THE BROOKLYN RAIL
CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON ARTS, POLITICS, AND CULTURE

ArtSeen March 4th, 2014

STRANGE INTIMACIES

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PAUL EDLIN *FAMILY BUSINESS*
ANDREW EDLIN GALLERY | FEBRUARY 6 – MARCH 15, 2014

He deftly forges strange, vicarious intimacies between viewers and the unlikely subjects of his paintings—from giants and insecure grasshoppers to an entire cast of fretting fowl. Such is one of artist Paul Edlin's (1931 – 2008) many talents. Edlin beguiles warring, molten subjectivities into form as deftly as Hephaestus. It is perhaps this gift that imbues Edlin's works—nearly 40 of which are on view through March 15, 2014 in *Family Business* at the Andrew Edlin Gallery—with their unexpected lyricism.

Edlin is generally understood to be an "outsider artist," and the reason for the classification is as fatuous as it is obvious: born deaf and having lived as a relative recluse, Edlin created many of his compositions entirely from sliced postage stamps. To marvel over his art on these grounds does not merely warrant censure as rank condescension; such sciolism misses a basic point: Edlin's biography is far less compelling than the hominal curiosities explored within his œuvre, much of which is invested in laying bare the brief elations, muted disappointments, misapprehensions, and quiet struggles that bid for intimacy not only court but demand (this is perhaps why *Moby Dick* is an inspiration for several pieces). But Edlin is not the bard of domesticity. Not only are the intimacies he tenders unexpected, he is also skilled at conjuring the uncanny. Many of his compositions boast spectacular visions from worlds Hieronymus Bosch might have dreamt of, had his dreams been more kind.

Paul Edlin, "Family," 2001. Postage stamp fragments on board, 14 × 11''.

More surprising is how Edlin's works inherit a tradition with underpinnings quite opposed to fantastic visions or cults of subjectivity. Before itinerant crusaders razed it in the mid-15th century, Constantinople was a city famed for its seemingly boundless wealth and its network of elaborate mosaics. Its works revealed a mentality where mortality was governed by an eternal plan, one that artisans gilded, broke into thousands of pieces and then reassembled in the apses and domes of churches, as if to proleptically defy any threats to theocratic credulity.

The glistering saffron backgrounds of so many Byzantine mosaics resurface in Edlin's own mosaic scenes, though the tesserae are not glass but the paper of postage stamp fragments. Edlin's works channel sixth century Byzantium even in prominent formal elements. Like any long-suffering saint in the Hagia Sophia, most of Edlin's subjects float in an eternal foreground set against a depthless chromatic sea. Moreover, like numberless Christian martyrs and apostles, Edlin's figures often are rendered with a minimum of corporeal detail, as if the material body was more an implication than an object of direct imitation.

Paul Edlin, "Sacrifice," 1986. Mixed media, 12 × 15''.

In Byzantine art that austerity of form was intended to express both the inevitability of an irrefrangible eternal order and the otherness of the spiritual realm. In Edlin's work, the same elements monumentalize subjectivity and are primed to tell any story the viewer might conjure. Flatness in figures creates a distance that paradoxically manages to inspire propinquity, imbuing relatively abstract figures with the power to insinuate figuration, to intimate endless narratives. In "The Letter" (1987), the faces of the four subjects are featureless, merely strips of flesh colored stamps stacked in separate formations. And yet, the angle of the simplified forms, the suggestion of a head's inclination, inspires limitless tales.

At other times, intimacy achieves a poignant aridity as it does in "Family" (2001), where four figures —circular headdresses and relative scale suggest a women and children—stand in front of the outline of an anonymous city, all towers and walls. An imperial moon of lapis lazuli presides over the scene. There is a disconnect between these three elements, which seem estranged, as if collaged into a single frame. Paradoxically, it is this disjunction that inspires a fellowship between the figures scattered along the foreground, who stand apart, but not alone.

Edlin's fantastic works inspire connections differently. The flatness of rendering, his stylized representation, presses them into a hinterland between narrative and allegory, making even the most phantasmagoric image into a metaphor of human experience. "Sacrifice" (1986) seems torn from Iphigenia in Aulis, complete with mourning parents, a young girl innocent of destiny, and a priest intent on rituals. Still, the juxtaposition of figures, each formed with a distinct angularity, creates an aesthetic contrapuntal harmony that places public duty in rivalry with private grief. "Doomsayers"

(1994), meanwhile, creates the impression of a world on the brink of chaos by juxtaposing a scene of superstitious ritual with an apocalyptic allegory reminiscent of the New Testament'sRevelation of John.

Edlin's work has been described as lyrical. What makes it so is how it crowns subjectivity with an emphasis on perspective, on interests in common and those in conflict. Its principles and practice are an accidental monument to how what is meaningful is not always derived from brute determination or the complacency of established connections. Edlin's work cultivates unexpected connections between subjects and even champions greater intimacies—between abstraction and figuration, narrative and symbolology—that are not just unexpected, but improbably lovely. Ultimately, Edlin's work embodies what cannot be explained: how separate pieces connect, how a million fragments can seem a glimmering whole, and how even the most pedestrian medium can conjure visions lithe as a Chagall flight, as lapidary as Homeric hexameter.

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