

Greta Gorzbik's "Opus Infinitatum"

by Andrew Budnick

Idolaters of Greta Gorzbik's contemporary works are often surprised to discover her earliest paintings. Vibrant flowers, verdant landscapes, even a series of portraits, done during her time spent in New York.

All forgotten now, of course, overshadowed by her masterwork. "OPUS INFINITATUM", she titled it, uncountably many precise, stark paintings of the square, that unstable yet comfortable shape-of- shapes. The first in the series were rough, unrefined—so say her critics—but the color variance and wavy outlines soon gave way to the architectural precision and unimpeachability of all subsequent works.

Though it is impossible to display her œuvre in a single exhibition, the museum-going public has had three opportunities to sample her spartan canvases, though I myself was unable to attend the second due to a brief involuntary commitment. I can only grasp at articulating the impossible frustration I felt when I departed these exhibitions on their closing days, having spent many hours studying each piece one-by-one. Still I left with a yearning, with the faintest dewy spider's-web of perception trembling in the drafts of my mind, as though the truth of my understanding of the world lay just beyond the next square, through each portal that Greta opened again and again in her art. I knew that only someone so dedicated and fastidious could hope to re-form the missing pieces in my mind, to start to repair the

shattered porcelain of my past.

I arrived at Greta's front door sixteen years to the day after the debut of her first show at the Harvard Art Museum—a coincidence, though I enjoyed the serendipity. To cross her path on the square of the square anniversary of her square augured well, I thought. I knocked on the door. A rectangle. I considered whether it bothered Greta to live in a house gated by not-squares. The windows, at least, were nearly equilateral, though bordered by heavy green shutters.

I heard sounds coming from inside the house. Sounds outside, too—birds chirping, the background buzzing of insects. Other sounds inside—the light panting of my breath, my quickened, rumbling heartbeat. I executed a calming rite, touching my fingertips together in front of my heart with knuckles bent to form a square. My pulse slowed and the birdsong returned to my ears.

Eventually the door opened, and a woman with a large, round nose and a pair of equally round glasses peered outside.

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It serves to justify in more detail my interest in the work of Greta Gorzbik. Of course, her fame speaks to the universality of the messages contained within her life's final work, but I'm confident it will become clear how she was, in a very literal sense, speaking to me alone as she painted her series.

I don't resent my parents for the villa in which I grew up, a breezy, Continental compound with a comfortable view of the steeple of the town's church. A neglected child would find here no end of entertainment, even confined within its mortared stone walls. The

building was replete with narrow alleys, intricate arches, and compact rooms whose purposes have been forgotten. Animals, descendants of the working stock that once paid the estate's protection fees, kept the modest lawns trimmed through ruminant mastication and fertilized through ruminant digestion.

But by far the most numinous feature of the villa was its tiling. I was told that the tiles were originally installed by craftsmen in 1203 and maintained by each successive owner of the building. My parents held responsibility for their share of cracked tiles, but without bias I can assure you that they showed no hesitation at commissioning repairs. As cladding goes, tiles are vastly preferable to, say, rammed earth or gypsum-rich wallboard paper, as they are far easier to clean. Solvents such as hydrogen peroxide are wonderfully effective against all sorts of spills: wine, tomato soup, blood, semen, fæces, pollen, and even rain-borne mud, a common target of my many hours' scrubbing. I can only imagine how much longer my penances would have lasted had the walls and floors been wooden! No doubt sandpaper and noxious urethanes would have been involved.

I drift from my primary argument: the beauty of the tiles. Thousands, perhaps millions, of perfect, regular, equal-sided squares lining the walls, the floor, the sills, and the benches. Tiles, spilling forth from the cave of Plato, leading the eye to a purity just short of the divine Ideal, presenting to a curious fingernail a smooth, rum-a-drum thrumming as it is dragged along their unending field. Tiles, whose regularity presented a gleaming lighthouse of purity to a life otherwise adrift, guiding this soul a-sea to the solidity of land. I cannot but indulge myself in the depth of the English language to describe the impact that these uncountable ceramic squares had on my young mind. They provided for me a bed in which to rest, even

as I wept and bled and scrubbed.

Though the innocence of my childhood was abruptly cut short when I was fourteen, and my subsequent experiences in institutional confinement limited my ability to explore my aesthetic preferences as I would have liked, these tiles left an indelible mark. I must confess I am left with considerable lacunae in my recollections of these bittersweet times, so my account is necessarily scattered. While I cannot always remember, I'm certain that these gaps were exacerbated by my parents' actions or through their inaction—though of course they did not have the opportunity to explain themselves.

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Greta peered at me through the crack in the door. "Hello? I'm not expecting anyone."

"Yes, I'm a fan of your work."

She glanced over my shoulder as if expecting to see more people standing in line there. "I don't really have the time now, and I'm not sure how you got my address—"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I should have said. Leon Perelman told me it would be OK to call on you today." "You're a friend of Leon's? Well, in that case, please, come in."

She opened the door the rest of the way, revealing a disappointingly mundane entryway. Stacks of frustratingly rectangular magazines lined either side of the hallway, which was floored with—what else—white, square tiles. Larger than the tiles of my youth, but the effect still pleased me. Rooms split off of the entry hall to the left and right, and the end of the hallway was lit.

“I just put a kettle on to make some tea, so I’d be happy to make some for you as well, if you’d like.”

“Yes, some tea please.”

We entered the kitchen, which was straight at the end of the entry hall. Soft light filtered in through the windows—though they were layered with lace, I could still see foliage in the backyard. The counter (formica with faux-marble pattern) and the cabinets (particleboard) gave the room an overall homely impression, though to my pleasure the tile continued.

“Do you do much of your painting in here?”

“Oh, no, I turned the garage into an atelier. How is Leon?”

“He is well. He wanted me to pass on his congratulations for your latest show.”

Greta made a sound of assent as she opened the fridge door. “Right, thank you for passing on the message. And how is his wife?”

“Also doing very well.”

Greta closed the fridge door with a sharp snap and turned back to the counter, where a red kettle had started keening. She squinted over her shoulder at me before turning off the heat and pulling the whistle-stopper off of the end of the kettle. She set the kettle down on a trivet next to the teapot. I glanced out the window.

“Your backyard is lovely. I appreciate a thickly vegetated backyard. Too much land these days is just trimmed back to sod, and it’s just

terrible for pollinators. Not to mention the impact on privacy.”

As I spoke, Greta began walking to the far end of the kitchen, where a small, white door was set into the wall. “Thank you. My neighbors are not so far away, actually.” She paused. “I was under the impression that Leon’s wife died several years ago. In fact, I’m certain of it.”

She was not presenting me the opportunity I had hoped. I got straight to the point.

“Greta, I was hoping to ask you about your paintings. I have some rather important questions about your inspiration.”

She began opening the door, but noticed too late that the deadbolt was engaged, necessitating a brief pause in her departure from the room to turn the key.

“In just a moment,” she said, her voice at a higher pitch. “I just remembered there’s something I need to find in the garage.

Closing the distance between her and myself, I became overwhelmed with the need to regain control of a situation rapidly falling apart. This moment was my only chance, this urge my only outlet.

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My appointed therapist told me to pay attention to these urges. I remember the conversation specifically:

HIM (abbreviated to H): When these emotions surface, do you notice if there's a particular trigger, or, uh, something that happens, that seems to intensify them?

ME (abbreviated to M): Well, doctor, I can't say that I've thought about it. H: It might be worthwhile to think about it

next time.

M: Stated another way, doctor, you're encouraging me to indulge in these im- pulses?

H: No, no, I wouldn't put it like that. I'm just suggesting that, some in- trospection, uh, might help us understand better how your mind works. For example, you've frequently talked about your interest in porcelain tiles—maybe there is a connection that we can explore. Again, I'm not trying to push you to a specific idea or interpretation; that's just to give you a sense of the types of triggers or environments that you might want to consider.

M: Understanding myself better is precisely what I am trying to do. I'm glad we're seeing eye-to-eye. The only way for me to dive deeply enough, of course, would be to fully surround myself with—

H: Let me be clear, I do not think it would help your healing process for you to feed your impulses. Just to explore your emotions and triggers, is what I'm suggesting.

M: I hear you completely clearly, doctor. Your point is not lost on me.

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As I washed my hands in Greta's kitchen sink, I contemplated how far I had come. This time I would not need to cleanse the tile, the formica, the wood of the dining table. Much cleaner than the last; only some residual spittle to rinse. A childhood spent scrubbing had left me with muscled forearms and precise fingers: a parting gift from my parents. Someone else might have put these strengths to a productive use, but a man's vocations are his own, as are his vices.

Greta's harsh attitude and unwillingness to explain her work to my satisfaction had left me little choice—I would not relive the disappointment of my childhood a second time, would not hear the whispered excuses, the muttered half-explanations. I could not bear the idea of watching the fading coherency of the subjects of my disappointment as they continually failed to justify their actions and their creations.

I had already phoned the authorities. Another attempt to heal myself through understanding, another failure. Perhaps this time the numbing concoction of therapy, narcotics, and confinement would have the intended effect. I doubted it. The front hall shimmered with muted blue and red lights filtering through the lace-covered front windows, flashing off of the matte tiles below. I momentarily regretted not leaving myself with more time to investigate the remaining unfinished pieces in her atelier, but the wiser part of me knew that such an inspection would leave me unfulfilled.

I do not tolerate ambiguity. I do not tolerate equivocation. Meaning is found only in precision, conviction, and certitude. I pressed my fingers together in front of my heart to make a square, calmed my heart, and waited.

