

Critical Review by Professor Dinah Ryan -

Trisha Orr's *Beloveds and Others*: Navigating Dangerous Times

They said to me: here
Is the beloved
And here is the world:
You have to choose...

How do we know
We can't have both?

Would that be greed,
When the two are one?

Book *Beloved* by Gregory Orr, *Concerning the
That Is the Body of the
Beloved*

To live in “dangerous times,” as former President Barack Obama characterized our age in a speech at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign on September 7, is to live in a period where unnoticed forces that have nevertheless been gathering over time burst into view, threatening to destabilize diversity, solidarity, and mutual respect within communities. As separate reports by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), and the FBI all note, since the 2016 election hate crimes in the United States have been rising, contributing to an increasing sense of personal and public anxiety about the future.

To live in Virginia, with its long history of racism (consider, for example, the state’s official resistance to *Brown vs. Board of Education*), and to live in Charlottesville, with its entrenched socio-economic and racial stratification, is to be already situated on fault lines. To have lived in Charlottesville in August 2017 when white supremacist, neo-Nazi, antisemitic, and white separatist groups descended on the city in the Unite the Right rally is to reside in one of the vortices in which the violent eruption of apparently quiescent forces can upend hope and deliver the struggles of “life in dark times.”

Trisha Orr’s paintings and works on paper in *Life in These Dark Times* reveal the walls of public and private spaces as permeable; and, her works invite viewers to examine this human porousness through both the closeup of familiarity and the more remote view of public events. The bridges between these vantage points are the works in the *Beloveds and Others* series that occupy such public spaces as parks and grocery stores. If both private and public bodies—the body of home, family, and friends and the body politic—are vulnerable, the answer is not in a descent into violence, which rips the

Other to shreds in an attempt to preserve the self, but in an awareness of that vulnerability of both self and other, of the loved and the unfamiliar.

The *Charlottesville Burning* series initially recalls Mark Tobey's white writing paintings, and it is fitting that the horror of the violent upheaval of the Charlottesville events would emerge in a tangled web of gestural, calligraphic marks. Tobey, a Baha'i believing in the essential unity of humanity, produced a harmony within his overall compositions, even when the paintings have anxious-seeming titles like *Catalyst* (1958) or *Trembling Space* (1961). Their agitation is resolved by a harmonious push-pull balancing potential disjunctions in a vibrating whole—much in the same way that citizens might hope for negotiation between opposing forces in the civil discourse of the body politic, which might lead to fairness and equality.

Orr's *Charlottesville Burning* works on paper won't relinquish their tensions. Their agitated, anxious marks lend a ruthless activity to the picture plane so that the eye moves ceaselessly around the composition. These works on paper refuse to settle into overall patterns that might suggest the balancing of countervailing forces. Rather, the gestural calligraphy coalesces into figurative narratives set in particular civic spaces—a public parking garage and the lawns extending around the Rotunda of the University of Virginia. The compositions are, like Orr's figurative paintings in the *Beloveds and Others* series, muscular, with a powerful interplay underlying the massed conglomeration of things that come together in each work. The marks suggest the glistening tangled string of human fascia, that gelatinous stuff connecting all parts of the body, and they somehow congeal into horrifying figures that intrude and dance upon the civic spaces represented here, as well as upon the tender bodies of the innocent human beings that ordinarily occupy them.

Figures writhe on the surfaces of these raw images of the torchlit march at the University of Virginia's Rotunda and of the Market Street Parking Garage where at least four men violently attacked De Andre Harris on August 12, 2017. In *The Rotunda* (7), forearms of alt-right demonstrators jab upward across the foreground, flickering torches in their upraised hands. These forms appear to be rising, transitioning from a diagonal forearm on the left to a pure dominant vertical on the right—mirroring the desires of the organizers of the Unite the Right rally to assert white supremacy. Behind them the neo-classical form of Thomas Jefferson's Rotunda appears as a spectral, gleaming scrawl that nevertheless assumes a fixed, symmetrical position, both in design and placement on the picture plane. Who or what haunts us, the viewer might ask in 2018, one year after Charlottesville and one year before the commemoration of the 400th year since the first African slave's arrival on North American soil in colonial Virginia? Are the democratic freedoms proffered by Jefferson's words alive? Are they living for every human being or are they being recast once again as exclusive to a select few?

If “the body of the beloved/Which is the world” (to quote the poet Gregory Orr) is at least in part the body politic, then the *Charlottesville Burning* series suggests that the connective tissue, the fascia, of this body has turned against itself and is eating itself from the inside out, as with a cancer. The deep interior question in Orr’s work is the question of the vitality of human connection, of a collective body. In the *Charlottesville Burning* series this body is in disarray, its fragility palpable. Thus the viewer turns to the domesticity of the *Beloveds and Others* as from a nightmare, wary and jarred and worried.

As if to underscore this unsettled quality, diagonals move through every painting in the *Beloveds and Others* series, explicit as shape and line or implicit as the psychological line of gaze and gesture. They sometimes function almost as one-point perspective—a table jutting through the center of a painting like a blue road littered with dinnerware in *Dinner at Al’s* or a conveyor belt of groceries in *Bagging at Krogers*—and sometimes lead the viewer across an oblique horizon as in *The Bridge*, where a dark, almost nonobjective arc bends across the center of the painting toward the vertical figures of a man and woman who occupy the right-hand third of the picture plane. The pair look away from the bridge into the distance perpendicular to it. She wears sunglasses, her shoulders stoop. His eyes appear briefly closed as if in a moment of resignation. This dark bridge asserts itself across an airy landscape like a gash in the earth. It is impossible to tell whether it is a metaphorical path into an obscure future or an intrusion. In any event, it is out of reach because, despite its visual proximity and weight, it occupies a distant space in the depicted landscape; and, the structure is broken, ending abruptly high above the earth at its abutment. It is no bridge. The figures in *The Bridge* pause in the foreground, turned both outward and inward while the dark passage leading to a remote place, time, or future—whether safe or unsafe—remains truncated, looming but unavailable. Yet the painting breathes in this pause, asking the viewer to notice such precariousness.

The psychological line in Orr’s paintings, the gestures and gazes that lead the viewer through the human interchanges vacillate between tight encounters and open gazes that ricochet between figures only to veer off the picture plane or boomerang in a new direction. In *Bagging at Krogers* no one looks at anyone else, yet the figures’ solitary gazes within the social setting reveal the motion of the human project of disconnecting and connecting. This project is constantly enacted in the *Beloved and Others* series, veering, ping-ponging, bouncing, settling, and sorting. Like Damien Hirst’s *Theories, Models, Methods, Approaches, Assumptions, Results and Findings* (2000), a nonobjective work of glass and metal in which air blowers keep ping-pong balls in seemingly chaotic motion until, the blowers stopping, the balls descend into rest, Orr’s paintings are similarly about the relentless and demanding act of paying attention to the ceaseless interplay of human life.

The seemingly domestic subjects of *Beloveds and Others* are in fact tied to the public experiences of *Charlottesville Burning*. These works suggest that each of us is

responsible for the same act of tender attention—and lines in her works, ever moving, ever playing against each other, lead the viewer to this task. The world tilts, especially in dark times, but the structures of empathy and attention hold steady.

There is no grief without love. And with love—and its capacity for grief—there can be no intentional harm, no plowing through a crowd of vulnerable living bodies with an invulnerable metal body (a car). No beating another with the broken plank of a parking garage barrier. No screaming for an/other to leave.

The domestic structures and public spheres of the *Beloveds and Others* may shift along diagonal planes, redistributing and restless. But the figures depicted in them navigate. Their gazes and gestures follow paths of gentle interaction and they share spaces as they remain stable within them—eating, working, talking, holding the baby, pausing, cooking, bagging or ringing up the groceries. Fellow inhabitants, they daily, bravely share vulnerability, grief, and love, alternating between the intimate love of family and friends and the respectful, impartial love of kindly encountering an/other in public, simply as one ordinary human to another. Like Hirst's *Theories, Models, Methods...* things are always in motion, but as the motion dies down, things flow into order and rest. They don't fall apart and are not torn apart.

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