, taking these pieces as configurations, a different concentration on essentials and a different rhythm is required for this eye ballet of verticals and horizontals.

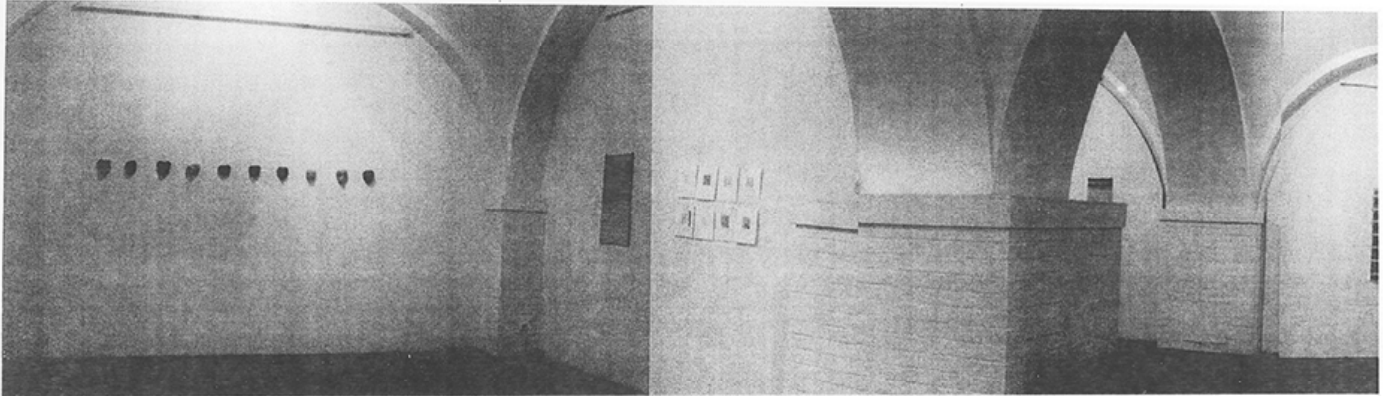
In contemporary Hungarian painting a similar mood to Varnay Jones' images captures me by looking at Zsigmond Karolyi's Xs and Tamas Hencze's light-poetry paintings; only for Karolyi, concept is the most important presence, while for Hencze, light is a basis of comparison, an organizing element. His lyricism is a sharp masculine one. Compared to them, Varnay Jones – even in her simplest images – is air. If inornate: aerial, not earth bound. The mood that breathes through her work reminds me of record covers from my jazz enthusiast period; the time when abstract painting and abstract jazz found each other. Jackson Pollock, Ornette Coleman. A Don Friedman and Don Cherry cover. Larry Rivers, who was a saxophone player as well as a painter. A bridge (like Rauschenberg) between post-abstract-expressionism and pre-Pop. As for Varnay Jones, the concurrence is not between sound and image, but between matter and her inner gentleness.

Of course it is entirely possible that for Theodora Varnay Jones her residence in San Francisco, that loving, most forbidding city, where the Pacific Ocean's calm stretch meets the Far East, (and her visits there) as well as the West coast's art communities' meditative praxis are responsible for the gentle affection she is filled with. Or perhaps this environment helped her to preserve the values she had from the beginning. I can imagine the little Theodora Varnay during the Hungarian Stalinist era as she is wandering the corridors of a

(self) expressive pillory; not only in their works of art but already in their previous experiences and in the attitude which preceded the artwork.

curves of a landscape. The geodetic surveyor sent to the museum and found measurable data. The central office is processing.

Prussian-style elementary school, being punished for forgetting to bring her composition book with her. On the walls – as in the school laboratory, where



during breaks Mr. Teacher reads the *Free People* (newspaper) - everywhere there are charts, diagrams, evolutionary tableaux (also, of which we can see a lyrical repercussion in the early works of Dora Maurer).

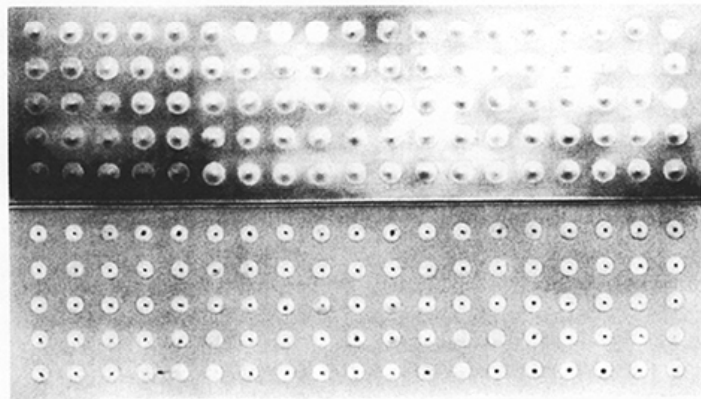
I wonder if this little blond girl with glasses got lost or survived in the city of hippies?

Survived. Works like the *Surface-Vertical* from 1995, made of wax, aluminum, graphite powders, and dry pigments on handmade paper and the *Surface-Horizontal # 2/ 1996* are solely the products of an artist, whose youth was spent in the shadows of those charts. Whose youth was such that when she saw the Mendeleev-charts, she had to think of everything having limits, and that only after our duty was fulfilled can we search for our rights. That everything in the world is defined by corners, regulated by standards and is captured by descriptive geometry on a chart. To my mind the rectangles of these divided color panels meant a private socialist hard-edge, Pop-art, while according to Varnay Jones, if I see her work correctly, what is interesting, is that those panels are also surfaces. They are realistic even if it means being inconsistent with the intentions of their inventors and utilizers. They are beautiful. Regular. Measurable. Clear. And now, somehow, after what

potato-like hard rock (?) potato. Calm and clear like the mood of a beginning, and hard, stable like an unspoiled force. I'd like to pick it up. Steal it. Guard it in my pocket, but that's difficult.

Thus I'm just looking at it, like someone is watching the sunrise.

Istvan Antal



Theodora Varnay Jones

Május 16 - június 6, Kyoto, 1995, ceruzarajz és füstölő hamu, égetés papíron, 92x64 cm

so many believed to be an irrefutable concept has burnt down and been born again, I see likewise, that the fault was not in the presentation but the reading of it. That indeed on those stretched out surfaces of charts everything was recognizable and conceivable, but one could not see the visible, blinded by what one was supposed to see. An image of the most abstract thought is the simplest. Like the design of a game. The whole concept of the *Who is laughing at the end* or the *Clever Economy* is there on the board, no matter what the numbers are on the dice.

A few years ago I saw a Danish cartoon. The title was: *Mother Potato*. According to the story, everything, the whole world, derived from the ancient shape of the potato. Besides formal reasons, the filmmakers referred to something more significant. Supposedly potato is the only necessary food source of all the essential vitamins we need.

I met *Mother Potato* again at Theodora Varnay Jones' exhibition, a ceramic art piece titled *Essence*. Installed on a red base, there it was in the Vasarely Museum, a harmonious ancient or basic form, the origin of all forms, a clear-cut



Theodora Varnay Jones  
fotó: Sáros László



Theodora Varnay Jones  
Lényeg (Essence), 2004, kerámia (16 x 10 x 11 cm)

Translated from Hungarian

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