

Write of Passage

IN THIS NEW YORK CITY STUDIO, ART BECOMES A SYMBOL OF
TRANSFORMATION AND FORGIVENESS BY RICHARD J. FRISWELL

Edward Vilga's work *Drop Back* graces a starkly contemporary space overlooking a New York City park. Vilga combines imagery of important life events with text overlay to create complex, sometimes autobiographical, work.



Emerging from the subway into the blinding light of Canal Street on New York City's Lower East Side, I quickly get my bearings and navigate my way past the throngs of shopkeepers and tourists, walking briskly toward my destination. As I enter Chinatown, the sidewalks are a jumble of baskets and crates displaying mounds of vegetables and buckets of glistening sea life in every



Leslie Lewis Sword sits beneath an Edward Vilga work depicting her role as Immaculée Ilibagiza in *Miracle in Rwanda*. In the distance is *Untitled*, a 1914 still life, in the Cubist style, by Pablo Picasso

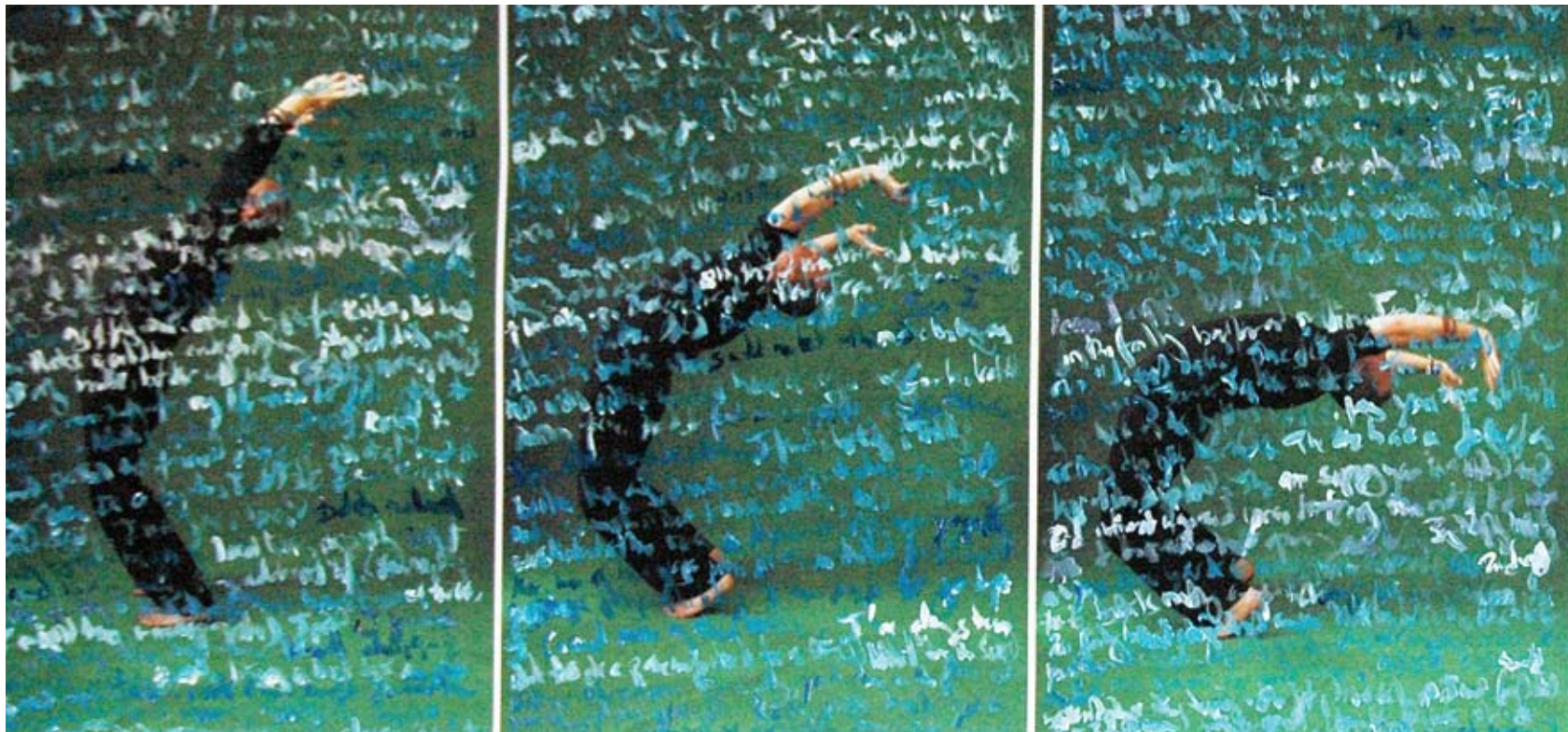


LANGUAGE ALONE, VILGA BELIEVES, IS OFTEN NOT ADEQUATE TO COMMUNICATE THE LAYERS OF EXPERIENCE AND FEELING THAT SHAPE US AS INDIVIDUALS.

imaginable shape and color. Some of these unwitting captives squirm helplessly, but most lie stacked and motionless, staring in stunned disbelief at the hazy summer sun high above. A vast array of shoppers in all shapes and sizes can be seen poking and prodding these hapless creatures, mentally sizing them up as a meal for tonight's table. Here, amidst this urban chaos, I am struck by the unblinking connection between death and dinner.

I have come to visit Edward Vilga, playwright, artist, and author, and to see firsthand the work that has become the focus of his attention for the last several months. His loft space, in the heart of Chinatown, offers a welcome respite from the noise and confusion on the streets, just five floors below. A warm greeting and a cool glass of water await me. We quickly settle in to discuss his motivation for the creation of a body of work that fuses language, imagery, and personal experience into a powerful statement about life in a complex world and our perceived place in it.

As an artist, Edward believes that language alone is not often adequate to communicate the layers of experience and feeling that shape us as individuals. Writing for the stage, he has had the rare privilege of seeing his words come to life, spoken by a skilled actor in front of an enthusiastic international audience. Using greatly enlarged photographs from performances of his work, he then paints the text of the play in an unbroken stream of consciousness on top of the image itself. This hastily rendered "manuscript" is not altogether legible, making for a completed work that is both powerful and mysterious. "This layering, which includes the creation of a written piece, the images taken from the actual performance of that work, and the final transfer of the source material as a painted application over an image, symbolizes the layers of experience that go into making each of us who we are," Vilga says. "Events like the ones I write about shape what we are, and I think of them as transformative in our lives," he tells me. >>



IN YOGA PRACTICE, THE “DROP BACK” EXERCISE SERVES AS A MEASURE OF SELF-CONFIDENCE AND A METAPHOR FOR LIVING WITH RISK AND REMAINING OPEN TO CHANGE.

Vilga recently co-created and directed a one-act play that has been performed in a dozen cities and festivals in the United States, England, and Scotland, to much acclaim. Titled *Miracle in Rwanda*, it tells the true story of Immaculée Ilibagiza, a Tutsi woman who seeks shelter in a tiny room (an extra bathroom in a pastor’s house) with seven other women to avoid the violence wreaked upon her fellow tribespeople during the 1994 civil war in her African homeland. Over the course of her three-month confinement she confronts the terror of annihilation and her own belief in herself, and emerges a stronger person for it. “The actor and play’s co-creator, Leslie Lewis Sword, has had to adopt the posture and personalities of nine different characters,” Vilga points out, “making the audience believe that, without moving or changing costume, she is all of these people.” He sees patience and forgiveness as “emblematic of the power of the human spirit, and the central themes of the play. These are lessons that have been central in my life as well.”

The play’s powerful message is made all the more dramatic by the fact that the stage is stripped bare and the actor is confined to an imaginary space little larger than a guest bathroom. In this nightmarish realm of self-imposed imprisonment, Immaculée confronts her father, her own childhood, her neighbors and friends, and, ultimately, her intended killers. In the end, through the power of her faith in God and herself, she survives because of her capacity to forgive her enemies. As with other Vilga literary works, *Miracle in Rwanda* became the subject of a recent series of paintings, representing the images and text of the performance in his characteristic layered style. They have appeared in a number of recent gallery shows.

Vilga demurs when I ask if his work is autobiographical, but

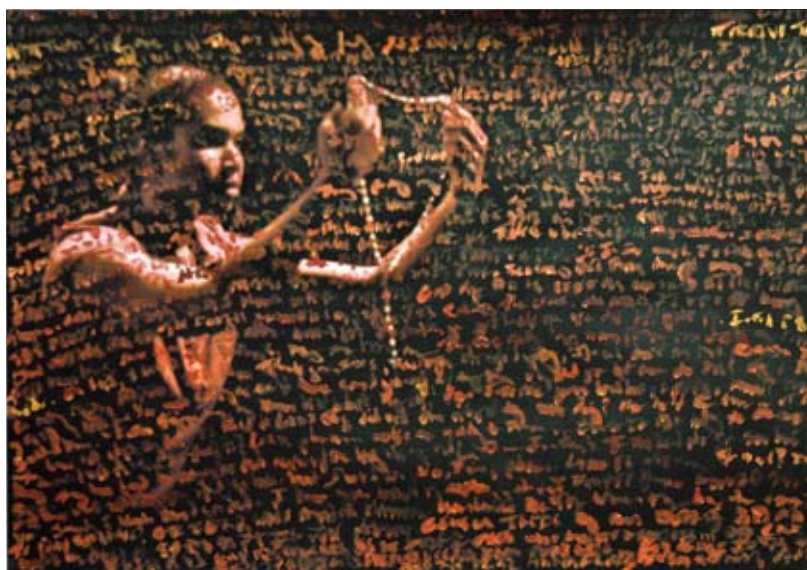


LEFT: A photo-montage of Vilga's birthday ritual—a series of drop-backs for every year of his age—merges the images with the text of his essay describing the process and its meaning to him. This layered work is almost 6 feet long. BELOW: The artist walks Belle through his busy Lower East Side neighborhood in New York City.



VILGA'S NARRATIVE STYLE IS AN EXPLORATION OF THE PLACE OF THE ARTIST AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE FINISHED WORK.

THIS PAGE, BELOW: Details from a series of Edward Vilga paintings depicting scenes from *Miracle in Rwanda*, including rapid overpainting of actress Leslie Lewis Sword's monologue as a construct in the final work of art, seen here in close-up (top) and as a completed work (bottom). OPPOSITE PAGE: A large painting represents the entire text of a short story by the artist, rendered over an enlarged close-up of his eye. For Vilga, the gestural and meditative nature of this creative process offers many of the same benefits as his Yoga practice, symbolized here.



he would agree that the motifs in his *Drop Back Series* clearly relate to his experience as an advanced yoga practitioner and teacher and to his own rite of passage into adulthood. The drop back is a difficult and frightening yoga move in which the individual reaches back over his head and continues to fall backward into an upward-facing arch, viewing the world in inverted form. “I celebrate my birthday each year by doing as many drop backs as my age. [This year, that’s 45 drop backs.] This is a difficult exercise, both physically and because it requires a level of trust in your own ability to have your hands where they need to be when it counts most. At a certain instant in the move, you go beyond the point of no return. That is living with risk, or as they say in my yoga practice, living in the openness.” Vilga views this as a metaphor for life and an ongoing test of his ability to remain open to change. Recently he chronicled the event as sequenced images. This experience, too, has become the subject of a series of narrative paintings, where form and language are folded into a single work, inviting the viewer to explore both the medium and the message.

Vilga’s paintings are the result of a multi-level experience, but manage to stand alone on the strength of the finished product. While each work is a fusion of imagery and language, in the end they are both and neither. In the spirit of today’s installation art movement, the artist relies on his own body parts (and those of others) to serve as integral components of the finished work. (One essay is transcribed over an unrecognizably enlarged photo of his own eye.) The physicality of this kind of first-person art is not new, and, in fact, it could be said that much of what Neo-Expressionist art has been about for the last 15 or 20 years is the exploration of the role of the artist as an integral part of the finished product. For Vilga, though, neither the self nor the narrative underpinnings of any work dominate; this allows viewers to bring their own interpretation to what they see. This open-ended approach to the complex themes that invariably seem to propel this artist’s work allows for many layers of meaning in a single painting. And this, after all, is the much-sought-after goal for any artist. **TME**

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Edward Vilga will be exhibiting at the Bridge Gallery, 98 Orchard Street, in New York City, this fall. Schedules and directions can be found at www.bridgegalleryny.com, or call 212.674.6320. Go to www.MiracleInRwanda.com/peek for play an excerpt.

