INDELIBLE FINGERPRINTS

THE ART OF LOUISE GLÜCK

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Essay by

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IN COLLABORATION WITH

GARVEY RITA ART & ANTIQUES

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An exhibition of the paintings will be held at
Steven Harvey Fine Art Projects in New York City
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THE ART OF LOUISE GLÜCK

You who do not remember
passage from the other world
I tell you I could speak again: whatever
returns from oblivion returns
to find a voice:

from the center of my life came
a great fountain, deep blue
shadows on azure seawater.

– Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris*

Louise Glück (1943–2023) began writing poems at five and never stopped. As an adult, she could "remember, verbatim, most of what [she] had written in the course of [her] life." She began making art in her youth and continued into adulthood. By then, she had studied at Sarah Lawrence and taken night classes at Columbia with the poets Leonie Adams and Stanley Kunitz, though she left both schools without earning a degree. A major postwar American poet without an MFA in creative writing or even a college degree. Despite lacking academic credentials, she received many literary awards and honors, including the National Book Critics Circle Award (1985), the Pulitzer Prize (1993), the National Book Award (1993), and the Nobel Prize (2020). Although internationally celebrated for her poetry, she is not known for her art. Still, Glück valued her early, small body of work enough to include twelve examples in her archives, now held at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

In her talk, "Education of the Poet" (1989), Glück spoke about these early years and her passion for art:

> For a while, I thought of painting, for which I had a small gift. Small but, like my other aptitudes, relentlessly developed. At some point in my late teens I realized I was at the end of what I could imagine on canvas. I think that, had my gift been larger or more compelling, I would still have found the visual arts a less congenial language. Writing suits the conservative temperament. What is edited can be preserved. Whereas the painter who recognizes that, in the interest of the whole, a part must be sacrificed, loses that part forever: it ceases to exist, except insofar as memory, or photographs, reproduce it. I couldn't bear the endless forfeits this involved; or perhaps I lack sufficient confidence in my immediate judgments.

There are two biographical facts that I want to add here. When Glück was seventeen she began a "talking cure"—because she was suffering from a life-threatening case of anorexia nervosa. Thus, in addition to painting and writing poetry, Glück's teenage years were about learning how to be both self-scrutinizing and direct while opening her inner self to a therapist. Later, she credited years of psychoanalysis with her recovery and her understanding of poetry as a pared down, intimate speech act between speaker and listener: "My preference from the first has been for poetry that requests or craves a listener." As critics have pointed out, her poems echo the intense relationship of speaker to listener in an analyst's office.

In her poems, Glück establishes a speaker who tries to get at some truth. However, the "I" in her poems is not her and she is not a confessional poet, like Robert Lowell or Sylvia Plath. In *Faithful and Virtuous Night* (2014), the title poem, and longest in the book, is set in an imaginary English countryside. The speaker is an aging male artist remembering his past as he addresses the inevitability of his mortality and the purposes art might serve. That life must end is a subject Glück returned to without an ounce of dread many times in her last books. She did not find a way to do this in art and gave it up.

I want to turn my attention to Glück's art with these things in mind. As with her poems, I think her desire to separate her autobiography from the "I" of the poems, was present also in her paintings, especially after she started psychoanalysis in 1961. It was a conscious way to get at something larger than personal anecdote, description, and revelatory narrative. Growing older, with people around her dying, she embraced her hyper- awareness of time passing and, despite the outcome, found moments of joy. She wanted to look at herself and the reality of existence without averting her gaze. Her early poems are fragmented and elusive, full of rebukes. Is someone speaking or hearing an anonymous voice or both? Is the speaker saying it or hearing it? The membrane between inner and outer self is porous and the self is compartmentalized.

The paintings stand separate from these preoccupations and follow a different trajectory. According to Glück, painting was too radical for her "conservative" temperament because of the "endless forfeits […] involved." You can preserve a poem in all its states, but you cannot do this with a painting. The process and materials culminate in different results. Call it revision versus obliteration.

In an untitled portrait (#3), done while she was still a teenager, Glück synthesized two divergent influences; Pablo Picasso's melding of a sharply defined profile view with a frontal view into a single portrait and Georges Rouault's black contour lines and glowing stained glass colors. This simultaneous portrait was done while Glück was a teenager, the painting hints at her ambition; she wanted to transform the influence of modern masters into something all her own, a portrait connecting interior and exterior. Glück may have believed her gift was small, but she also believed that this could be "relentlessly developed." The portrait's white pallor and blue eye sockets are unsettling. At the same time, the expressionist power of the work is not a direction Glück would go on to pursue in either her art or her poetry.

The largest body of work within Glück's youthful oeuvre consists of four compositionally related views of flowers. Three of them depict flowers on unadorned table. Each one is painted with a different, consistent application of brushstrokes and signed "Louise "in large cursive script. In this group of paintings, one sees evidence Glück's desire to try out different paint applications without knowing the outcome in advance. Self-taught, she is confident enough not to seek out a signature style or subject. Present from the beginning, this boldness is what binds her art and poetry together.

In 2007, she lent an untitled, undated still life of flowers from her personal collection to the exhibition, *The Writer's Brush: Paintings, Drawings, and Sculpture by Writers,* at the Pierre Menard Gallery in Cambridge (MA), and the Anita Shapolsky Gallery in New York. It is the most complex of her flower paintings. Using thin paint, Glück painted a soft-edged, cylindrical gray vase holding round red blossoms on a tilted up off-white plane (table) holding a gray bowl with a green and yellow pear, a pale celadon-colored glass,

and a gray fork and spoon. Behind the flowers, we see a blue rectangle framed on the right by a bluish-gray band and a salmon-pink band along the bottom. A thin pink band extends down the left side between the painting's edge and tilted tabletop, flattening the space further. Together, the muted colors and soft edges imbue the view with a dreamy quality, as if it is a half-remembered scene.

Glück became sophisticated in the formal qualities of painting on her own. She is aware of cubism and abstraction and how they changed the way we see a painting and the world. She was not interested in becoming a realist or an expressionist painter and she left no record of the struggles she might have gone through. Her body of work is small and neat and gives us a lot to think about.

In 1993, Glück published *The Wild Iris*, a series of poems written during an intense eight-to-ten-week period. Named after wildflowers, each poem is from the point of a flower conscious of death and renewal, the cycle of the seasons. In "Trillium," we read the following lines:

> I woke up ignorant in a forest
> only a moment ago, I didn't know my voice
> if one were given me
> would be so full of grief, my sentences
> like cries strung together.

In her poems, Glück found a way to express grief as a subject that was not confined to her. She recognized that her experiences, however devastating, made her human and not special. Death came to everyone. She did not become a painter, but art left its indelible fingerprints on her work, from her use of words such as "cerulean" and "incarnadine" to her authoring of a nameless landscape painter trying to make sense of the world in the face of death and chaos.

—John Yau

The eight paintings that comprise this exhibition and catalogue came from two family estates, including the estate of Louise Glück's mother, Beatrice, following her death in 2011. Seven of the paintings are signed by the artist, and one of the paintings is attributed to her. When added to the eleven paintings that Louise Glück had retained for herself and which are now part of her archive at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University, they bring the total number of documented art works by Louise Glück to nineteen. Together they represent a small but fascinating body of work that reflects the poet's youthful inspiration and creativity before she embarked upon her great poetic journey.

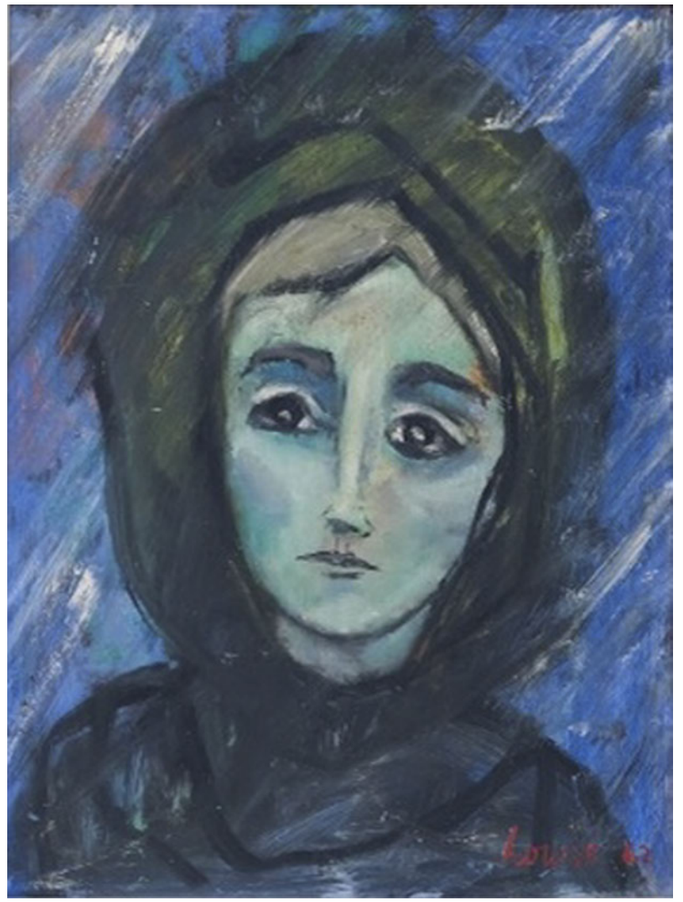
James Jaffe

Kevin Rita

1. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Oil on board
17½ x 23½ inches
Signed "Louise '59" lower right
Private Collection

2. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Oil on canvas
23¾ x 23¾ inches
Signed “Louise ’61” upper left
Private Collection

3. Attributed to Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Oil on board
23 x 23½ inches
Private Collection



4. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Oil on board
24 x 18 inches
Signed "Louise '62" lower right
Private Collection

5. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Oil on canvas
23¾ x 17¾ inches
Signed "Louise" lower right
Private Collection

6. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Mixed media on paper
10 x 9 inches
Signed "Louise Gluck '64" lower right
Private Collection

7. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Mixed media on paper
10½ x 9 inches
Signed "Louise '62" lower right
Private Collection

8. Louise Glück
UNTITLED
Oil on canvas
24 x 18 inches
Signed "Louise '60" lower right
Private Collection

DESIGN & TYPOGRAPHY BY JONATHAN GREENE