Raya Bodnarchuk
This is a True Picture of How it Was

ALPER INITIATIVE FOR WASHINGTON ART
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Moon Shadows and Reflections, January 17, 2014.
Raya Bodnarchuk has been an essential part of the arts ecosystem in Washington since Glen Echo Park was reborn by the National Park Service as a Center for the Arts in 1974. She became one of its first Artists in Residence and gave fourteen years working and teaching in that community. Her imagery was, and still is, closely identified with Glen Echo Park, appearing on publications, posters, and banners for many years. Then, for thirty-two years, she was a faculty member during the golden age of the Corcoran College of Art & Design. Together with her extensive exhibition career and public commissions, Raya has been at the center of what was good in Washington over the past half century.

Through it all, Raya never wavered from her commitment to her art and to the craft of art, or from passing along her knowledge of making and her modeling of what it means to be a true artist to the next generation. It seems that Bruce Nauman got it right when he titled several of his works from the late sixties, *The True Artist is an Amazing Luminous Fountain*. Nauman’s phrase can be interpreted in many different and conflicting ways, but considered in the context of Raya’s work, art is pretty clearly a celebration of our humanity. Her art celebrates the light, the positive side of our lives, even during our darkest hours.

Raya is best known for her sculpture, collages, and silkscreen prints. *This Is a True Picture of How it Was* may seem like a radical departure from her life’s work, and it did come as a big surprise for me. What began as good advice for her students (“Do something you love every day”) evolved into a brilliant chronicle of six years of her life beginning in 2013.
Every day I would find something I could use as a subject, come home and remember it, or bring something home, put it on my table and paint it. Then I'd paint all the things on my table, everything in my house, and then my neighborhood when I'd go for a walk in the dark before going to bed. The thing was to do one every day. That wasn’t the only thing I did, but it was something I did without fail.

1,926 paintings later, the advice for her students, which she took herself, seems like good advice for all of us. It was the museum’s challenge to show every painting, in order, as a fitting celebration of Raya’s life as an artist. Our Preparator, Kevin Runyon, managed this feat. His achievement is also documented in this catalog, and when the COVID-19 pandemic has at last receded, and you can come experience the physicality of this amazing body of work in the Alper Initiative for Washington Art and be richer for it.

The Alper Initiative was created by philanthropist and artist Carolyn Alper in the American University Museum to promote an understanding and appreciation of Washington regional art and artists. It is an exhibition space, a meeting place for people and ideas, and a place for celebration. We must thank the family of Carolyn Alper, and her devoted friends, for keeping her vision alive for the Initiative, and the Wolpoff Family Foundation for its continued support of the Initiative’s publications.

Jack Rasmussen
Director and Curator
American University Museum
at the Katzen Arts Center
Washington, DC

The White Sun and Swirling Clouds, April 22, 2017.

Sticks in the River, January 22, 2018.
JACK RASMUSSEN: You have been an important artist and teacher in Washington since the mid-seventies. Where did you come from, and when did you first have thoughts about becoming an artist?

RAYA BODNARCHUK: I was born into a family of artists. My parents were artists their whole lives, and I liked what went on wherever we were living, wherever we were. My mother painted, and my father made sculpture. I started out as a one-year-old, with a tiny wee paint brush and a little shot glass of water, and I painted on the refrigerator. It was fun, and just that simple.

My father came back from World War II and the Navy to meet my mother in NYC, where I was born. She had a job in the Education department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art working with the youngsters and the collection. She was a very good teacher and a very good artist. I was only a year-and-a-half when we moved to DC. I remember my father working with clay. Clay is so easy for anybody to touch, to be fascinated by, and to fall in love with. I think that’s where it all started. I made my choice of what I wanted to do in life from the very beginning.
JR: Why did your family move to Washington, DC?

RB: Neither one of my parents were from New York City. They loved it, but there were job opportunities in DC that were doable. At the time, that was the deal. They could make a life, earn a living, and still make their art. They both did that, I think at a cost. It is hard to have a job and be a serious artist. Most of us have had to do that. I was lucky my jobs were in the art world and with art institutions. I was surrounded by other people who had the same desires and the same interests. I didn’t have to explain or prove anything, just keep going.

JR: When did you start to receive your formal art training? It sounds like you got your early training by osmosis.

RB: I did get it by osmosis. My mother was a good teacher. We always had materials out, she was very understanding and helpful to a little child. My friends would come over and we would make things. Sometimes it was just paper or cloth, cutting out, gluing, making little buildings out of boxes and making all the things that we wanted in there. I was a little kid, I would call it “Making Things.” Talk to a friend and say “want to come over and make things?” We had clay, and my mother had a kiln, and we could make things out of clay and we could fire them. That was real. It took some learning about technical things, and about tools and equipment.

JR: You eventually went to some of the best art schools.

RB: I did. I went to public schools all the way through high school. Art classes weren’t a very big deal, but it was meaningful in its own small way because at least there were art classes. But when I went to RISD (Rhode Island School of Design), that’s when my connection to art expanded. All my friends were doing
the same thing, on the same path. It was exciting, it was fun. And RISD had everything you could ever want there. Not just new things, but the basic stuff. Design, two-dimensional, three-dimensional, the traditional style of art education at the time. That was worth so much to me, to go at it from the basics rather than from the more creative angle, but they all fit together without question. That’s a nice way to learn, and I loved what I did there.

The last year at RISD, I went to Rome for the year at their Palazzo Cenci. I had studio space and the beautiful places I’d studied in Providence were actually in Rome, and I studied them in person. That was just marvelous!

JR: What did you like the best? The outdoor sculpture?

RB: I loved everything, just being there. You mention outdoor sculpture. On the Capitoline Hill was the huge white marble head of Constantine, and the foot of Constantine, and his hand with the finger in the air. They were incredible. It just made me so happy being there. We were standing on the Apian Way, in the same place where people stood two thousand years before.

JR: Then you moved on to graduate school.

RB: While still in Rome, I applied to the Rhinehart School of Sculpture in Baltimore, part of the Maryland Institute College of Art (MICA). At the time, that was pretty great for me. It was small, my class had five people in it, and I was the only woman. Norman Carlberg was the Artist in Residence. I had great opportunity there. It was lovely.

JR: After graduating, you moved to Washington. Why did you do that?

RB: After I graduated, I stayed in Fells Point for a while, periodically driving back to Providence to cast some things at RISD. I loved foundry work and what I could do with metal. I moved to Washington because I heard about Glen Echo Park’s new life. It was an amusement park when I was little. When the Park
closed in 1969, the property went to the National Park Service, and they started making it into an arts park. I heard they had a foundry. When I got there, I think it was 1973 or 1974, Jim Sanborn had already gotten there and set up a foundry and sculpture studio, and he said, “come join us.” So, I joined in. It was like the wild west. It wasn’t like a 9 to 5 job, but we were there 24/7.

JR: When I met you, your studio was in what had been the amusement park’s first aid station.

RB: Yes, that was connected to the pool. It was a wonderful little building. I was lucky. It was all luck for everybody in Glen Echo Park, really. I stayed until 1987, almost fifteen years.

JR: I remember you were carving these wonderful sculptures out of Styrofoam, which you would make a sand mold around right there and then pour in molten aluminum that replaced the Styrofoam. All low tech, all wonderful.

RB: Most people have heard of the lost wax technique, an ancient technique. For me, it was the lost Styrofoam process. You burn the Styrofoam out by pouring the molten metal in, so there is no second mold. The limitations are many. You can’t make something huge, and you can’t make something super thick. You had to learn how to do it. Nothing is really easy. It was really hard work, but it was my favorite thing. It was almost like drawing. Just do it. Just do it now.

I did some lost wax casting, but I’d rather have someone else make the molds for that. When I got commissions that needed to be cast in bronze, I would bring the work to a professional fine art foundry.

I stayed at the park for a long time and met some very good people.

JR: You were making collages, too, at the time.

RB: I made cut-out paper things, besides the sculpture. I used colorful paper, or silkscreened paper. They’re two-dimensional works, but since they’re cut out,
the pieces are actually objects. That appealed to me so much at the time. I was so bent on making three-dimensional stuff. There they are, you can experiment with them, move them around, see what they do, change it, put it back, take another one. It’s paper. It’s not carved in stone or cast in metal. I loved that.

JR: Your imagery was so closely identified with Glen Echo Park for many years, appearing on publications, posters, and banners.

RB: Yes. I enjoyed making the illustrations for the park for years.

JR: You are also known for your wonderful silkscreen prints.

RB: I made silkscreen prints in graduate school at MICA and assisted in teaching a silkscreen class. I had done it enough that I could help the students. Soon I was teaching at Glen Echo Park, and then at Montgomery College in Takoma Park, too. I taught drawing and design, mostly.

JR: When did you start teaching at the Corcoran?

RB: I started teaching at the Corcoran in 1982.

JR: You taught there during its golden age. They had an amazing faculty.

RB: It was a fantastic group. I joined the faculty when the curator, Claire List, put my work in a show of collages with four other people in the Corcoran Gallery of Art. That was a great opportunity for me. I wrote a letter to the Dean of the Corcoran School, Bill Barrett, asking for a job.

I got a hand-written note back from him saying “Sure. I’ll let you know.” And he did. It was very lucky. That’s all I can say.

JR: What did you teach at the Corcoran?

RB: I started out teaching design for freshmen. After a while, I could design courses I wanted to teach. We could change what we were doing into what we really needed to do and wanted to do. Soon I was teaching a three-dimensional class which we called “Resources,” and it involved tools, materials and design: wood, metal, paper, plastic. We did it so students would learn a lot about tools and materials and solve design problems and deal with craftsmanship and skill also.

JR: What a fantastic training students were getting. I have known your sculpture, your collages, and your silkscreens since around 1976. I think that was the first time I met you at Glen Echo Park. I’ve followed your work closely ever since.
When did you start painting? It seems a radical departure from what you had been doing.

RB: I always drew. And I used drawing to work out how I was going to make my cut-outs. But in 2013, I thought about how I had always told my students to do something every day. Do something, something you love to do, every day. You may not have time to do your main thing, but you have five minutes to draw something, or cut out something. I thought, well, I’ll just do it, too. I started doing a little drawing on a 3 1/2 inch square piece of paper, like a Post-It note. I got some decent paper, and I’d just draw or paint something every day. I did that for six years.
I kept going. I added a color, and then I thought I’d make them bigger. Over time I started using opaque watercolor, or gouache. Every day I would find something I could use as a subject, come home and remember it, or bring something home, put it on my table and paint it. Then I’d paint all the things on my table, everything in my house, and then my neighborhood when I’d go for a walk in the dark before going to bed. The thing was to do one every day. That wasn’t the only thing I did, but it was something I did without fail.

Over time, they got more complicated, more involved, they took longer. I didn’t stop for six years. At that point I decided I would take a vacation. Everybody needs a vacation. It was time to look back and see what I’d done.

JR: This body of work began as good advice for your students: Do something you love every day. Don’t wait, do something now. Is that also good philosophical advice for the viewer?

RB: That wasn’t my goal, but people might take it that way. When a student says, “I don’t have time to make something,” I say, “you really do.” Do something that you like for five minutes. It adds up to be more. It really does. People who do a certain kind of exercise say they don’t have time. Well, you can move your skeleton around, your muscles. You can breathe for five minutes. It’s worth it. Just live it up. Live it up! And then look back, make sure you really see what you’ve done, and proceed from there.
RAYA BODNARCHUK
This is a True Picture of How it Was
Very Good, December 26, 2013.

At Nine Degrees, January 8, 2014.

Rose of Sharon and Aucuba in the Winter, January 13, 2014.


Tons of Pink, April 11, 2015.

The Spirea at Night with the Sycamores, May 6, 2015.
Some Big Clouds, October 14, 2018.


A Colorful Shrub Late Afternoon, November 21, 2017.

A Side Pool, April 14, 2018.

More Blossoms Nearby, April 9, 2018.


When the Season Changes, Over the Susquehanna, October 16, 2018.
The Other Mango, September 3, 2017.

The Pottery and a Mirror, December 19, 2016.


A Cabbage White Butterfly, August 26, 2017.
Hoping, February 28, 2016.

Thinking About Spring, March 3, 2016.


Made It, March 1, 2016.

A Little Tried, February 29, 2016.

An Early Bud, March 4, 2016.

I would like to thank Alberto Gaitán, Caroline Lacey, Robin Moore, Jack Rasmussen, Bill Roseberry, the AU Museum and all my friends who clicked and cheered me on every day no matter how late at night it was.

— Raya Bodnarchuk
The Alper Initiative for Washington Art promotes an understanding and appreciation of the art and artists of the Washington Metropolitan Area. We provide and staff a dedicated space located within the American University Museum, to present exhibitions, programs, and resources for the study and encouragement of our creative community.