

Frosted Glass Encounter*

Trudy Wilner Stack

*This phrase and those in italics below are the words of Susan kae Grant and are drawn whole from the exhibition's audio component.

I need a secret

For an artist who draws heavily on autobiography as a point of departure and inspiration, what intimate realm remains when the events and character of her life have already been extensively mined? When she shows her audience something true through the questions her own life raises, where does she turn when she has seemingly exhausted her primary subject? In the case of Susan kae Grant, it is to the dream state, to the wild rides of sleep where the imagined and the real collide without a compass.

Not anchored by a bed

If dreaming feeds, processes, and provides ballast to our waking life, is it possible or advisable to expose its contents to the light of day? Or are dreams necessarily submerged, unclear, and beyond any precise summoning? Grant concludes that they are, for her, still only partially accessible. They are unanswerable but inspiring, incomplete but powerful, they are a tantalizing font of imagery to which vivid connection recedes at the very moment a dream gives way to consciousness.

I don't remember how he got in

In search of heightened access to her dreams, Grant initiated a project that enlisted the cooperation of sleep science. In a University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center sleep lab, the artist submitted to an elaborate network of electrodes and the scrutiny of researchers who repeatedly awoke her from REM sleep to interrogations about the nature of her most recent dream. Grant's accounts were recorded over many nights during 1993 and 1994, and from the

resulting transcripts she collected select phrases and images. These fragments were to provide the basis for her next photographic series, a series about remembered dreams as an avenue to the unconscious.

Hands clutched tightly

Night Journey was created and continues to evolve. Grant has undertaken a cycle of shadow works that will number one hundred when complete. The first were cast onto billowing floor-to-ceiling scrimms of silk suspended and layered together, breathing one image onto another in an ever-changing shadow world viewers could physically



enter. A soundtrack animated the environment (as it does here): provocative phrases from the sleep lab interrogations uttered in Grant's own voice, loud then soft, words layered like the images, parallel then discordant, edgy clues to the flesh behind the ghostly, ageless silhouettes.

I am the participant and the observer

In this exhibition, Grant's elongated dark hour tableaux, her delicate shadow plays that hearken back to childhood imaginings, fairy tales and nightmares; Victorian spirit worlds and the lurking Nosferatu of F.W. Murnau; are printed in four black inks onto forty-four inch high paper sheets half again as wide. The transparency of the images on cloth are

exchanged for the opacity of rich, hand-torn paper imprinted with lush ebony forms. The forms are often human figures engaged with props and set upon filmy backgrounds. Branches, leaves and curtains punctuate a smoky negative space that the artist terms an “envelope of light.” The players float, sometimes alone, sometimes in relation to each other or a chair, a bird, a magic lamp. They seem to reach in and out of the picture frame like unmoored phantoms, advancing their drama in a thick, luminous liquid.



There is an understanding

In *Night Journey*, dreams are both Susan kae Grant's subject and her source. But, they are not the literal, objective subject they are for her sleep scientist colleagues, nor are they a direct source, as a dream was for Jasper Johns in 1955 when he painted *Flag*. This now iconic work was wholly conceived by his unconscious the

night before he took up his brush. Many other artists, writers, composers, and filmmakers, have plumbed their own dreams for ideas, images, stories, and song, as they have also sought to approximate the qualities of dream world experience in their art. Ancient cultures whose boundaries between conscious and unconscious states are less strictly drawn have entire artistic traditions significantly reliant on hallucinatory aesthetics neither real nor utterly fantastic. Grant, a product of the Freudian era, comes to dreams self-consciously, drawing from their content and character carefully, asserting her artistic discipline on their primal lack of order to both relive and contain their fascination.

She sits straight up

Grant began by wanting to both address and access her dreams. “Where do I go at night?,” was the question that took her to the sleep lab. Could she access a part of herself otherwise unavailable, unexamined? And could she take what she found and use it to continue her work as an artist, lengthening the trajectory of a life's work based on life story to include her unconscious self, using memory as the bridge? *Night Journey* is just that, a journey from darkness into light and back again. It tells her story, a shared story, it poses searching questions that both stump us and define us. What are we doing? What just happened? Are we giving or taking? Are we oppressed or dominated? Do we accept or let go? Are we filled with fear or yearning?

No one ever finds the room

To create this work, Grant ultimately resolved that the dreams she uncovered in the lab would be the inspiration for her images but that they would not be illustrated. Likewise the visceral, sexual phrases that spilled from her lips as she was interrogated just seconds out of REM would be used as is in the audio, and would advise only the conception of scenes for her shadow theater. The language would have taste, smell, touch, the images would be seen but silent, they would be illusions without precise meaning, but evocative of meaning, rich with symbolism—they would be as dreams, elusive, like the thread of their memory. The visions of *Night Journey* return us to a world of ineffable states remembered from somewhere, a familiar, inescapable place impossible to know.

Afraid because we found each other's secret

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