

YOU ARE THE WORLD

by Cathryn Drake

Austrian artist Alexander Ruthner's paintings for *Volume 1*, more than 100 so far, are like the prolific pages of a diary, fraught with intensity yet brief and ephemeral, and to be continued. Crowded on the wall in a visually raucous rabble so animated it is almost audible, the scenes seem to levitate as if waiting to be placed into a meaningful narrative. Still each episode resounds on its own with uncanny familiarity, as if taken from a story we know or have heard of, or even happened to us. Although the scenarios may be inspired by incidents from the artist's own life, they are rendered in a vivid allegorical language employing symbolism, literary archetypes, and darkly comic caricatures that lend them the quality of fairytales. Produced over the course of the pandemic, the painting series was triggered by notes Franz Kafka scribbled on pieces of paper, later referred to as aphorisms, while convalescing with the fatal tuberculosis in West Bohemia. These 109 metaphysical entries were published posthumously under the titles *Reflections on Sin, Hope, Suffering, and the True Way* and *You Are the Task*.

We know that Kafka became successful only after death, and the angst-ridden avian of *A Crow's Lifetime Achievement* could be a portrait of the writer, whose name is the Czech term for the ominous black bird—symbolic of wisdom and spiritual transformation as well as danger.

It also brings to mind the protagonist of his classic *Metamorphosis*, widely seen as autobiographical.

The title is perhaps a sardonic reference to Kafka's perceived failure in the eyes of his father. Kafka in fact would have preferred to be an artist and started drawing as a young man, but did not feel he had talent. Not the figure of royalty one would expect, the feathered creature in *Bow Down to the Emperor* appears regal and unruffled just the same, recalling the Danish parable *The Emperor's New Clothes*. Things are never as they seem, yet they are the way you see or feel them.



We might think not only of a bedridden Kafka pondering the nature of existence, but also Giovanni Boccaccio, who wrote *The Decameron*, comprised of 100 irreverent tales shared among a group of Florentines sequestered in a rural villa to escape the carnage of the Black Death.

In the painting *Carriage*, a vehicle piled with corpses is pulled by men in black wearing the masks used by Venetian plague doctors.

Death's Apartment is haunted by the pale faces of the departed. For us too, funerals have become an everyday occurrence, and reading obituaries a daily ritual, so that a lifetime seems a briefer affair while each day takes on more weight. We might be excused for blowing things out of proportion, for seeing them in biblical terms, for losing faith.

As in the novel, Ruthner satirizes the Catholic church: *Cardi Nals* portrays a cluster of distressed clergymen like a comically deformed monster; death is dressed as a cardinal in *To Be or Not to Be*. We all have our crosses to bear, and the struggle to survive is what connects us all. My own personal vision of hell: one of the damned carrying a never-melting block of ice in the Inferno, titled *Do You Have a Publisher Yet? Yet I laugh*. It was Boccaccio, after all, who added the word *Divine* to *Comedy* in the title of Dante's published work.

And then there is Marcel Proust, who rarely left his bedchamber out of choice, except for the rare party—and incidentally, he was also a grave

disappointment to his family. Time during quarantine took on a Proustian quality, and like the French author of the seven-volume novel *In Search of Lost Time*, we have all had the luxury of time, like it or not, to muse endlessly on the universal meanings in the minute and quotidian.

Minutes decelerated to take on the quality of hours, reflecting a whole chapter Proust dedicated to the simple act of falling sleep in endless descriptions of tossing and turning in bed—or staring into the eyes of our pets, in which we mistakenly see our own dread or boredom, or paranoia: *A Dog Making Sense* depicts a canine taking violent control over a half-human figure while spectral onlookers straight out of Edvard Munch scream like a Greek chorus.

We don't know what the dog knows. As Proust informs us: "In reality, every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer's work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without this book, he would perhaps never have experienced in himself. And the recognition by the reader in his own self of what the book says is the proof of its veracity."



During our own isolation we may have experienced some type of metamorphosis as we examined ourselves obsessively in the mirror and questioned our identity. Our very physiognomy might have been altered by the change in our daily routines. I have the feeling that parts of my brain shrank while others became larger, the very neural pathways rerouted, almost as if I have become a different version of myself. In *Balloons* a couple sits at a table drinking wine, heads blown out of proportion and faces contorted, an empty glass fallen over, yet the other glass is full. Life seems even more surreal now that society has opened up again, not at all normal. I do not feel equipped. I am the disembodied jester in *Spherao*.

We might take solace in Kafka's words: "It is not necessary for you to leave the house. Stay at your table and listen. Do not even listen, only wait. Do not even wait. Stay completely still and alone. The world will offer itself to you for unmasking; it can't help it; it will writhe before you in ecstasy."

We have all been compelled to be armchair travelers for a time, surfing the Internet in search of succor and sympathy, and the meaning of life.

Just as a single aphorism inspires myriad insights and interpretations, Ruthner's paintings take on different meanings in the psychic terrain of each viewer. Images by nature speak volumes more than words, which have too much resting on too little—they must be precise enough or die off. Images are more like experiences; we can experience ourselves in these pictures. Reflecting the fragmented way we

see the world through the screen of the computer, the mesmerizing installation of *Volume 1* forces us to select the things that suit our viewpoint. So the narrative is yours to write, composing the frames of the storyboard into your own tragicomedy. As in Ruthner's epic volume, to be continued, the protagonist is always you. Ultimately it is an exercise in how to read reality.

