

## ***Twelve Years in the Life of Sanda Iliescu***

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I have at hand selections from four groups of work by Sanda Iliescu from the period from 1998 to 2010. They rest upon my desk within easy reach. They are a cluster of ball point drawings of baby Gabriel (twelve in all) and three related water colors with gouache, all from 1998; two drawings in water color from the series that the artist calls “grass drawings” from two years later; and, finally, two recent oils from 2010 that the artist refers to as “Ares and Aphrodite.”

We do not need to know a thing about Sanda Iliescu’s childhood in Romania, about her education at Columbia and Princeton, about her degrees in engineering and architecture, about her marriage to the writer Paul Lipkowitz, about her own writing on art and ethics, or about her inspired teaching of design at the University of Virginia in the Architecture School and the College of Arts and Sciences to appreciate these works, to see them as self-defining moments in the life of a mature, truly gifted, and impassioned artist at mid-career.

What have we here: a baby, indeed the artist’s baby, blades of grass, Greek gods, erotically famous for their momentous liaison, which amused the other gods greatly. Is there a connection between these diverse themes? Certainly. They are all about pulsating life, life as the artist sees it, transforms it into visual play and beauty. All of these works are small in scale, intimate, tender.

In the ball point renderings of baby Gabriel, which are close ups rendered with pleasingly ornamental lines, as if scratched onto the surface, we see the artist’s baby from above, close up, trying to put his hand in his mouth, sticking his tongue out, sleeping, awakening. What makes these drawings so magical is not merely the way in which they convey an effusive maternal love, but the wonderful wire-like lines. With such calligraphy the baby is virtually recreated as a looming presence--filling the sheet over and over and over again. Much of the aesthetic pleasure one derives from these drawings has everything to do with the pressure of the pen, the way it stops and starts, the intimate sense of touch that the pen conveys: a kind of giving birth in pen and ink. The drawings are festive, joyful, celebratory, and even droll, comic in scale—all that baby plumpness. Baby Gabriel’s pudgy fingers are unforgettable. They elicit a smile. The baby’s gaze is uncanny—direct and deep as only a baby’s can be.

Three paintings in watercolor with some touches of gouache are more simplified renderings of baby Gabriel. In one he appears with his back to us, the lemon-yellow, egg-yoke thick outline of his pajamas (or is it a bib?) at his neck line, arresting in a field of black and white. He gazes into the distance to a place we will never see. The contours of the baby’s head and his hair are rendered with shapes that bend and curl in a series of circular swirls. For all this pleasing curvature of form, one still feels the pressure of the artist’s almost hesitant hand as she gives definition to what she sees: a likeness, but made up of beautiful arabesques as well, set again a pale yellow to which the lemon neck line is wed.

In a wonderful composition, black and white with patches of gray shadow, mother Iliescu plays with rectangular shapes as she shows baby Gabriel in blue trying to escape from his crib set in the middle of a nearly empty rectangular space, that is also a flat surface. There is something almost funny about the isolation of Gabriel. The bars of the crib and those of the window create intensely pleasurable patterns, a geometric construction that is animated, indeed dynamic, at the same time that it is anecdotal. One can almost hear Gabriel cry out for attention, and we cannot help but laugh at his big black eyes set against the white of the crib. The blue of his outfit is suffused throughout his crib as a paler celestial aura.

I save for last the image of baby Gabriel bundled up and on a sleigh that descends in front of five tree trunks. The tracks of this sleigh and tracks of other ghostly sleigh riders no longer present run in front of and between the trees, hints of black contour covered in snow. The baby is unforgettable, impersonal, almost spooky in his hood, but funny really. We see him flying by on his sleigh as if we are at a window defined by a thick black frame. Again the artist's handicraft is conspicuous in the pressure of the brush that conveys the haptic sense of something touched into being. Most amusingly the snow tracks run over the fictive picture frame. That is impossible in real life, but not in the amusing art of Sanda Iliescu.

If Sanda Iliescu creates dynamic compositions in the rendering of her visual "narratives" of baby Gabriel, she turns three years later to forms more nearly abstract when she does her "grass drawings," which are intensely musical, lyrical arabesques of brushed lines that overlap without ever losing their coherence. In fact, it is a wonder that these dancing lines cohere so perfectly in the two examples in front of me, since it is all too easy to slip into a confusion of lines. These lines are rendered in muted blue, green, gray and yellow. They swirl across the surface in a playful dance. They are like sea grass moving within currents at the bottom of the sea. Every stroke is clearly thought out, controlled, yet buoyant: a chorus of lines. Were I to give a title to this lyrical group, I would call it "Sanda's Song."

Fast forward to 2010: the day before yesterday, or almost. Two pictures from the "Ares and Aphrodite" series are perched against the wall two feet away. They are small square canvases about a foot in height and width. I selected these from a larger group, but they sit side by side as if inevitably of a piece, like pendent paintings. These pictures are seemingly simple, but they are very complex, rich, rewarding.

Brushed slowly, deliberately, lovingly, but also delicately scratched, they represent thick patches of color that merge and oscillate ambiguously between the flat canvas and depth. They create an alluring imaginary space. Blues and gold but also touches of red vibrate both behind and in front of simple geometric shapes in black that echo the shape of the canvases themselves. These pictures are like living breathing presences. Both are dominated by different tones of fleshy pink: the flesh of Ares and Aphrodite. The viewer is invited to reach out and touch the painted surface of the canvases with their thick inviting impasto. Pure voluptas: a delectation to the eye, an invitation to the hand. Like all of Sand Iliescu's works, these paintings are the objects of intense contemplation. They inspire contemplation. They do so with infectious delight and visionary fervor.

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## **Note**

This essay refers to the following works:

*Ares and Aphrodite (I and II)*, 2010

Oil on canvas, 12 x 12 in. each

*Grass Lines (no. 55 and no. 66)*, 2000

Watercolor on paper, 12 x 10 ¼ in. each

*Gabriel, Ball Point Pen*, 1998

Ball point pen on paper, 12 drawings: 11 x 8 ½ in. each

*First Winter*, 1998

Watercolor and gouache on paper, 3 drawings: 12 x 10 ¼ in. each