

Margrit's

fire

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I met Margrit Lewczuk at the iconic New York Studio School, which was in fact the original Whitney Museum, when I moved to New York in 2007. I spent two years in her and Bill Jensen's atelier where we had countless hours of conversations about art, life, and everything in between. She always had great insight and gave spot on critiques. Margrit is the kind of artist who can put herself in another's shoes and offer practical feedback according to their needs. I felt lucky and grateful to have her perspective on my work.

We kept in touch over the years, even after I left NYC. We saw each other several times in Istanbul and New York, and every single time carried that same feeling of familiarity. Our dialogues around painting never ceased to be stimulating and solacing. When I reached out to her, towards what seemed to be the end of the C19 pandemic, it had been thirteen years since we lived in the same city. As she turned her camera on and I got to see and hear her from across the pond, I knew we would have a bittersweet conversation full of stories impossible to tell the way she does

First we had to catch up and get our pandemic experiences out the way. Only afterwards did I ask her

about her studio fire. I remembered her telling us about this event in her life playing a double-edged role, but I needed details in order to grasp its significance in her personal narrative.

Margrit was born in 1952 in the Lower East Side of New York City. Her father was from Ukraine. As a young man, he was taken to a work camp in Germany during WWII where he met Margrit's German mother. They got married; and because he was a refugee and stateless, had to choose somewhere else to live. They moved to America. Margrit went to Queens College and studied psychology. She was very interested in observing people's behaviour and thought she was a good listener. As a former student of hers, I think so too. Walking around the school, she'd notice art studios and would think how brave these students were that they were able to make art in public. Eventually she left psychology and ended up taking a full-time class at the Brooklyn Museum Art School where she met her lifelong partner, artist Bill Jensen.

Together they were a part of a vibrant artist community in the 70's New York. As she puts it, they were poor, but very happy. They made art and were surrounded by

it. By 1980, she had moved to her 14th Street studio, at the Meat Market. Her new studio had two skylights and was flooded with natural light.

She worked there until 1999 when she and Bill bought a building in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where they are now. On November 24, 1999, three months before she was going to move, a big fire destroyed the 14th Street building along with her paintings of 25 years.

**“You lock the door, you go. You don't think you're never going to see anything in there again and your entire life is wiped out. It's not even just your paintings, it's everything. In a way, it takes years to get there... to get the feeling. People would say to me, I have 30-40 years of work and I sometimes wish something like that would happen to me so I can start all over again. And I'd get very mad at them for saying something so insensitive.**



Sun/Moon, 60"x48", acrylic on linen, 2015

**But I get it now. There's something very freeing, I now see it like a gift those old paintings gave me. Like new life, all these new paintings I've been making since. I'm here. It takes years really, to get to that point.”**

We are having this conversation twenty-three years after the fire. The way she describes her post-fire experience and refers to the work as 'new life' makes me think of what Ismail Bekar, a fire ecologist, told me in relation to wildfires. Many ecosystems actively need fire, Ismail says. Fire opens up space for new growth. Forests need to stay young as old trees risk diseases. Fire suppression is a very risky human intervention which results in accumulation of undergrowth on the forest floor causing destructive mega fires. I think of years of work accumulating in the studio

and feeling crushed under the weight of one's own history. I want to know what was lost for Margrit, and what remained, though I know the answer is not that straight forward.

**"The fire was so hot there was nothing left. There was nothing. Oh no, there was one thing. Bob Witz, who you may remember, made a portrait of me and that portrait, hung in the brick hallway, survived. I could never go back. Bill went back and said "if I find anything," and I said "anything, bring me a fork, bring me anything" and there was that one painting, very weird, a portrait of me hanging up on the wall which I have now."**



Portrait of Margrit by Robert Witz, 12" x 15", oil on linen, 1995

Margrit was applying for teaching jobs at that time. So, she had sent resumes to people, and slides. She had no slides left. She received some of the material back from these job applications. Also, people who owned paintings of hers knew she did not have anything left, so they all gave back the paintings they owned. "People are very kind, and generous," she recalls.

I find that moving. That the one painting that survived is not one of hers but a painting of her. That the people around her tried to help restore her past, her archive. Burcu and I often talk about losses and remains, especially in the context of the climate crisis. Last summer, more than two hundred wildfires

burnt 1700 square kilometres in Southern Turkey. It was the worst in the country's history. We were all overwhelmed with the amount of lost lives, destroyed habitats. It was such a big griev-



Dirt, 12" x 9", swiss soil on paper, 2016

ance that only after a while we wondered what, in fact, was not lost or permanently gone during that time. When I have a conversation about the 2021 fires with Ismail, he doesn't sound so bleak. Unsurprisingly,

he is a strong believer in respecting ecosystems' cycles. Given enough time, forests might renew themselves completely, he states. We need to observe the process, study the changes in the fire regimes and intervene as little and carefully as possible.

**"It's probably not the right thing to say," Margrit starts hesitantly, "but you know through some fires, there is regrowth and ash feeds the soil. It's symbolic for me because it's kind of what**

happened with me. At some point you lose so much, you can decide, I'm not going to go on anymore, I'm just going to shoot myself. For me painting is a very nasty habit. It was a habit I couldn't get over" she chuckles.



UNTITLED Day View, 60"x48", Acrylic and phosphorescence on Linen, 2015



UNTITLED Night View, 60"x48", Acrylic and phosphorescence on Linen, 2015

It took a while for Margrit to get back to work. Finally, in Maine she starts working outdoors with big sheets of paper and lots of ink. She uses a broom and makes these big cloud formations. They were huge, she recalls. When she brought them back and hung them on the wall people said to her "oh poor thing, we can see the fire and the smoke." She did not like to hear that. She

didn't want anybody to feel sorry for her for what happened, and went out and got the brightest colours she could get. That's how the fluorescent paintings started. And then came the phosphorescent; the night time glow paintings. It was not enough that it had brightness only in the day time, she wanted it to be light day and night.

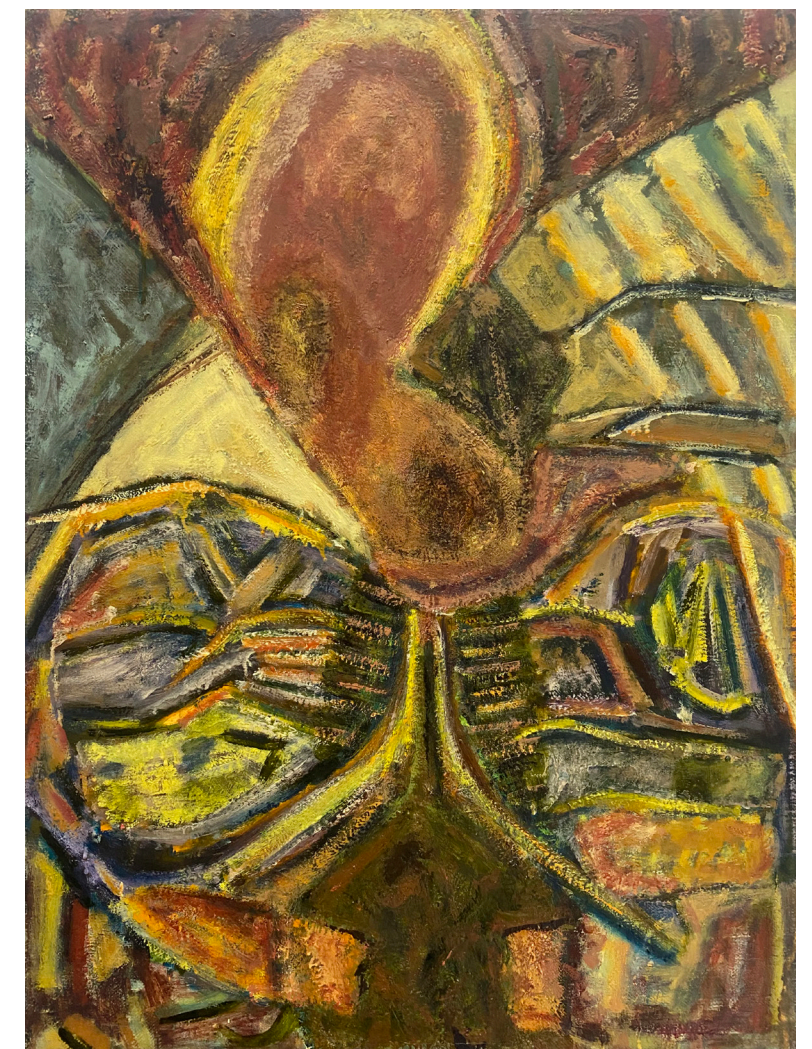
Another change it prompted was in terms of materials. The smell of the oil was reminiscent of the oil paintings. So she switched to acrylics. But she kept going. "Noone escapes tragedy in their life," says Margrit, "you either get over it or it cripples you forever. Somehow you find the strength to go on." I ask if she ever dreamt about the fire. I don't know why I'm asking this, maybe because sometimes my dreams become active agents in my work.

**"I dream a lot when I'm not home" she answers. "I have incredible dreams where I walk through the 14th Street studio. And I see the paintings. The person that took my studio is Stella McCartney, you know, Paul McCartney's daughter. She doesn't know that my spirit is in those rooms still. I'd like to talk to her one day to see if she ever saw something. You have a room that you made art in for 20 years? That feeling has to be in that room. It's gotta be in there, that life force? Maybe one day I'll ask her. They are so real, the dreams."**

Three months before our conversation, Margrit received a notification saying three of her paintings from the time of the fire were coming up for auc-

tion. She had a show in Stockholm back in 1999 and those paintings escaped the fire because they were away for the exhibition. It surprises me to hear this happens 23 years after the fire, just before I reached out to her to talk about all this. Margrit bought her paintings back. She tells me they are now in a dialogue with the new paintings.

**"They are in perfect shape. Not a crack, still tight. When I opened the wooden crate they came in, I told Bill all the meals that we didn't eat because we didn't have money went into the art supplies in those paintings"**



Deep Sound, oil on linen, 30"x 22", 1985



Angel, 60" x 48", acrylic on linen, 2016

Finally we talk about our time together at the New York Studio School. They no longer teach there. Margrit tells me jokingly she and Bill had always gone out dancing with all the students as a prerequisite to get into their class. They would just take all the good dancers. "That's the way, I think, you should really teach. To be around your students. To show how to live."

I remember well. All the chilli parties at Margrit and Bill's home, hours spent in their studios talking about the work, the materials, and everything else. Going out dancing to live music. Margrit once told me "instead of being in the studio and dreaming about the beach, go to the beach and dream about your studio." I always think about the studio. I think most artists do, that's how we cope with life.



Butterfly, 60" x 48", acrylic on linen, 2022