

## Journeys Both Familiar and Unprecedented

*“Here for once you see a complete man who thought and felt beauty,  
and in whose mind there was a world such as you will not find outside of it.  
The pictures are true, yet have no trace of actuality.  
Claude Lorrain knew the real world by heart, down to the minutest details,  
but he used it only as the means of expressing the harmonious universe of his beautiful soul.  
That is the true ideal, which can so use real means of expression that the truth  
which emerges gives the illusion of actuality.”*  
*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe<sup>1</sup>*

The words that Goethe—the ultimate appreciator of nature, connoisseur of landscapes real and imaginary, and enthusiast of artistic imagery—used to describe the art of the 17th century French master Claude Lorrain apply exquisitely, and as to no other artist of recent times, to Raffi Kaiser. Phrase by phrase, Goethe, in elucidating Lorrain’s working method and artistic achievement, describes Raffi’s as well.

I went to see a marvelous show of Claude Lorrain’s drawings at the Louvre in the summer of 2011 because Raffi insisted on it. The critics had written that the exhibition was too large, and suffered for the lack of paintings; Raffi would have nothing of their viewpoint. Rather, with his usual independence and jaunty disregard of the prevalent point of view, and his generous wish that a friend not risk missing a fantastic pleasure, he said that I “*must*” get to the show, that the work in it was, “one after another, utterly *spectacular*.”

This is all pure Raffi. He is an enthusiast, and the point of his art, of his entire life, is for others to partake of the pleasure of seeing. And no wonder that Le Gellée would be one of his artistic heroes. Raffi, too, has devoted his life to making art work that resembles a completely knowable world, that rings a hundred percent true, but that is his own creation, the product of his imagination. He studies landscape all the time, on the spot, meticulously, as if photographing the images, yet the camera is his brain; he depends on no other mechanism, just as he avoids almost all technology (computers, mobile phones, etc.) that diminish the capacity for truly seeing and hearing and observing firsthand with the fullest possible mental acuity. And then he creates, back in his studio, another world, one as real as what he has observed when walking in China or Japan or Cambodia or wherever he has last taken himself, but one where you could never say “Oh, yes, that is the precise spot where the River X meanders past the Mountain Y.”

Rather, the universe he has invented is a new planet, a very beautiful one, one with water and peaks and open spaces, with vast skies and lovely voids, with shrubbery and foliage that belong to paradise, where harmony and grace prevail, but which exists nowhere else than on the paper where Raffi has so brilliantly scribed it.

In the spring of 2011, Raffi, who is quite simply ageless, showed me his largest work to date, the eighty-eight drawings which he had finally finished two weeks previously, and

<sup>1</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe from *Conversations Of Goethe* by Johann Peter Eckermann / translations combined

which he intended for the splendid space being offered him at the Morat-Institut in the current exhibition. The visit to the place where he lives and draws at the edge of Paris' s fourteenth arrondissement had the elements of a ritual I have come to adore. Like Mondrian, Raffi has always been happy sleeping and eating in the same space where he achieves the work that is the essence of his life, and treats the matters of sleeping and eating as life's necessities to be handled gracefully but without undue emphasis on them in the two-story space that is mostly studio; to go there feels like going to a refuge that is wonderfully reliable and never changes. Raffi greeted me with his warm engaging smile; we walked in; and, as always, he began to hang, with the small clips that are almost like devotional objects in their graceful functionality, one drawing after another on the wall, side by side, so that his composite masterpiece began to assume form. In the old days, I used to insist that he let me help him, but I learned long ago that he has to be the one to remove each drawing from the stack, position it, follow it with more, and eventually remove them; even if he has at times had back problems, this is the task he assigns himself and permits no one else to do, like a monk performing a very pleasant rite.

And, as always, there was music, and it was magnificent. One of the few luxuries Raffi allows himself is a first-rate sound system and a connoisseur's collection of cds. Today he was listening to Bach's St. Matthew's Passion, and when I quickly commented on the magnificence of the recording, Raffi lit up, saying with his knowing smile, "Of course, it is Herreweghe." Quality, the nuances of difference, what it is that makes one recording of Bach so much richer than another, is the central issue for this man who is such a perfectionist, an unfussy one, when it comes to the placement of every line, the dimensions of every void, in his drawings.

He calls this new work "The Journey of Journeys". Each of the eighty-eight sheets of heavy (640 grams) Arches watercolor paper has a width of seventy-five centimeters, a height of a hundred and fifty. The lines of the drawing on this richly textured white support have been made with the hardest possible pencil—7H—which is practically like metal; Raffi sharpens the graphite quite often by sandpapering it. As he places sheet next to sheet and the very quiet but utterly absorbing spectacle begins to unfold, you see a river, clouds, sky. You don't know, of course, where you are in the world or what will come next. Rather, you are in paradise—in all of its beauty and its unpredictability.

Raffi is not given to a lot of explanation, and no one is less likely to make the sort of gratuitous explicative statement popular with so many artists of our epoch. He simply tells me that this consummate work is a memory of thirty years of trips. To do it, he pretty much gave up all social life, stopped seeing people. And closed himself off from the world in the studio, with no knowledge of what he would do there. Atypically, he went so far as to abandon the beloved act of reading; like someone in a monastery, he isolated himself from all disturbances, except for listening to Bach and Monteverdi and Mozart and Beethoven ("the quartets of course", said with the familiar smile of sheer delight), buying food, and going to see what could not be missed in Paris during this time period of retreat: the Mondrian and Claude Lorrain exhibitions. The lines of these drawings leap with a grace that connects directly to the movement of the voices in St. Matthew's Passion; the crosshatching has a resemblance, in its complex clarity, to the blend of well-

orchestrated instruments. The single straight strokes and mix of more intricate ones serve to articulate peaks, jagged rocks, soothing lakes. For one who has known Raffi's work for many years, the lines of this latest series have a new freedom; they are ethereal. Some people—Matisse, Josef Albers, Merce Cunningham, to name a few of the inventive and life-embracing creators of recent times—age with an increased sense of joy, an appreciation of life; Raffi is one of them, as is evident in the dexterous pencilwork with which the breathtakingly exquisite scene takes form. My God!

A new group of drawings goes up on the wall. Some of the lines undulate. Others soar into space. A distant shore takes form. We are looking from a boat; no, we are seeing it from a plane. Then comes the next grouping. There are fantastic mountains, some small rocks, boulders. Oh, what a wonderful moment of beatific calm follows the drama of the Rockies/Alps/Raffi's invented mountains of course when we reach some fertile fields; grass is pushing its way from the soil into lustrous life.

From jagged rocks we move on to total voids, to mist, to floating island. Each step of this flow of events is achieved with such balletic grace; Raffi does it all in a way possible only for someone utterly comfortable with himself, sure of his abilities, in love with the experience of seeing.

In the pure pleasure of looking at the work, I make my own voyages. In my case, it was childhood summers in Vermont, the hikes in the Green Mountains, the swimming in lakes; then, the bolder peaks of New Hampshire; skiing in the Rockies; canoeing along the Maine coast; floating in the Everglades; reaching summits in the Andes; observing a river bore in China. Each viewer of Raffi's "Journey of Journeys" will have his or her personal memories, will be brought back to loved places. The specifics do not matter; Raffi makes the experience universal, applicable to everyone, wherever the person has happened to go.

Then, while looking, we go from memories to an experience that is unprecedented. We are somewhere we have never been before. The way to look at these drawings is simply to be there, not write, not speak, just relish.

Great artists always use the white space to rare effect. We see this in Piero della Francesca as we do in Mondrian; it is an abiding principle at Lascaux, on Greek vase painting (one of the earliest forms, the white-ground lekythi), in Cézanne watercolors. Raffi uses white as one of the most effective elements of his art; it is articulate, soothing, splendid in itself and at the same time useful for suggesting concavity, convexity, and flatness.

He tells me in response to a question that he never erases, but that he was forced to destroy one drawing in the course of making these eighty-eight; he just could not get it to cohere. It strikes me as a good law of averages.

To write about Raffi's work is a bit like writing about a virtuoso soprano singing Bach. The experience of seeing/listening exceeds anything we can put into words. To say too much would be like describing the soprano's breathing, or trying to chart the way the horns and the voice weave in and out of each other.

One mainly describes a sequence of pleasures. Wait, here's Ireland! Raffi has never been there, but he has drawn forms that evoke, extraordinarily, the jagged coastline, the patchwork of fields, the sea when it is lake-like, the same sea when a tempest has it

revved up and choppy. Now Iceland, the north coast with its utterly clear life; now Costa Rica, the rain forest, the volcanoes. I had forgotten that I had been in those places. And Raffi has never been to them. But his work makes me remember them.

Oh, how nice it is to feel the changes in tempo and mood, to be guided through this visual experience where everything is consistent, clearly from the same hand, but where there is never any repetition, just treat after treat after treat.

And then I am brought to places that do not exist on the earth. That must be lunar! It doesn't matter, of course; it is Raffi Kaiser's invented territory.

And then, as my eye was allowed to feast on another sequence of drawings, I was brought, in my memory, to the Colorado River in Utah, to some locales south of the town of Moab, a region that can be reached only on the water, by river raft or kayak able to make it through the precipitous rapids. Here the walls of rock, as one floats past them, resemble, as much as anything more familiar, the rows of skyscrapers that frame Central Park in New York - peaks and dips, recesses and protrusions. To float past these on a raft is a magical experience.

There is a particular resonance to thinking of this trip as I look at Raffi's drawings in 2011, because I made it with him in 2001. There was a rumor that he was already over seventy years old at the time, because he needed a medical release to be allowed on the journey, but you would not possibly have known it if you saw the alacrity and ease with which he dealt with setting up camp, loading the raft each day, climbing cliffs when that was the afternoon activity, and paddling down the river.

The trip was run by the American organization Outward Bound, a non-profit entity that treats rugged, physically challenging outdoor adventure travel as a powerful means of education. The Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, of which I am director, had organized and funded this particular journey, and we were a group of nearly thirty people, many of them inner-city black and Hispanic teenagers from Brooklyn and the Bronx. My eighteen year old daughter Charlotte and her Norwegian boyfriend Magnus, some French art historians, and several middle-aged teachers were also in the group. Raffi was the oldest participant, and from the point of view of the guides probably the easiest; he never complained, did all chores with grace, and when there was nothing else to do just sat quietly on the river bank or on the raft looking, and looking, and looking, while emitting an aura of sheer pleasure.

He and I were "dunnage bag" mates. This meant that we packed our few belongings into the same large waterproof bag, with our sleeping bags at the bottom. Raffi was always more proficient at rolling his bag and folding his clothes than I was, and since it was necessary to have everything utterly compact, and then to fold the top of the bag many times to assure its being waterproof, I was grateful to have a partner who was so competent.

On the fourth day of the ten-day outing in which we were out of contact with the rest of the world, depended entirely on the food supplies packed into some steel boxes in a support raft, and portaged our own excrement, we faced some exceptionally powerful river rapids. One in particular is considered so difficult that, when going through it, the rafts had to be piloted by professionals.

Raffi and I were seated against the same rubber gunnel of our inflatable gray raft as we heard the rapid downstream from us; it roared with unimaginable force. Our pilot was shouting commands, since our getting through the rapid safely depended on utmost precision. We dug our paddles into the rushing river with all the muscle we had, timing the pulling strokes according to the pilot's demands.

There are few thrills in life as sublime as that of shooting through the tongue of a rapid, feeling yourself in just the right spot to avoid the points of rocks and going at breakneck speed with the flow. I could hardly wait for the moment as Raffi and I followed the pilot's demands.

The next thing I knew we were up in the air; the raft was completely sideways to the water; and Raffi and I were ejected, like cannon fodder, into the air. A moment later, I knew nothing except that I was in deep rushing water, wondering what would happen next. Then I surfaced and saw others on the raft extending their arms to me. They pulled me on to the raft while the pilot, deeply shaken, trembling, shouted, "I am just so sorry. I got it off by a fraction of a second. I missed the moment!"

"But where's Raffi?" I shouted.

Everyone looked around. I felt a horrid sensation of panic; had I brought my friend to the American wilderness only to have tragedy befall him? Of course the question on my mind was whether he had drowned.

The horror lasted for only a few seconds. We were now at the shore on the east side of the Colorado, in calm water, and I looked across at the west side only to see Raffi floating downstream, on his back, in his life vest, with a broad smile on his face. I have never seen anyone in such a perfect Zen state. He evinced a calm and grace one had to see to believe.

We paddled over to him, and pulled him on to the raft. "I am fine," he assured me. "I knew I would eventually come to the top and float. I wasn't worried."

Again the pilot offered profuse apologies. "Don't worry about it," Raffi assured him. "These things happen. I enjoyed the adventure. I have never been on a raft before, let alone thrown from one into nature's fury."

The next day, in brilliant sunlight, I asked Raffi where his sunglasses were. I had noticed that he wore a very good pair, but now had none.

"Oh, in the river. They went with the events of yesterday."

I commiserated. Raffi simply smiled, "Don't worry! They were only sunglasses. Look at those rocks," he said pointing to a region known as *The Doll's House*. "Isn't nature *amazing*?"

On September 16, we arrived in Lake Powell, named for a great American explorer. I immediately asked, as is my habit after an Outward Bound trip, the first person I saw if there was any news of the world. He was a driver of the bus come to pick us up, and he looked at me blankly, and asked me to wait.

Then someone from the Outward Bound staff asked us to assemble as a group and told us what had happened five days earlier in New York with the destruction of the World Trade Center. I immediately wanted to make sure that my Charlotte was not too upset, and to reassure the kids who were so far from home. I learned that on the 11th the

President of Outward Bound had phoned my wife, Katharine, to ask if they should try to reach us by helicopter with the news, and that once she was assured that no one on the trip was related to anyone who was killed, she urged them not to do this; she said she wanted Charlotte and Magnus and Raffi and me to preserve our innocence for as long as possible, rather to be burdened with horrific information which would only destroy the pleasure of our outing.

Raffi was immensely helpful in giving the kids a sense of calm and offering perspective. One of the people on the trip, a former marine, fell apart—so much so that I had to remind him we needed to think first of the young people—but Raffi provided perfect counterpoint, being reassuring to the most anxious of the young teenagers. The travel back east was horribly difficult because suddenly there was a need for photo identifications, which none of the teenagers had, and I needed to do a lot of persuading of airport police and other authorities; Raffi was the essence of equanimity throughout.

From the moment that we look at any of Raffi Kaiser's art or its details, we are filled with a feeling of calm, a supreme sense of intelligence and balance, the all-too-rare sensation that all is well in the world, that were evident in the man floating down the river with that beatific smile on his face. This is the quality of the large assemblages of drawings—placed adjacent to one another, the horizon lines and mountain peaks continuing invisibly through the void—like this recent masterpiece, but it is equally truly in the smallest portion of graceful crosshatching establishing foliage or perhaps the edge of a rock. The grace exists in each well-defined void, the unmarked white paper, richly textured, which indicates sky or the mirror-flat surface of a lake. We also feel that nature and art are inefably, resolutely rich.

The experience is not unrelated to what occurs when we stand before certain rock gardens in Kyoto, or a fine Olmec pot, or a Morandi still life. The artist's equipoise and balance, his allowance of mystery in combination with his quiet assuredness, penetrate us. Raffi unclipped the drawings that had reminded me of our rafting on the Colorado and put up the next sequence—not that there was any stop to flow from sequence to sequence, given that the work is meant to be seen, as it is at the Morat-Foundation, as a continuous entity. Now, like a whisper, there was a distant heaven. I felt as if I was looking at the Holy Land in the background of a Jan van Eyck panel.

Then I was back in Ireland, one particular area of jutting cliffs on the southwest coast. I was everywhere, nowhere, Vermont again, a dream.

The journey has moments of density, others lightness. "I did it without anything I visualize," Raffi told me. "I felt it. That's all. I was in another world: an unusual one. Not reality."

As he said that, I pictured him floating down the river. One sheet was nothing but the most glorious whiteness, with only a single dash on it.

My God, I forgot how much I loved the islands off the coast of Maine when I was twenty-three. Fishing in the Connecticut River where it separates Vermont and New Hampshire. Rock-climbing with Charlotte in Corsica, with my older daughter Lucy in the Shawangunks. By taking us on his imaginary journey, Raffi allows each of us to relive his own journeys, to celebrate real experiences while enjoying an unprecedented one.

How he can move us into space! The dunes at Cape Cod! A rolling sea! The Gambia River! A secret lake! The poetry of Wordsworth! The sense of the sacred in nature which we feel in Cézanne's late watercolors, in Balthus's mountain drawings, in the best Chinese scrolls of the 17th century. The pleasures are universal and timeless.

If you love life and nature, the diversity of the world, the beauty of art—if you respect the earth and admire discipline and skill and a sense of grace—Raffi Kaiser's work is for you.