

The Painting of Alexander Markovich: The Unknown, or Imagery with Religious Connotations*

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Alexander Markovich's life and career were very short. The American artist of Serbian origin died prematurely in January 1991, at the age of twenty-seven. Yet, Markovich left a profound record of himself in his paintings and drawings, done over a span of only a single decade (1980–1990). He originally represented his visions of the world around him—the world in which he often felt alienated and isolated. More than ever, this feeling is no stranger to many in the contemporary world. The passionate inner struggles of Alexander Markovich, his restless confrontation with “unanswered questions, very hard to understand,” as he put it in one of his reflective pieces of writing, found their most powerful expression in his painting, which is at the same time beautiful and filled with pain. Markovich's art is inspired by Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism, both of which dealt with psychological states of entrapment and isolation and evoked existential solitude.

One of Markovich's unpublished poems, entitled “The Unknown,” deals directly with this phenomenon:

I am the Unknown, the dark,
I am the light, and all that
goes beyond the knowledge
of all the human race.
I have no feeling and no emotion.
 I have the access to those
things that are known of,
and those that are not.
I am nothing, yet everything.
 I am life, and death,
and that which is beyond.
 I am here, now, and am there in the future.

* A chapter from the book by Svetlana Rakić, *Alexander Markovich: Paintings and Drawings*, to be published by A. Pankovich Publishers, New York, in 2001.

And everything in-between.
I exist only to myself.
Others know, that I am, but what am I,
 they cannot say.
I have existed infinitely in the past,
and endlessly in the future.
 I am time and space.
 I am the Unknown.

Markovich's reflections in this poem appear to be visually realized in his paintings and drawings with religious connotations. The concept of "the Unknown"—God and the Universe—described as nothing and everything in his poem, is grasped in his art through examination of Christian symbols in metaphorical terms. Schematized representations of a cross, dove, radiating light, heart, gate, celestial imagery, and mother and child figures with haloes are often superimposed or combined in the same work. All of these symbols are immediately recognizable as coming from the long tradition of Christian culture. The cross, the very first and all-encompassing sign of Christianity, is most often repeated in this group of Markovich's work. The dove and the radiating light are inevitably related to the Holy Spirit. The heart is associated with universal love and God's love for mankind in particular. Through the "gates of the Church" salvation is to be obtained and the heavens entered. Celestial imagery—stars, the sun, and the moon—are traditional symbols of the Universe. Finally, representations of Mary and Child also belong to the basic Christian vocabulary and reflect the idea of the God Incarnate—made flesh—as well as more earthly concepts of motherly love and the necessity of sacrifice. All of these core symbols of Christianity also imply purity and innocence, most movingly conveyed through the mother-child image (Plate 6 in the insert following p. 142).

Radiating light is the most noticeable feature on the three images (Plates 3, 4, and 6) which feature the spiritual light of life reaching out expressively. Rays, defined with hard lines, are always depicted as descending from above. Thus the picture space is given depth and figure-like images are either hovering in the center (Plates 3 and 4), or they are placed in the very foreground, as if walking out to us (Plate 6). The Holy Mother and Child images in Plate 6 are surrounded with protective rays coming from the stars above. Another prominent feature of this group of works is the absence of shading, which would give volume to the form. In this way, Markovich obtains a dematerialized effect in all of them. Light, the nature of which implies this very effect, has remained one of the most important religious symbols of all times. As a symbol, it is nonmaterial and transcends time and physical space.

As a cosmic phenomenon, coming from the sun, light is a life-giving element on earth. Finally, and maybe most importantly, rays of light that dispel physical darkness become the most appropriate symbol for spiritual light that dispels spiritual darkness.

The reductionist use of black and white, light and shadow, on all of Markovich's works with religious allusions (except on Plate 10 where color is important), wonderfully enhances aesthetic and philosophical concepts of simplicity, purity, and truth. Images in this group of works are executed in a spontaneous and direct manner, with thick lines that are often repeated over and over again to reinforce the image. Floating apparitions are splashed on in a messy, expressionistic style. Whether reducing his images to silhouettes (Plates 3–6) or to the black outlined profiles (Plates 4, 5, and 6), Markovich's visions transcend the Christian-limited vocabulary. They live as smeary traces of dreamlike encounters with everything removed from a specific time and place—with the Unknown.

Image 1

In image no. 1 (Plate 3), smears and splashes work as an alchemy of ink on paper—the liquid spills magically transform themselves right in front of us. A meaningless chaos of random shapes turns into a floating apparition in the center; all-encompassing darkness starts pulsating with water splashes; an earthly landscape is born below and an heavenly expanse appears above, and everything is crowned with the celestial symbols of the sun and the crescent moon in the upper corners. The central apparition is a combination of different forms recognizable as a dove with its wings spread, a heart, and a child with arms raised. All of them together form a core of radiation, with concurrent shimmering rays of light-and-darkness.

The random, accidental quality of this work—which indeed will remain one of the hallmarks of Markovich's expression throughout his career—brings out a chaotic, disjointed feeling, which is counterbalanced by the centralized and symmetrical composition of the picture. This random yet orderly structure and the general ambiguity of the light-and-dark concept—with the central image simultaneously emanating from both of them—is actually very close to the aesthetic derived from Zen Buddhism. Zen philosophy valued chance over planning and rejected the polarities of good and bad, with everything being subsumed by ultimate oneness. Markovich's drawings in general, as well as some of his paintings, draw their powerful, at times even over-

whelming, expressiveness from their pared-down, simplified format, which is used to disclose universal meanings.

Images 2–4

Three small-size prints are conceived like a triptych, in a frieze-like composition, on a single sheet of paper. The triptych, usually referring to a set of three panels hinged together and used as an altarpiece, has been a common form of Christian art since the church's formation. The image on the middle panel is the most important one—it usually depicts the saint to whom the altarpiece is dedicated. The side panels always illustrate events related to the central picture, like scenes from the saint's life. The central representation in Markovich's triptych is the crucified Christ, who is flanked by images of conception and childhood. Side images include the presence of the Virgin Mary and indicate the appearance of the Holy Spirit or God the Father in the form of rays. Christ is represented isolated and alone in his sufferings on the Cross.

Like the previous print, prints nos. 2 and 3 (Plates 4 and 5) again feature a hovering image. In picture no. 2, it is a kneeling figure with a halo, holding a child. Its widely spread wings bring to mind associations of flight and angels. It looks as if the Annunciation scene—in which archangel Gabriel informs the Virgin Mary that God has chosen her to bear his son, and she is made pregnant by the rays of the Holy Spirit—and the representation of the Nativity of Christ—in which the mother either holds the baby or is kneeling in front of her son—have been combined in one single vision. Rays of light, coming from above and behind, fix the vision in mid-space, above the viewer's head.

Furthermore, it is also possible to see a hand with a wrist, in this complex composition. It is as if it is coming straight out of the picture space, while holding the kneeling figure on its palm—the thumb would be the same shape that describes the legs of the kneeling figure. This allusion to a hand is in fact most probably deliberately intended by the artist. This association makes the whole image a creative translation of the traditional Annunciation scene into an expressively modern language of signs and symbols. According to the oldest Christian iconography, which can be traced back to sixth-century icons from Sinai, Egypt, God the Father is represented as a hand coming down from the Heavens in rays of light. On Markovich's print, the hand, also surrounded with rays, is reaching upwards, and not descending. Wings, spread out behind the kneeling mother-figure, could indicate both the presence of the archangel who brought the news to Mary, and the dove—always included in the scene—which represents the Incarnation and the Virgin's miraculous conception through the Holy Spirit. This means that Markovich has imaginatively com-

bined all the separate representations included in a traditional Annunciation scene, in a single self-transforming vision hovering right in front of our eyes.

In print no. 3, Markovich seems to snatch momentary Crucifixion signification from a universe of whirling lines. Rhythmically inflected contours bring out a uniquely haunting figure. The cruciform image is hovering above shadowy, layered clouds, emerging from the darkness below. The traditionally motionless representation of Christ on the Cross is replaced here with a strong impression of a fluid gesture of flying. Markovich's cruciform vision, with its wing-like arms spread far out, appears to be regenerated from the clouds below—emblems of evolving consciousness as well as of Earth viewed from the above. The image is further ghosted by a muted grayish wash-thin tonality. A feeling of disturbing disconnection is achieved by means of a straight line (seen on the left) piercing through the circles that form the vision of the human-like crucified form.

Images 5–6

Images 5 and 6 (Plates 7 and 8) are actually two sides of one, very thin, paper card. The front side (Plate 7) is a collage placed on a painted background. The cross is cut out of a Band-Aid-like material and glued to the card. It is actually made of two serrated stripes, the horizontal one placed above the vertical. In the center of the cross is a small piece of paper, torn out of a newspaper, of a printed heart. This yellowish paper-patch is not glued to the surface but is fastened on it with two strips of scotch-tape placed above it. The background is painted with gray washes of diluted ink and color tones of white-grays. This results in an overall effect of bluish diagonal rays piercing through the darkness. We read "SANTA CRUZ" at the bottom; and the signature and the date are at the top (A•M• / 2•24•89). There is also a clear indication of a painted black frame that encircles the image.

Both sides of the card in fact feature written words and a large cross that occupies most of the picture space. However, on the reverse side, there is nothing either painted or glued. This image of the cross is actually a silhouette of the cross from the reverse side, seen through the thin paper. Ink marks are also only reflections of ink used on the opposite side. Inscriptions in black letters and the framing rim are printed.

The detached and timeless quality of an icon is suggested on both sides of the card by focusing on a single enlarged and framed image. However, this is strongly contradicted by the smeared background, which intuitively evokes the feeling of transience and brings out the "worn out" impression. The front image obviously appears much more solid and definite; it looks common and machine made. The back one suggests a surreal and translucent vision of a

sign still submerged in the subconscious mind. Thus, by using transparent paper, Markovich cleverly points to the concept of fading away—if we “read” the card from its front to the back side—and the opposite concept of an emerging process—if we look at the card in the opposite direction. However, the power of these two pictures lies in the fact that their formal characteristics, which are utterly reduced, are in fact loaded with emotional connotations. Formally, we are looking at two rectangular bands, placed in the sign of a cross, immersed into a scribbled background field. And yet, the deepest human emotions of love and pain—often immanently intertwined—and our eternal need to grasp the purpose of both, form the real subject of these works.

The front cross has in its center two hearts embedded in each other that give one the visual impression of pounding. This image could possibly be an allusion to Mary’s love for her child and Christ’s love for mankind, and the inevitable sacrifice they both had to make—he by suffering on the Cross and she by watching him die. Other possible associations are their love, or the love between any two people, which becomes their core of sorrow and pain because sooner or later the two will have to separate. Whatever the interpretation might be, we are faced with a pounding patched heart placed in the center of a symbol that, in Christian symbolism, speaks of salvation as well as of pain and sacrifice. The inscription at the bottom—“*Santa Cruz*”—assures us that it is a Holy Cross at which we are looking, although the cross is “patched together,” as is the heart, and is torn at its ends, thus not fitting the traditional features of the Holy Cross. The choice of Spanish may be arbitrary, but it also brings to mind the popular image of “*Maria de los Dolores*”—Mary of the Sorrows. This is a movingly human image of the grieving Mary that stresses her love and pain; it shows her contemplating her son’s suffering, as opposed to other representations of Mary as the Mother of God and Queen of Heaven. The *Dolores* type shows her weeping and sometimes also includes depictions of “swords of pain” that are struck through Mary’s heart.

Allusions to the common/commercial/mass media aspect of reality are clear on both sides of the card. On the front, it is seen in the use of machine made elements—the Band-Aid and the newspaper print. On the back, it is seen in the use of stenciled letters and the wording—name; amount; paid not paid; telephone #; time—that unmistakably refers to a common bill-paying document. The fact that the central image of the cross is actually not hand painted, which implies eliminating the artist’s personal touch, points to detachment and, finally, to terrifying emptiness. One thing that seems to be certain in these images on the two sides of the card, is that the cross is transformed into a sign which acquires a new significance, not limited only to the

meaning inherent to the image of the Holy Cross. Several different realities—abstract and concrete, spiritual and common—are irredeemably leveled, yielding a new symbol, a symbol of the post-industrial world we live in, where everything is temporary and thus instantly and indiscriminately consumed. The new meaning now springs from something that is always more absent than present. On the opposite side of the card, the cross, which appears barely present, is actually “not there” at all, since it is only a reflection of the image on the front.

This is in fact extremely close to the Buddhist concept of emptiness and impermanence that Markovich elaborately visualized in his other paintings. In both collages, “constructed” and “reflected,” the image of a cross must be considered as relative and uncertain, an ambiguous rather than an absolute sign, as the Holy Cross would be. The fusion of Christian and Buddhist philosophy is maybe most directly revealed by the use of bandage material to represent the “*Santa Cruz*”—which is immediately associated with wounds and pain (Christ’s wounds and his pain on the Cross), and ultimately with suffering: the core concept of Buddhism which sees life and death only as suffering. However, it is very important to understand that Markovich did not make art that promotes a religion—either Christian or Buddhist—but the religious aspect of art is included in his work, as it is included in numerous examples of modern art. Because the sign of the cross is associated with death, and because religion is one of the principal means by which we come to terms with our own mortality, this picture—similar to many of Markovich’s other works—inevitably evokes religion.

Image 7

The Band-Aid-like tape with serrated edges that is used on this collage (Plate 9) is narrower, but otherwise the same tape used for the cross on collage no. 5. Here, it is glued to the paper, and then painted over. The thickness of the tape, used for constructing the shapes of the fence and crosses, gives a strange three-dimensional effect to the picture surface which appears as if cut in a shallow relief. This is especially true on the shapes of the crosses, where two or more layers of tape overlap. On the other hand, this unique sense of depth is contradicted by a flat and murky picture space.

The shady space of the painting is interrupted only by a ghostly whitish contour of a gate and fence in the foreground. A boundless expanse of darkness is thus given shape—it is framed by the trembling contour of the transparent apparition of the gate and fence. Through the gate, in front of it, and behind it, and everywhere around it, we see the floating signs of vaguely discernible crosses. The simple fence separates the viewer from the house of

mysteries, entrance to which is reserved for the initiated. One of the common symbols for the Virgin in Eastern Christian iconography is the depiction of double doors—a gate through which Christ would pass, although the gate in Markovich's painting, surrounded with crosses, is more associative of the entrance into the Church—the House of God. In fact, Markovich appropriates the sign of the cross and then moves from a specific symbol to universal meaning—this is not a representation of a Christian Church but of the House of the Unknown, in a way that escapes any specification. Concepts of death, suffering, and mystery—in the most general sense—are presented in this painting. They are conveyed through the drifting cross-signs and through the colors used—black associated with death, red with passion, and ghostly white with mystery.

Traces of yellowish-green tones are seen on the fence; very thin linear strokes of green and blue are vaguely discernible on the left and right sides of the painting; and reddish tones are smeared mostly on and around the cross signs. All colors are extremely subdued—ghosted. Red tones are painted over with diluted black ink, so that the red appears to be sensed—more than actually seen—through the veil of darkness. Shapes, colors, tones, and different textures, all overlap and intertwine with each other, inseparable in their genuine oneness. This is a vision of extraordinary emptiness, of a world purged of everything except its essential shadiness encapsulated in the opaque, umbrageous picture space through which human hopes for salvation—symbolized by the cross signs—aimlessly float around. What is truly remarkable about this painting is the power of the simple shape that is brought to the fore. By taking almost everything out of the picture, Markovich creates emotion-laden imagery, like a magician who keeps pulling out amazing things from his “empty” hat. Fear, sorrow, wonder, hope, tranquillity, all keep pouring out through the non-existent door.

While most of Markovich's work is gesturally expressive, in this lyrical abstraction he created one of his most mysterious silent environments. In this painting, Markovich gave up the immediacy and spontaneity of his usual gestural approach in order to explore the subject matter of deeply personal introspection. This resulted in a unique experience of a soundless encounter with oneself transmitted through the painting.

This picture maintains the same kind of equilibrium between the forces of disintegration and definition as Mark Rothko's famous clouds of color. Rothko stays fully in the nonfigurative realm, while Markovich suggests “the gate of the Church.” However, his equally esoteric shadows, grouped around the gate, create a melancholic, introspective, and deeply pessimistic mood, which is the same as Rothko's color clouds. Markovich's painting oscillates between description and abstraction. After carefully observing it, the viewer

is transferred, through the process of free associations, to the mystical state of consciousness where everything oscillates between rational perception (consciousness) and intuition (unconsciousness). It speaks, in its own way, about the “unbearable silence of God”—as Rothko himself defined his tragically silent rectangles.

Image 8

The *life in death* paradox, perfectly encapsulated by the Western world’s foremost symbol—the Crucifixion—and the whole notion of rebirth and transformation, has fascinated artists for centuries. This painting (Plate 10) has no particular religious significance, but it interprets pain and suffering, which are intensely captured by the blood-red field of paint in the center that dominates the picture together with the intensely blue space above. Markovich distorts, almost destroys, reality—the nature of agony summed up in Christ’s Passion—to express his own inner vision and emotions. The red and blue color is used to focus on the moment of passion, which is a sensation usually associated with red. Translucent yellows, pinks, and greens construct the surroundings for the violent red and the aggressive, bright blue.

White-yellow-aquamarine shimmering brightness on the right of the central image is juxtaposed to umbra—literally a “phantom,” a perfect and complete shadow in which no direct light is received from the source of illumination. Color of both raw (yellowish-brown) and burnt (reddish-brown) umber are used on the left, together with the black at the far left of the central image. This juxtaposition heightens both the artistic and metaphorical paradox. It beautifully evokes the phrase from Markovich’s poem, hinting at “the unknown, which is the dark, and which is the light.”

At the top, above the cruciform image, a sign taken from Chinese calligraphy is painted in black ink. It is the “*ren*” character for “person.” Markovich incorporated this same sign into one of his ink paintings of a head, probably a self-portrait, which is not reproduced here. Thus, in a uniquely delicate way, Markovich combines the formality of a Chinese written sign, and the image-symbol abstracted from Christian iconography, with the deep intimacy of his personal feelings. The central figure-like crucified form, the greenish stripe in the very foreground, and the blue infinity of the open background remain in the domain of pictorial representation. In spite of the figurative and symbolic associations used, the elaborate, multicolored, and essentially elusive forms of this painting together create an abstract vision of unique spiritual transformation as well as pain.

The haunting figurative imagery and powerful abstractions that characterize Markovich's work are lyrical statements about the human condition. Whether working in an associative or nonassociative mode, Markovich's art always depends on pure experience rather than on an intellectually recognizable subject matter. The feeling of unease, which vibrates in much of his work, found a palpable expression in different art styles of the 1990s. Indeed, art of extreme vulnerability and fragility—elements that characterize Markovich's expression as well—left a deep imprint on the last decade of the twentieth century. Markovich's paintings and drawings portray the artist's most intimate anxieties, fears, hopes, or sorrows. His soul talks to the viewer, which is the essence of all good art. Markovich's art perfectly illustrates Jackson Pollock's remark that "[p]ainting is a state of being ... a self-discovery. Every good artist paints what he is."