



## Jigsaw Puzzle With an Interesting Thread

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I'm very uninterested in subject matter," Eugene Brodsky told a recent visitor to his East Hampton studio, although he has also said that "the sources for my work start from images I come across." In his artworks, things are what they seem, and yet there's more than meets the eye.

"I try to make it hard for myself. I think my specialty has been finding the hard way to make things that absolutely don't look hard to make." His recent "Plans" series exemplifies this.

He has described those works as "essentially creating a jigsaw puzzle of silk," a complicated process that includes drawing, collage, vector conversion, laser-cutting, inking, silk-stretching, pinning, and assembly — processes that, in the artist's words, "remain mostly invisible to the viewer, who rightly just sees what's there."

He does not like talking about his work, "although that can be frustrating for people who need to lock it into something. It's like making music. If there were really some way you could describe your work that was really, really useful, you probably shouldn't be making art or music to begin with. I think most people who love art look for something beyond words, beyond understanding in any literal way."

With just three and a half weeks of formal art education, he had a show at the O.K. Harris Gallery in SoHo in 1970, his first, at the age of only 23. He was born in Manhattan into "sort of an artsy family. My mother was a painter, my father went to Yale Drama School." He attended the High School of Music and Art, then left and went to Walden, "the go-to progressive school for those who couldn't make it anywhere else."

Some teenage summers were spent at Buck's Rock Performing and Creative Arts Camp in Connecticut, "which was part of a whole progressive syndrome you went through in the early '60s, where you kind of see the creative life through the perspective of your teachers and your counselors and you go, 'Oh my God, this is really scary.'"

He enrolled at George Washington University in 1963 with a plan to major in political science. Within two months, John F. Kennedy was assassinated. "It had an enormous impact on me, going from a city that was very glamorous and future-driven to this whole series of events and political

wars and the civil rights movement. I got very engaged in all that and dropped out of school after two years.”

Back in the city, he started to paint. Until that point, art “was an area where I sort of shone, as opposed to some other areas where I didn’t shine.” Very briefly, he attended the New York Studio School on Eighth Street. “You were supposed to work from the figure and evolve in the inevitable way of an atelier-type school, but I was down in the basement doing Ronald Bladen-type sculptures with cardboard and black tape.” (Bladen was one of the progenitors of Minimal Art.)

“I remember Leland Bell, who had been a student of Derain, saying, ‘How did you get in here, Brodsky?’ I was asked to make a commitment or get out, and I got out. That was my experience of art school.”

Mr. Brodsky recalled taking his slides to Ivan Karp, the director of O.K. Harris, “who at that point was sort of the Donald Trump of the art world. ‘These are great, these are fabulous,’ he said, and I remember telling my father about it and thinking ‘this is kind of nice.’ But from then on, it was hell.”

In 1972, the artist moved from the West Village to SoHo. “I knew a lot of people, but my life experience as opposed to everybody else’s life experience in the art world was that my friends tended to be less successful, and the very successful people didn’t like me.” He was with the Cunningham Ward Gallery in the mid-1970s, as was Ross Bleckner, “but lots of people didn’t ‘get’ my work.”

From the beginning of his career, Mr. Brodsky has been focused on both image and process. Among the artists who have mattered to him are Franz Kline, Robert Rauschenberg, and Jasper Johns. “My work was also impacted by Eva Hesse and the whole period of making things that were painterly with nonpainterly materials.”

He described his breakthrough work as the “child” of Hesse, Richard Diebenkorn, Frank Stella, and Conrad Marca-Relli. “In my work of the mid-1970s, I used raw canvas and black Rhoplex and cut every line, instead of drawing every line. I followed the shape of what I was doing so it would have an irregular, Stella-like shape.”

He pointed to a work in a 1975 catalog as an example. “It was all canvas, cut and then joined. Forty years later, I’m still cutting and joining. Then I did what people do, I moved along and the art world moved along, and things that I had excluded from my art that I was very proud of excluding I found myself including, like figurative elements.”

From early in his career, Mr. Brodsky’s works have been complex compositions of different, sometimes dissonant components — a realistic Mickey Mouse “imprisoned” in a checkerboard-like grid, drum-like forms that faintly suggest the chocolate grinder in Duchamp’s “The Large Glass,” or a shape that suggests a piece of furniture but could be simply an abstract line.

More often than not, his forms and lines are suggestive but elusive, often paired with seemingly random elements such as a crudely drawn house, a realistic drawing of a prison camp, or a line drawing of a pregnant woman in profile.

“I photograph things,” he said when asked where his images came from. “What excites me, what I like to look at, what captures me. I have to trust that the integrating thread to all of my objects and all the images I do is that they appeal to me, they give me a starting point, they make me think, and they leave some room for me.”

For the “Plans,” much of his research focused on the plans and drawings of early 20th-century European architects, among them Carlo Mollino and J.J.P. Oud, whose “drawings were very wonderful-looking and, at the same time, functional. A lot of the time the most arresting things I see around are not exactly art. They can be the sketches for an animation or a blueprint that’s crumbled at the edges and stuck together with tape, and this, to me, is really it.”

“LCX,” one of the silk pieces from “Plans,” derived from a floor plan Le Corbusier made for an exhibition of paintings. “I get very remote from the starting point, from the initial image. My goal is to find examples where my vision works in tandem with another’s to produce something that is both new and at the same time intentionally bound to its beginnings. I’m often pulled toward the most casual image.”

He first came to the East End when he was 19 and “found out that artists went out there, and there was a Friday train with a bar car. I would be there with all these people whose names I don’t remember, drinking up a storm, and I loved it. There were cornfields next to the ocean, there was landscape and light.”

He began to rent during the summers when his daughters, Kate and Emma, now 34 and 30, were little. He and his second wife, Corry Kittner, a children’s-book illustrator, purchased their house on Accabonac Road, just east of the village, in 2001. “I move my studio here in May, and we stay as late as we can, which is late September or early October.”