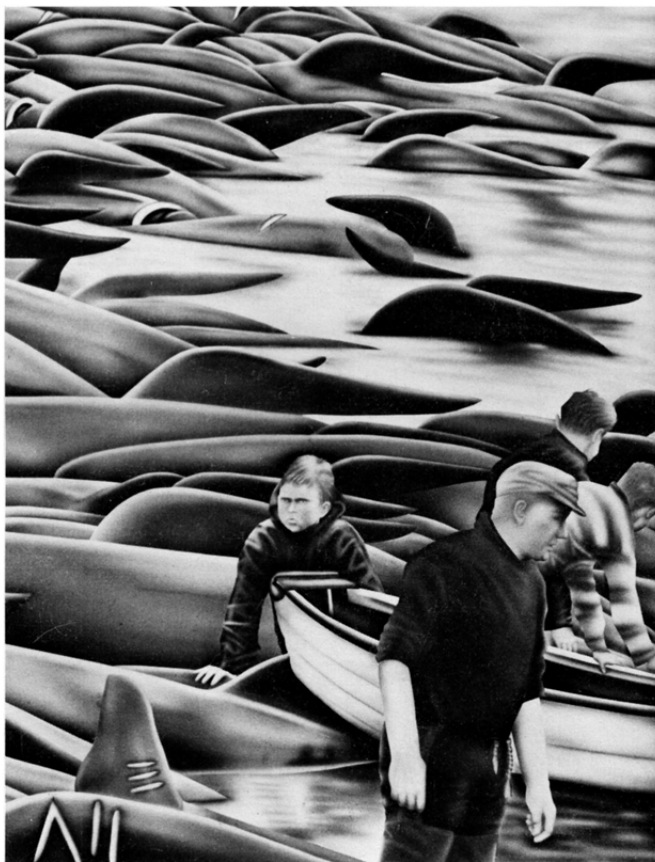


The ONTARIO Review

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Curse of The Faroes

Michael J. Berman

Fiction by MARGARET ATWOOD MILI VE McNIECE

Poetry by SAMUEL HAZO, WILLIAM HEYEN, DANIEL HOFFMAN, W. S. MERWIN, ROBERT PHILLIPS, DAVID R. SLAVITT

Essays by RUTH RATTNER, GEORGE WOODCOCK

THE PRIMAL VISION OF MICHAEL Berman

Reviews by LEWIS B. HORNE, IRVING MALIN, PETER STEVENS

The Primal Vision of Michaela Berman

RUTH RATTNER

"The artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him. . . . As an artist, he is 'man' in a higher sense — he is 'collective man,' a vehicle and moulder of the unconscious psychic life of mankind."

Carl Jung, *The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*

Painting for Michaela Berman is an act of discovery. Her paintings are the visual records of her explorations, adventures of body and spirit that led her far from civilization into a sea world of slaughter and death. Haunting visions remain, strange juxtapositions of the real and surreal. *Oceans of Blood*. The title of her exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto set the tone. Four huge paintings viewed in sequence offered a moving testament of the artist's development and self-discovery.

Although she graduated from the Manitoba School of Art in 1969, Michaela Berman's artistic birth occurred early in 1973 when, during a visit to Niagara's Marineland, she first saw a whale. The sight of the enormous creature confined in its aquatic chamber lingered in her imagination. During ensuing days and weeks, she found herself compulsively tracing and retracing images of whales. Curious to know more about them, she dived through book after book about the *Cetacea*. What was originally fascination soon bordered on obsession. She felt as if her unconscious had been tapped, as if "an ancient memory had been awakened."

Once stirred, this distant memory demanded expression, reshaping not only the direction of her art, but the very meaning of her life as well. Previously, Michaela Berman had been involved in a creative world of plastics — film-making and soft sculpture of curving abstract forms. Now she was governed by a new need — to know from first hand experience all about the whale, to discover the reality beyond the apparition. Why did the image tantalize her so? Somewhere in the long evolutionary process was the whale . . . an ancestral figure, perhaps an archetype.

Was it through destiny or determination that her wishes were realized? In the summer of 1973, some six months after her visit to Marineland, Michaela Berman and her partner, Douglas Pringle (a



Oceans of Blood 96" x 144"

acrylic on canvas

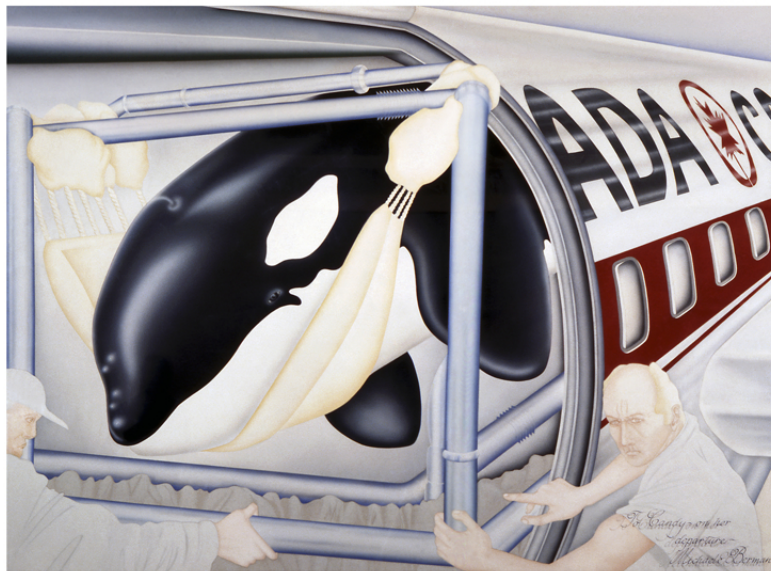
Michaela J. Berman 1976

musical composer bent on learning more about the songs of whales) set off on a journey that would take them to the uninhabited islands off the Northwest coast. While preparing for their expedition, they lived for a few weeks among the Kwakiutl Indians at Alert Bay. The opportunity to observe Indian rituals and learn their myths, in effect, an initiation to the adventure that lay ahead. In Kwakiutl lore, the killer whale is a totemic figure; it is believed that the spirits of dead chiefs dwell within the cavernous bodies of these animals. An emphasis upon the unity of all forms of life pervades the culture. The dance ritual, in which the dancer assumes the aspect of a feared or revered animal, is a celebration of this unity; it serves as an act of identification and an affirmation of the instinctual self.

Far from their Toronto home, Michael Berman and Douglas Pringle became acutely aware of that other self. In a wilderness world, it is instinct that best serves the basic need to survive. The two set out for the vast ocean domain of the killer whale in a small borrowed boat equipped with a few camping supplies and the composer's electronic recording equipment. Venturing into a literal no-man's land where human aptitudes provided no advantage, they experienced at a primal level ineffable peril. Ms. Berman's account reveals the drama of the circumstances: "The waves crashed furiously over the sides of our meager vessel, the sky grew black, silence everywhere, our heart beats echoing our longing for life." Miraculously, the pair not only survived but developed an empathetic relationship with the killer whales. "I could feel what they felt," Ms. Berman relates, "in a sense share their consciousness." The recognition of a pervasive all-transcending life spirit was an epiphany. Previous conceptions of hunter versus hunted vanished in a new vision of common mortality. It became her mission as an artist to communicate this vision.

For the next two years, the familiar studio in Toronto served as both laboratory and theater, a laboratory in which Michael Berman could develop new technical means, a theater where she could reenact the events of her self-transformation in all their visible dimensions. She discovered painting. The medium had never before intrigued her, but now a great span of canvas seemed a territory to be filled with the inhabitants of her imagination.

The four paintings developed like scenes in one drama, each a separate yet related action, each grander in scale, greater in intensity than the one that preceded it. Mental images of remembered and felt experiences were amplified by figures and scenes gathered from photographs. Combining remembered incident with recorded fact, Ms. Berman created her own two-dimensional world of multiple significance.



Candy's Coffin 60" x 77"

acrylic on canvas

Rogers Collection

Michael J. Berman 1976



I Cry Tears of Blood: To Nuliajuk 96" x 192"

acrylic on canvas

Michael J. Berman 1976

Collection of The National Gallery of Canada

Scene One: the first painting serves as prologue. On a canvas seven and a half feet high, the artist introduces the protagonist, the captive whale remembered from that first encounter. Marineland's star attraction, Candy, is portrayed, however, not as Michael Berman first viewed her in the aquatic tank, but in the view used by the newspaper to publicize her arrival. Here is the whale, floundering in a huge sling devised for her transfer from plane to Marineland chamber, a spectacle of helplessness en route to doomed confinement. When she finished the painting, Ms. Berman appended the ironic title — "Candy's Coffin."

Scene Two: shift to the north seas, an inlet of the Faroe Islands. A larger canvas, over eight feet high, can barely contain its contents. Countless bodies of slaughtered whales, their sleek steely-blue hides marred by the slashes of the hunter's weapon, clutter the shallow waters. In this final great gathering, the school of sea mammals is attended by only a few seamen — the impassive executioners. Shaded tones of blue impart an eerie stillness to the deathwatch. It is the calm after the killing, this "Curse of the Faroes."

Scene Three: later. No longer covered with carcasses, the sea is crimson now. As Michael Berman denotes, "Oceans of Blood." The harvest reaped, the enormous bodies stripped of their riches, the remains have been discarded and now sink slowly out of sight. Knee-deep in bloody waters, the hunters perform their customary rites of excision and extraction. In the foreground, stretched across twelve feet of canvas shore, a mammoth whale, gashed and torn, spills blood and entrails upon its own dark shadow. Yet, it is not this unsavory sight that is most disturbing. Rather, it is the manner in which this creature of most inhuman proportions assumes in death a strangely human mien. The peering eye, the fixed grimace of the mouth are tormenting reminders of a mortality known by man as well as beast.

Scene Four: upon a canvas of panoramic scale (eight feet high and sixteen feet wide), Michael Berman's drama is brought to a stunning climax and resolution. The pictorial contents are much the same, but in their treatment, they appear totally transformed. Brilliant light bathes the scene, dissolving shadows, illuminating the enormous pink presence of a beluga whale. Spread upon the shore, in frontal view, the huge mammal confronts its audience evoking awe and fascination. *What or who* is this? The mass of fleshy-pink protoplasm with anthropoid guise appears as much a giant fetus as a whale. Set in the luminous ice-blue waters of the northern sea, flanked by proud Eskimo captors, the giant creature is indeed a prize. A dazzling image, portrayed even in death as indestructible. The whale — ageless and monumental — appears in this culminating scene as prototype and symbol

of mortal endurance. For the artist, the painting affirms her two-fold identity. She is the creator; she is also that which she creates. This is the admission in the title — "Self-Portrait — I (in the form of Beluga Spirit) cry tears of blood for the power man wields on the hierarchy of being: to Nulijuk."*

Michael Berman completed "Self-Portrait" late in 1975. In January of 1976, the four paintings were hung together for the first time in the exhibition at the Isaacs Gallery in Toronto. It was a stunning event. Heroic in content and scale, the paintings seemed all the more remarkable because they were the artist's first work in the painting medium. Yet, as she looks back over the two years during which she painted the *Oceans of Blood* series, Ms. Berman makes little mention of her technical struggles and solutions, emphasizing rather the emotions she experienced during the long and arduous creative process. She remembers moments of great spiritual torment as she devised the initial scenes of doomed confinement, slaughter, and death. It was as if, in creating the scenes, she assumed the pain of the wounded animals while bearing the guilt of the executioners, her fellow humans. Her paintings, much like the ceremonial dances of the Kwakiutl Indians, served as a kind of expiatory rite. She became one with what she created and, in the process, found release and renewal. As she worked, the sense of tragedy that had originally haunted her was dispelled, overwhelmed by a greater emotion — ecstasy.

The intensity of Michael Berman's vision inspired her means. She knew intuitively that such powerful emotional content required cool handling. By limiting her palette to a few colors, applying her paint in thin smooth layers, and crisply delineating each image, she asserted her artistic control. Not a brushstroke is visible to mar the pristine surfaces, not a jarring color or disturbing line.

From watercolor, she advanced to acrylic paint and then, seeking greater luminosity, she taught herself to apply the acrylic with the electrically powered airbrush. Working on one small section of the canvas at a time, she kept the rest of the surface masked. Only as the paintings neared completion would she see at last the totality of what she had made. It was always somewhat of a revelation. "I didn't know what I was doing. . . ." Michael Berman still muses.

And indeed there are characteristics of the naive painter visible in her work. Particularly in the handling of spatial relationships and the over-simplification of animal shapes and parts, Ms. Berman invites

* the Eskimo sea spirit

comparison with the naifs. If this can be considered a technical weakness, it is nonetheless one that serves the artist's expressive purposes. As in pictures by primitive painters, the passages that seem most awkward are the very ones that convey the urgency and integrity of the artist's statement.

In Michael Berman's sea pictures, the unlikely synthesis of recognizable primitive elements (the content as well as the handling) with the very contemporary airbrush technique reflects her special sensibility. She is, in her nowness, attuned to innovation and closely affiliated with artists who experiment with forms and materials to provide new types of sensory experience. At the same time, she is obsessed by a past she can only sense. Recognizing the value of primal instincts and memories, she draws upon them to inform her art. "The process," she says, "is the miracle of art." For it is the process that provides the opportunity to discover the primordial self — a self that transcends time and circumstance, linking generations of life in one continuous chain of being. This is Michael Berman's vision.



Curse of The Feroes 96" x 72" acrylic on canvas Michael J. Berman 1976
Collection of The Art Bank detail