Mosaic for Now

A contemporary take on an ancient medium

Unspoken, 10.22.10 - 07.07.11 forges the traditional mosaic materials of stone and glass. Instead, “It’s a very personal piece speaking of my [verbal] isolation” following a move from New York City to Italy, explains artist Samantha Holmes ’06 on her website (www.samantha-holmes.com). Hundreds of notes she wrote on paper, each folded and tied with wire, rest upon nine shelves in a small wooden cabinet. Holmes knew little Italian then, having just begun graduate study in Ravenna, and the notes capture “thoughts you don’t say aloud—not having the language is only one reason—there’s courtesy, necessity, fear, desire. They are thoughts that were composed but never received; they remain suspended in space between artist and viewer. It’s a strange and uncomfortable experience to have it in the museum, as they are all the thoughts I couldn’t express, and that means they are the most private thoughts I had at that time.”

Unspoken, 10.22.10 - 07.07.11 now belongs to the permanent collection of the Museo d’Arte della Città di Ravenna. The provocative work, whose only resemblance to a traditional mosaic is the assembly of a larger
Brotherly Love

explores his life in relation to siblings Harry, Ned, and Mark (the dedicatees), with interwoven historical pairings (Edwin and John Wilkes Booth, Vincent and Theo van Gogh, etc.). Here is a vivid taste of the personal passages, from the book’s beginning:

If the handful of black-and-white snapshots that remain from my childhood is any indication, it’s a wonder I didn’t end up with a permanent crick in my neck from literally and figuratively looking up to my older brother. Harry was born 20 months before me, and I worshiped him with an intensity that must have been both flattering and bewildering to the worshipper. I didn’t want to be like Harry; I wanted to be Harry. I cocked my coonskin cap exactly the way he did when we played Daniel Boone; I made the same pshew-pshew sounds he did when I pulled the trigger on my silver plastic six-shooter; I punched the pocket of my baseball glove with which he had filled it the night before. When he woke me in the middle of the night one Christmas Eve and invited me downstairs to open presents while our parents slept, I followed. When he said he could help me get rid of my loose tooth, I let him tie it to the playroom doorknob and slam the door. He was my older brother and I would have agreed to anything he proposed; I would have followed him anywhere. And so, one spring evening not long before I turned six, as we lay in our matching twin beds, when evening not long before I turned six, as we lay in our matching twin beds, when he woke me in the morning before dawn, I did not remember what we said, or indeed whether we said anything at all. I don’t remember wondering where, if anywhere, whether we said anything at all. I don’t remember wondering where, if anywhere, we were going, or how far we could get in the space where we anticipated a sacred figure. “The saint is only a delineated absence,” Holmes says. “The piece asks the viewer to fill it in—according to whatever belief structure they want to use. It evokes the desire we have to fill in that space.”

To fully appreciate Absence, the viewer must see it in the context of the history of mosaic, as the artist did. Mosaic is one of the most ancient art forms, and the permanence of its traditional materials led Renaissance author Giorgio Vasari to call it “painting for eternity.” This is why “mosaics have been used by religions and empires—Christianity, Islam, the Roman Empire, Byzantium—to represent all sorts of belief systems,” Holmes explains. “[The medium] was also picked up by capitalists in New York City, by Fascists in Italy, and by Communists in Russia. Wherever there’s a strong ideology that believes itself permanent, or wants to believe itself permanent, you will see mosaics.

“But we have a society in which those empires have fallen,” she continues, “and we live amid doubt, insecurity, and impermanence. The society around us has turned away from the kind of religion that
Paradoxical Fables

Ben Loory’s minimalist stories ambush the reader.

by DAVID UPDIKE

In his recent collection, Stories for Nighttime and Some for the Day (Penguin), the short stories of Ben Loory ’93 often begin with a direct, declarative sentence:

“A man is walking through the woods, when suddenly he sees Big-foot.”

“A woman and her friend are in a knife store.”

“A boy meets a girl on a beach, and instantly falls in love.”

The stage is set, and the story ensues—usually short, with an unpredictable plot. Sometimes things take a turn for the worse, sometimes otherwise. Some stories evoke childhood terrors, others, the gritty preoccupations of adulthood. Humor, or the unexpected turn of phrase, appears slyly on the page. The language is beguilingly simple; the stories—"fables and tales"—are not. They often end with a metaphorical exclamation point—a surprising, yet appropriate, paradox. “The end of a story should feel like a birth,” Loory says, “painful and hopeful; frightening but inescapably right.”

Loory writes in a spare, pared-down style. “The choice I made from the beginning,” he says, “was to take out any extraneous details, anything that would take away from the emotional thrust of the story. I was trying to focus on character, and on a single emotional conflict.” The things “taken away” are the names of characters, adjectives, and quotation marks.

Loory’s sparse, unadorned prose,” wrote Michael Patrick Brady in The Boston Globe, “may seem at odds with the fantastical subject matter…but his restraint allows his big ideas to flourish without distraction.”

His work has appeared in dozens of publications, ranging from The Antioch Review to ESPN The Magazine to The New Yorker.

After Harvard, where he concentrated in visual and environmental studies, Loory earned an M.F.A. from the American Film Institute, then worked as a Hollywood screenwriter for six years. “Screenwriting taught me to focus on story,” he says, “to externalize and dramatize and always keep things moving forward.” For several years, he also played mandolin, provided answers to questions of life and death, or gave us the way to live. Instead I ask, in my work, how we can make sense of the world without those ideologies.”

As mosaics are rare in contemporary art, “viewers tend to approach them with the traditional context of mosaic in mind,” Holmes explains. The question of permanence, then, informs Absence, where the space vacated by the saint reveals only a deteriorating brick wall. “There’s a feeling of emptiness and longing,” she notes, “which is related to there being something missing in society to help us answer these questions. What happens to a mosaic when the central figures—the saints and gods—aren’t there anymore? These are questions for which the medium of mosaic is particularly well suited. Its sense of permanence contrasts directly with the surroundings. The ideal world promised by the church, where there is justice, immortality, and everything happens for a reason, contrasts with the world we actually live in, which is complicated, painful, ultimately given to decline, and holds nothing that is immortal.” For Holmes, traditional mosaic, built from fragments, reflects the “coexistence of acts of creation and destruction”: to make a new work, the artist, using a hammer and chisel, fragments stone into pieces.

Holmes discovered mosaic as a visual and environmental studies concentrator, and won a Michael Christian traveling fellowship to study mosaics in Greece and Italy one summer. She spent a few years at frog design inc. (an international product and digital design firm in New York) before moving to Ravenna to enroll at the Accademia di Belle Arti to learn traditional mosaic techniques. Her Italian is much stronger now, especially for words related to her art, like martellina, a type of hammer specific to mosaic. In fact, she says, “I don’t know the English words for some of the tools we use!”

—CRAIG LAMBERT