

Sky Glabush: Background

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by Kristin Campbell

Sky Glabush's 2009 show at MKG127, *Renting*, featured paintings of houses as temporary homes. The palette, the scale, the time of day and the wintery light, the view through a screen of trees or up an unshovelled snow-covered walkway: some quality always kept the viewer struggling to place locations from some personal past or present even while the artist was quietly insisting that these places are ultimately inaccessible. This impression lingered long after—a haunting familiarity that was at the same time inescapably remote.

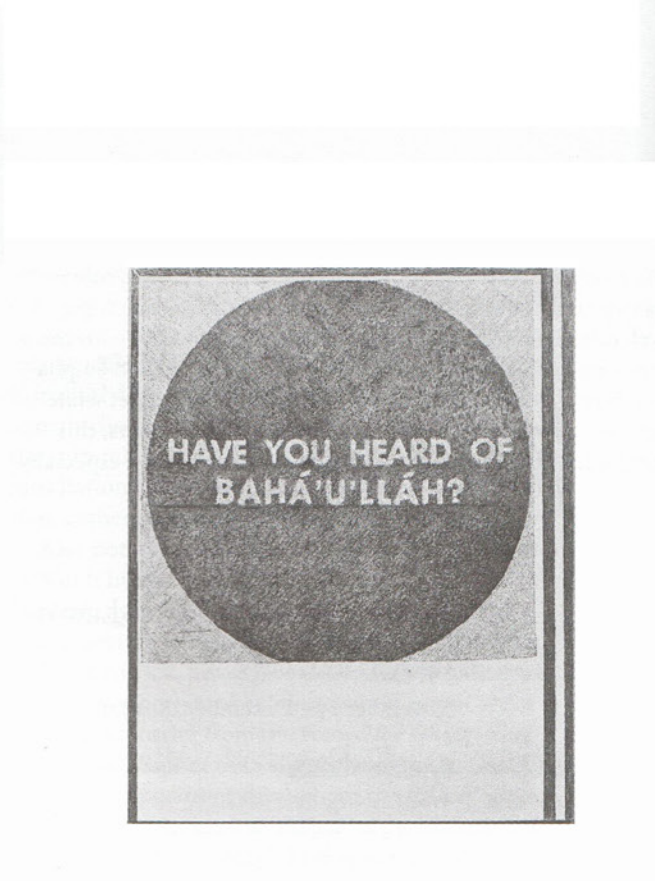
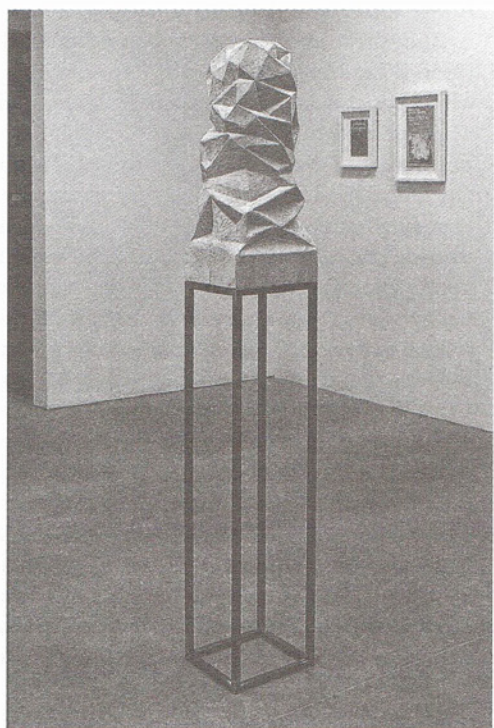
Because I had such an established sense of Glabush as a skilled painter, I was surprised by his recent show, *Background*. For instance, there was an abstract sculpture on a steel plinth, *the carpenter* (2011). Recesses and projections are formed from triangular hollows carved out of bone-coloured basswood. Placed in the middle of the space, *the carpenter* insisted upon my engagement. Its three-dimensionality ensured its difference from every other object in the show, yet its triangular patterns and prism-like angularity set the tone.

Perhaps because of this initial startling encounter, the sculpture quickly began to function as a central touchstone for the show—a reference point to which I kept returning. Its title evoked ideas of workman-like diligence and methodical craftsmanship, and having faith that forms would emerge without seeming forced, while its physical, angular dips and hollows fostered a dynamic dialogue with the other works in the show. I soon saw *the carpenter* as part of a broader effort to search for a new visual language, one that could serve as a vessel for meaning, perhaps after a trying experience or radical change in lifestyle. This may be signified by the artist's shift from painting to sculpture.

In any case, this change became more literal and personal in the small pencil drawing *mother and child* (2011), which posed a stark contrast to the abstraction of *the carpenter*.

It is an intimate, sketchy depiction of a young child seated on his mother's lap, combined with the title page taken from an old Alcoholic's Anonymous handbook. Here, the AA logo—the triangle representing the motto “unity, service, recovery”—is contained within a circle. This logo is positioned at the nexus of the bodies of the mother and child, at their most intimate centres of gravity, suggesting that the triangle and the recovery from addiction are somehow linked.

A similar sentiment is expressed in *the scholar* (2011), a work that combines a sheet from an old ledger, an op-art radial drawing in black and white, and a colour test strip in shades of blue and green. In the bottom righthand corner is an original, intensely hued blue AA handbook cover. Underneath this work, in a smaller, separate frame, is a pencil portrait of a man, in the garb of a Middle-Eastern cleric. The ordering of these seemingly disparate elements has an exploratory quality: this man (the titular scholar?) may hold the answers, but perhaps only in combination with the process of taking account of one's life, and by expressing devotion to abstract imagery. Such a combi-



nation may serve as a way to fill the void left by addiction.

Another painting, *U-n-i-t-y* (2011), features a single, large triangle recessed into a field of glossy blue and enclosed by a circle painted in another lighter shade of blue. The circle and triangle immediately invoke the AA symbol—and by extension its connotations of “unity, service and recovery”—but they are, at the same time, freed from that association, becoming simpler forms for their own sake. Most striking about the work's surface are the blemishes that interrupt the glossy finish. These fossil-like ruptures are evidence not only of damage but also of the processes of working and fixing. I feel sympathy for this ground, for its afflictions, as though violence had been done to it.

In contrast, *untitled (sound)* (2011) has a remarkably different texture, and tone. A large canvas depicts a circle in which the phrase “Have you heard of Bahá'u'lláh?” appears.

The texture of the canvas emerges through the graphite colouring, as does the suggestion of half-tone dots from old newspapers. The repetitive action of laying down so much graphite may be seen as a meditative one, repetition in the service of a larger whole.

There is humour in the deceptively simple “yes/no” question, here rendered in a humble typeface writ so large it becomes an exclamation. The phrase invokes, for instance, street-level and door-to-door encounters with religious recruiters of different stripes. Yet this humour is tempered by an expansive sincerity that has, at its roots, the subtext of searching for meaning and striving for recovery or enlightenment.

By contrast, *updown* (2011) is very different in tone and texture—it is celestial and otherworldly, yet retains a mouldy, earthy quality. With its cracks and ravines revealing dry rivulets of pigment, it recalls Rauschenberg's *Dirt Painting (For John Cage)* (c. 1953). I read *updown* as an alternative means for exploring the same goal of a new visual vocabulary for the artist, one that is far heavier and more abstract than *untitled (sound)*.

Choosing radically different procedures—encaustic, graphite, and so on—suggests a serious struggle, perhaps one inflected with pain and doubt. Glabush may be implying that each kind of surface and composition has the capacity to encapsulate profound, and potentially transformative, content. The range of media in the show reinforces the notion of seeking out a new visual language of expression—symbols and associations appear hither and thither, sometimes encouraging existing connections between one work and another, while also providing opportunities to (re)examine familiar forms for their own sake.

left
Sky Glabush, *the carpenter*, 2011, basswood and steel plinth, 162.5 cm × 2.4 cm × 2.4 cm
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED; IMAGE COURTESY MKG127

above
Sky Glabush, *untitled (sound)*, 2011, graphite on gessoed canvas
PHOTO: TONI HAFKENSCHIED; IMAGE COURTESY MKG127

Finally, *The Secret Doctrine (parts one to nine)* (2011), substitutes delicately but intensely hued watercolour for rough, grey gravel, offering nine renderings of the same geometric pattern as components of a single, larger work. Each is coloured to emphasize different peaks and angles, allowing some to project while others recede or retract into space. More than the others, this elegant work recalls the efforts of Klee and Kandinsky, especially

during the Bauhaus years. Like them, Glabush strives to achieve a condition of hybridity, melding Eastern and Western traditions, in an effort to believe in the power of shapes, textures and colours to motivate us to improve our lives.

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