

Part I: "Who Am I? The Journey of an Artist", Dorotha Lemeh

By

Dr. Amy Bush



Dorotha Grace Lemeh, *Bird of Prey (The Grand Lady)*, Mixed media on canvas, 2005

In her description of her exhibition, "Who Am I? The Journey of an Artist", Dorotha Lemeh emphasizes the "passion that embraces one of the most important human concepts that of self-naming", which she sees as an "important part of [her] 'lived' experiences. Ideologically the process underlines the ideas of individuality, self- awareness as well as self-ownership" although "there is

no escaping what Conroy, Medina, and Stanbury identify as the `tension between women's lived bodily experiences and the cultural meanings."

In his early unpublished work, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, Nietzsche claims that "Philosophical thinking...is ever on the scent of those things which are most worth knowing, the great and important insights. Now the concept of greatness is changeable, in the realm of morality, as well as in that of esthetics. And so, philosophy starts by legislating greatness. Part of this is a sort of name-giving." However, for Nietzsche in this name-giving, in stating "This is a great thing," philosophy is "elevating man over the blind unrestrained greed of his drive for knowledge," by which he means that the philosophy is selective; it does not indiscriminately and promiscuously consume information without evaluating it [p. 43, PTAG]. In this light, Dori's concerns, in such works as "Consume" and "Eat Me", for woman as consumer of various conflicting social, historical, political and media images and narratives, should include a philosophical element of selection of what narratives and images we then "impose" on ourselves, rather than a concern only for a "hunt for knowledge", as she describes in her work "The Grand Lady (Bird of Prey)". Rather Dori's sense of selection lies in the image of bird cages, as free will, and birds, as that "inner voice", and the development of that inner voice despite - or through and in subversion or resistance to? She is not altogether clear here - those diverse and conflicting narratives that lie outside us, and "fragment" us. Insofar as Dori will also affirm the pursuit of what is unknown, rather than acceptance of what is familiar and conventional, she shares Nietzsche's later conception of knowledge, as that which is "strange" and "unfamiliar" (*Gay Science*). At the same time, some of her works, such as "First Communion", and "Baptized by the Words: The Last Miracle" also struggle with the various religious traditions in which she was embedded through her childhood, both affirming and questioning aspects of them.



Dorotha Grace Lemeh, Baptized by the Words: The Last Miracle, Mixed media on canvas, 2005

Nietzsche also ties the name-giving and selectivity of philosophy to a type of self-possession which reminds us of Dori's connection of self-naming to self-ownership, and yet, in his early works, Nietzsche does not emphasize individuality as does Dori; rather, there is a way, for Nietzsche, that the philosopher/artist takes on the whole world around him in such a manner as to transform it: "While he [the philosopher] is contemplative-perceptive like the artist, compassionate like the religious, a seeker of purposes and causalities like the scientist, even while he feels himself swelling into a macrocosm, he all the while retains a certain self-possession, a way of viewing himself coldly as a mirror of the world. This is the same sense of self-possession which characterizes the dramatic artist who transforms himself into alien bodies and talks with their alien tongues and yet can project this transformation into written verse that exists in the outside world on its own. [ibid, p. 44] In a later work, *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche will split the legislating aspects of the philosopher of the future from those tendencies for making oneself a mirror of the world or of nature, which he attributes to mere scholars. The latter "errs about his own needs" [BGE 207], thereby misreading himself - he denies the passion necessary to the pursuit of knowledge.

In his work, *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche makes name-giving a sort of triumphant self-naming and self-evaluating by "masters": The masters call themselves - "their positive basic concept - filled with life and passion through and through" - "we noble

ones, we good, beautiful, happy ones!" Thus, they not only give names, but name themselves, and in so doing, affirm themselves and their own power to so name themselves. "While very noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is 'outside,' what is 'different,' what is 'not itself'; and *this* No is its creative deed." [GM.I.10] Slave morality demonizes what is outside itself, and attempts to reject this outside *tout court*. However, slave and master morality in all "higher cultures" or in modern times, "at times...occur directly alongside each other - even in the same human being, within a *single* soul." [BGE 260] Thus, insofar as we affirm ourselves and express pride we partake in noble moralities; and insofar, as our values are established only in reaction to others and those institutions which oppress us, by demonizing them - we partake in slave morality. However, for this very reason, among others, we are sites of contradiction.

Dori Lemeh does not demonize the outside, but considers the ways in which we also contribute to our own docility and constriction in such works as "Contemplation", "Consume", and "Eat Me"; she does not simply mirror the world around her, but presents various self-portraits, themselves a type of self-naming, through which her interaction with the world around her presents to us the possibilities and obstacles within that larger world for each of us, in our own self-naming. The contradictions she notes and portrays are those of diverse narratives and media and cultural images which are inscribed on our bodies, and which we often impose on ourselves. That is why we ourselves become shifting narratives. In this fashion, we might say that Dori sets an example - not one to slavishly imitate in its particularities, or categorically reject as a project irrelevant to our own situations, which may have their differences - but as to affirm the process of comprehending one's situation within and among contradictory historical, social, political, and cultural narratives, and to affirm the process of self-naming.

Sartre would call this a matter of "man choosing his own self", by which "we mean that every one of us does likewise; but we also mean by that that in making this choice he also chooses all men. In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. To choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose...." [p. 17, *Existentialism and the Human Emotions*] Choosing for Sartre fulfills part of the purpose of self-naming, and seems to connect self-naming to both our freedom, as expressed through our inner voice, and to the rest of humankind. Self-naming becomes an evaluating process.