

On-Verge Alternative Art Criticism

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alternative art criticism

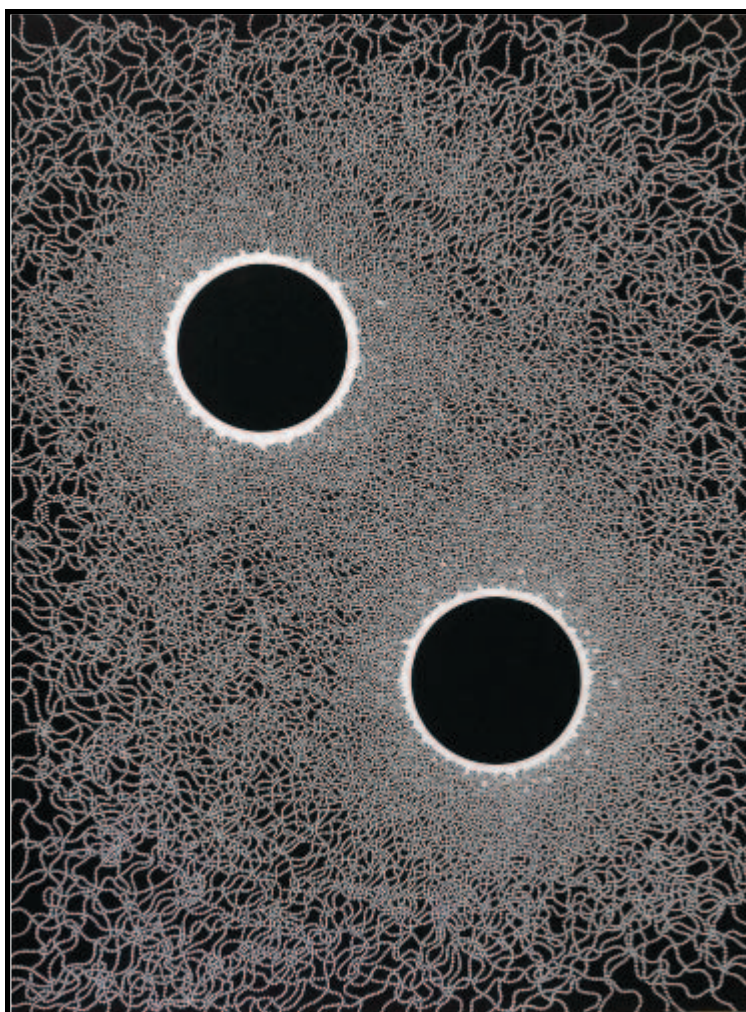
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IN THE SHADOW OF CONSTELLATIONS

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by **Ethan Shoshan**



Ivan Gaete. *Lovers M2* from *Supreme Weavers Series*, 2012. Hand drawn ink on paper, 20 x 30. Image courtesy of the artist.

Like with most things, I fail at attempts to try and say specifically what something is or is doing, complicate rather than essentialize the multiple ways in which we can resonate with something simple, chaotic, and beautiful. It's in the shadow of the constellations that I try and find meaning. As a child I was always looking up at the night sky, whether it was at an early age when my father would take me to a nearby park and push me on the swings and I would try very hard to kick my legs so that my hands can reach the giant glowing orb of the moon, or when I used to share my nights with friends laying down on the concrete floor of a sidewalk looking up with wonder at the expanding universe to see the faint glimmer of things coming into focus and wonder very hard about my own goals, my own connections. And mainly when I was alone, smoking cigarettes on the rooftop and staring up at the stars trying to find Orion's belt, one of the easiest constellations to find, the sense of knowing the shape and outline of that mythical warrior, and realizing a little too late, my queerness and the erotics of crotch-watching.

In 2010, I was honored to participate with The Cue Art Foundation and EFA Project Space on a panel discussion called "The Artist-Citizen." Already with the all consuming open platform of the topic wide ranging as that; the venerable ideas of an artist taking responsibility in and of the world, social practice, and the relationships present; it was an almost insurmountable discussion that was not able to bridge all the multiple directions it was proposed to undertake. The room was set up much like a fishbowl discussion group, where the panelists form a small circle in the middle of the space, able to see one another and engage among themselves with their own projects, ideas, situations and experience without seeing all the audience, and then a much larger circle which comprises the audience, able to listen in and sit in on this focused discussion. This format, which has been used in political and activist organizing circles, ~~allows one to see a focused discussion develop amidst the trust and openness~~

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of the relationships within the particular group when done correctly by allowing each participant to discuss their viewpoints and perspectives and engage in dialog without thinking about the “outside audience”. However, the problem that arises with the idea of the Artist-Citizen is that we want the larger outside group to be just as present and participatory, at least that’s the idea when we all have different values, perspectives and experiences to add to the discussion, but if the inner circle isn’t guiding the discussion it becomes an unfocused multi-vocal group compounded with our own fears, anger, pressure, and goals and the discussion or helpful creation of fostering these ideas falter, and that is what happened. Sometimes our hopes reach well beyond our own individuality, and it becomes a lesson in collective struggles and voices.

I was greeted by an artist I met in passing once, who recognized me, and I didn’t recognize her. She said she met me at an art show with her friends who were in the show and voiced her concerns at being upset for not being included with her friends. I asked her why she felt the need to be part of the show, it was a huge overarching show with very little context, and the works in the show I was unable to focus on or see anything resonate. So to me, being in the show was not that pressing, but for her, its possibly the lack of validation for not being part of something that her work reaches or touches upon since her community of artist friends were all included. I know there are always inner circles in lots of situations and circumstances, which we all try to break open as we try to strive to obtain our own voices in a sea of changes and situations, because perhaps we see that power in a small circle and want it. Just like social and politically conscious artists, the larger art community replicates these circles. One that is very familiar to me becomes very present.





Ivan Gaete. Installation view of *Lovers* from *Supreme Weavers Series*, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist.

As I found myself straddling these ideas, I was speaking to a dear friend, Ivan Gaete, who's work I admire, but he has never been able to talk much about, or write an artist statement. As he finds the time to make work, he is grappling with the critical distance he feels he needs in order to present the work. It's a hard line to find the words to express how we live and how we create meaning, and it's with this I told him I would try and help him. Its much easier to be a friend and offer advice, give studio visits, and share stories recounting experiences that will help alleviate the pressure of having to define one's "practice" or "artist statement" which can assume too much and not directly engage with our interests or projects, and often essentialize out of lack of the multiple ways in which we operate and surface on a daily basis. I wont argue or try to tackle the issues of why there is a need for this, but I can at least offer my own musings, because I am in this fishbowl with him, swimming, learning, exploring, creating, and building a nurturing environment where I feel we can begin to live more consciously with each other and hope that maybe it transcends immediate concerns and fears, because it is about fostering

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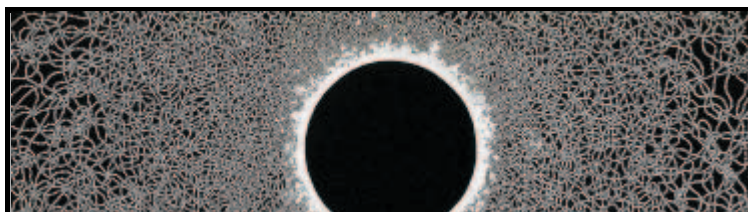
sharing, and always loving ourselves and others for their persistence, dedication, and focus, and its in there that we can all grow.

Although Ivan's work is not as socially or politically conscious as I would like it to be it is a great example of the larger fishbowl that the visual arts play in society and culture, offering personal insights and resonances. Its very easy actually to insert Ivan's drawing compositions into this discussion about social relations and various point of views because for me his work is that abstract representation of an ambiguous microscopic and macrocosmic perspective. Our eyes focus in harmony, stirring up an elated connection within ourselves and yet outside ourselves through the simple abstractions of actions, simple shapes and layering. In a way, Ivan's obsessive compositions bring a quality of light to life, "constellations" that resonate in our eyes, but more unconsciously sing to our cells of being in harmony; a singularity which exists in a plane, yet outside it.* It's like creating an event horizon, a boundary in space-time beyond which events can no longer influence, but yet this does not exist in our lives because everything has a direct or indirect relationship to ourselves? Perhaps a similarity with Emerson's horizon, "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts." Its being able to see the horizon as a contradiction, expanding outward in all directions encompassing everything, yet consummately moving inward showing a singular point of view. Thinking about this more, and the way in which our relationships to others compound, I invited a few friends to contribute to helping me explore Ivan's work more. In that way it's the multiplicity of voices that resonate on the singularity of the individual.

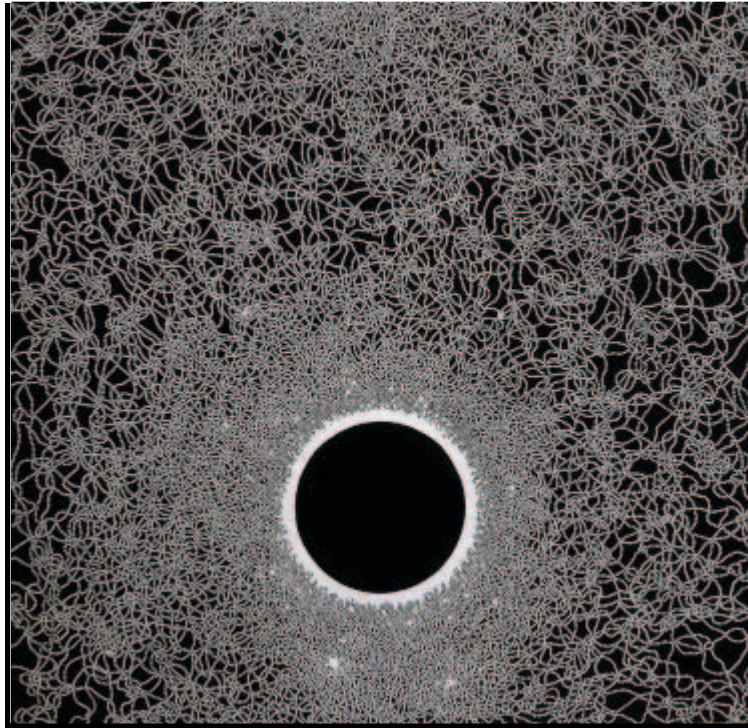
Lucas Michaels, in his own work an orchestrator of psychic architecture, with his winding visions of cultural references, altars of sexuality, self reflexive voices hidden within a talisman of forgotten idols, enigmatic in its own being and illustrative of the discarded or lost between human connections. I've admired

in the various ways in which he makes work and also creates community around his interests. His willingness to foster other artists with his collaborative project with Eve Fowler, ACP (Artist Curated Projects) among other ways. One of the thoughts he brings up in Ivan's work is the idea of "controlled chaos": the orderly repetition of dots and line on a surface, "representing the attempt to contain the expansion of a universe onto the page. The random logic of infinite orbs, stars, points in space, reorganized in a systematized manner; formally elegant, conceptually mysterious, and ambivalent in meaning. Qualities which are deliberate, whether conscious or unconsciously on his behalf. He creates this mode of expression that has no possibility of an ending beyond the limits of the surface. The surface is then just a slice of work, the work continues beyond the surface."

As with everything we do, there is an attraction that needs to be present in order to engage; its that unconscious erotics that allow ourselves to look deeper at something that may initially be just about surface delight. It's like stargazing, that fascination coupled with curiosity I mentioned as a child awakened me to my own mortality and humbled place in the universe. It's the delicate qualities of Ivan's obsessive drawings that pull us in further to look at the forms present. Leor O'Grady, who's work is a visual poem grappling with a diasporic tradition of the ever elusive quest for home sees "something about the focus in [Ivan's] practice that brings up almost obvious associations of science and mysticism and at the same time beauty, repetition, order and control. More intimately connecting to its beauty. Beauty of the 'constellations' he creates, the materials he uses, and the beauty in his order. (He has very zen'ish habits.)"



ON-VERGE is a CUE project in collaboration with HCA



Ivan Gaete. *Lovers M2* from *Supreme Weavers Series*, 2012. Hand drawn ink on paper, 20 x 30. Image courtesy of the artist.

Looking up again at the sky, I often fantasize thinking about what else might be looking back in my direction, what else comprises the larger world that is faint and unknown, untouchable and yet filled with wonder and curiosity. Looking for that elusive connection may help my thoughts wander away from depression, loneliness, and sadness, and maybe reach someone on the other side. And its with these thoughts that I find myself floating back to my little fishbowl. About my reasons for following my interests, and about the possibilities of exploring a life following my creative visions. Its reason enough for me to engage with others about these same thoughts, and in fact I have been, sharing thoughts and conversations around personal meaning, drive, ambition, love.

It's like we have our very own fishbowl within our own creative communities where we thrive, but very hard to let it grow or develop outside this. I think its the case for a lot of artists, the ability or need to be seen in new situations outside our own small communities even if its in those communities that we thrive and develop our own voice, continue to share our expressions, our vision

on and in that, a collective voice is lost for an amalgamated erotic ego that tries to surface above like a branding of sorts. But its in the human and personal that we invest our time and emotions and have our commitments to. I often wonder what it would look like to organize a show of works by friends that inspire me, and almost toyed with the idea when a friend showed me his closet. It was such a perfect place to organize a show in that I was seriously asking him what he thought of the idea. He dismissed the idea, and I could understand why, I mean today its very difficult to be creative and do things we would like to do without the overarching threat of time, money, and focus. I think its endemic of living in NYC at this time and place where we need to be more strategic with our "careers," finances, and our time. So for now the show exists in my head, remembered by each friendly encounter that harkens me back to my own inspirations, my own experiences with the joys and wonders of stargazing and trying to pair them in ways that create lasting constellations of love, harmony, and beauty found very easily in our own little fishbowls.

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www.projectlucasmichael.com

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