

Lowell Boyers – Inhale/Exhale

Edward A. Shanken



Boundless/Unboundless (diptych) – Lowell Boyers, 2004
acrylic paint, resin, watercolor and colored inks on canvas, 96" x 120"

Lowell Boyers is a painter's painter. *Inhale/Exhale*, at Briggs-Robinson Gallery confirms, moreover, what many Chelsea insiders have known for many years: that Boyers is one of the most talented painters of his generation. This long-awaited first solo- exhibition finally allows audiences to see the artist's work in a proper setting that reveals its full dynamic range. The eight paintings simultaneously scream their eviscerated guts off the walls while whispering alchemical secrets conjured by the artist's feather-touch and use of randomness. Combined muscularity and delicacy is a hallmark of Boyers' work and is but one example of how the artist consistently integrates pairs of opposites, strikes satisfying balances between them, or presents the tensions of their irreconcilability. Similarly, Boyers' process – which involves struggle, grace, and redemption – successfully unifies enervating form with epic content.

Agonizingly contorted nude or partially disrobed figures are engaged in timeless crusades of mythic proportions. Battles between life and death, good and evil, male and female, heaven and earth, freedom and enslavement are frequently symbolized by entrails, hearts, blood, crowns of flowers, brains, cages, and barbed wire. Spiraling ladders, decrepit pathways, and makeshift harnesses nonetheless offer the hope of redemption to Boyers' protagonists. Indeed, the suffering souls, the bilious spewing, and the seductions of base desire that confront the viewer are trumped by the overriding belief that human dignity can prevail over disgrace and that cosmic rectitude permits the fallen to be redeemed and enables beauty to blossom in the ashes of evil.

The compositions are original and dynamic, intuitively poised between balance and imbalance. The figures are defined by outlines that are at once drawn and painterly, sure-handed and tentative. Their diaphanous forms sink, sail, hover, or are loosely anchored in an indeterminate ether. The depiction of musical horns, as in *Miasma*, is augmented by the

lyricism of the composition and parallel handling of materials, together invoking a sonic field of symphonic richness that is shared by all the pieces in the exhibition. In earlier work, Boyers employed thickly brushed impastos of painterly bravura to produce a feverish, climactic intensity. His recent canvases, by contrast, are more subtly rendered, with complete opacity and saturation used sparingly, expanding the dynamic range and heightening the drama. *Inhale/Exhale* invokes a synaesthetic sensibility that can be described as operatic, with each canvas embodying the presence of individual acts that work together to propel the cycle through stages of an unfolding tragedy.

Indeed, Boyers' paintings embody the archetypal narrative structures underlying classical drama but they also draw on diverse narrative and visual sources ranging from ancient Hindu traditions to Judeo-Christian religion and iconography to comic books. Yet Boyers elects to approach historical references unselfconsciously and without postmodern irony. His work is gutsy, dead serious, and completely sincere. In this respect, compared with contemporary artists whose work attempts to wrestle with such ambitious subjects, the painter is temperamentally more closely aligned with Hermann Nitsch or Anselm Kiefer than with Matthew Barney or Julian Schnabel. In contrast with Francesco Clemente, Boyers' work is less focused on a personal, internalized psychological exploration than on an intersubjective journey of transcendence.



One Great Step, Building to Blossom (detail of diptych) - Lowell Boyers, 2004
acrylic paint, resin, watercolor, and colored inks on canvas, 76" x 68"

The heroic struggles, uncertainties, and moments of redemption depicted in these paintings are embodied in Boyers' studio process. The lightly and unevenly primed raw canvases possess an organic quality as they inhale cloud-like washes of pale, transparent pigment and exhale layers of poured resin that undulate like ancient rivers or create faint golden pools that mix with and amplify the underpainting and simultaneously provide a slick ground for additional layers of pigment that float on top. The application of sprayed turpentine or splashes of water to the medium create crater- and canyon-like disturbances, enhancing the

works' presence as living, breathing beings with a primordial history. Brushed and poured patches of white semi-gloss enamel provide another element of surface tension and open further physical and metaphysical dimensions. Sections of some paintings reveal the scars of Boyers' battle as a painter with his subject-matter and medium. These traces serve as witnesses to the classic battles of man against nature, man against the supernatural, and man against himself, here embodied and enacted in the studio, where the artist plays the role of a mythic character, who, like Atlas, carries the weight of the world on his shoulders. Other sections of paintings reveal redemption and grace, where the artist has achieved instances of extraordinary clarity, the beauty of which courses through his brush to memorialize the glory of victory, the sweetness of bliss, the light of epiphany.

Boyers' canvases are psychologically dense, complex, and unsettling. Yet they leave us with a sense of rightness, a feeling of empowerment amidst difficulty to surmount our burdens, whatever they may be, by recognizing and asserting the virtues that lie deep within us. His protagonists serve as models of ascendant spirits who, in a moment of heroic desperation, by force of sheer will selflessly summon the beauty and power required to overcome adversity and, by saving others, save themselves. The journeys Boyers depicts are fraught with temptation, danger, and evil. But that is the nature of the journey of life, his canvases suggest, and it is our responsibility to rise to those challenges, lest we fall to the temptations of passivity, apathy, or disinterest, which ultimately lead to our demise individually and collectively. Such probing assertions would amount to no more than shallow platitudes if Boyers' paintings did not themselves bear witness to his own heroic confrontations with darkness and the battles he has waged with both the metaphysics of the spirit and the physics of his medium.

Boyers has been on the New York scene since 1990, when he moved to lower Manhattan after earning his MFA at Yale. He first gained attention at Water Street Studios, the loft space where his partners and he hosted a series of popular exhibitions for a then-twenty-something crowd. Over the last fifteen years, Boyers has generated several potent bodies of work, held open-studio events, exhibited in group shows, and sold work directly from his 26th Street studio to a devoted group of collectors, including Andy and Kate Spade. Perhaps his decision to delay his commercial gallery debut was for the best, as his development has been untainted by the pressures exerted by gallerists, critics, collectors, and curators. Boyers has proven that he is an artist who will continue to make outstanding paintings, regardless of whether or not he "makes it" as a commercial success. He will do so because his personal journey in life is bound up in an unflinching and unyielding exploration – through the medium of paint - with the most profound and enduring questions of human existence.





Each Rung, One Great Step - Lowell Boyers, 2004
acrylic paint, resin, watercolor, and colored inks on canvas, 76" x 58"

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