

THE ANNUNCIATION LINO MANNOCCI

·CURWEN·
GALLERY

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LONELINESS AND BEING

«Bright virgin, steadfast in eternity
Star of this storm tossed sea,
Turn your thoughts to the terrifying squall
In which I find myself, alone and rudderless». (Petrarch) ⁽¹⁾

«I paint with my prick» avowed Renoir, thus affirming the stereotype of the virile male whose work is charged with sexual energy. Combative or sexual vocabulary permeates the discourse of painting. The blank canvas is a «virgin» surface which the artist «attacks». He also battles with his materials, struggling to mould recalcitrant matter into meaningful form.

Writing of the abstract expressionists, Harold Rosenberg created a different, but no less heroic, metaphor. The canvas became «an arena in which to act» and the artists pioneers journeying into uncharted regions of the psyche where they encountered the «moral tension» of «genuine struggle». «The action painting», asserted Rosenberg, «is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence». ⁽²⁾

Heroic mythology like this has caught the popular imagination, but one could replace «masculine» attributes with so-called feminine virtues, such as patience and receptivity, and paint an equally valid picture of what happens in the studio. Rather than assaulting the canvas, Lino Mannocci caresses it with myriad tiny brush strokes. The small scale and meticulous handling of his paintings attests to patient application rather than heroic demonstration. His approach is collaborative: he tempts the image to emerge, as it were, from hiding.

Max Ernst described his role in terms that remind one of midwifery and parenting: as a spectator who assists «at the birth of his work and watches the phases of its development» ⁽³⁾ Paul Klee likened himself to a mediator, channeling images from the collective unconscious, much as a tree conveys nutrients from the roots to the crown. Both employ passive metaphors, portraying themselves as receptors rather than generators of imagery.

In the past, when the church was an influential patron and most creative activity celebrated religious belief, it was common to speak of Divine inspiration. Artists had a specific role and purpose — many felt they had been singled out by God to act as his mouthpiece, much as in mediaeval manuscripts the Apostles are shown writing the gospels to Divine dictation.

But the chord that bound art to religion has long since been severed, so has the link between art and the state. In the twentieth century, artists in the West have been cast adrift as free agents expected to

(1) Petrarch «Hymn to the Virgin» in «Oxford Book of Italian Verse» ed by St. John Lucas, Oxford University Press, 1952 p. 109-144

(2) Harold Rosenberg «The Tradition of the New» New Arno Press, New York 1959.

(3) Max Ernst «On Frottage» in «Theories of Modern Art» ed by Herschel B. Chipp, University of California Press 1968 p. 429.

set their own agendas and create their own rules, subject to a market that is responsive rather than pro-active. Bereft of patrons, they have to be autonomous and self-motivated.

Yet we describe the talented child as «gifted», acknowledging that creative ability seems mysterious and God-given. And something which is bestowed can also be taken away. Artists may no longer be the servants of priests and princes, but they are still subject to the vagaries of a talent that never seems completely their own.

Like all artists, Mannocci has experienced the frustration of fallow times, when inspiration has disappeared and you can only work, and wait for its return. Especially as such times, the studio can seem a lonely and vulnerable place. Mannocci has portrayed the artist as a naked conductor occupying a landscape barren save for a lone tree, a fish or a fire — the talent which he nurtures and directs. In «Isole», a group of paintings which preceded the «Annunciation» series, the artist appears alone on a small island or raft, adrift on a featureless ocean.

His «Annunciations» also take place on rafts or beside water and the naked figure of the Virgin is accompanied by elements, such as a mound of earth, a tree, or a flower, that are migrants from the «Isole» series. The paintings are, then, part of a continuing preoccupation with the solitary role of the artist. In them fertility is equated with creativity and conception with inspiration.

The Virgin Mary is an archetype of the individual singled out to receive a divine gift, since she was the vessel chosen to nurture the Word made flesh. But why was she singled out? Theologians have argued that she was no ordinary mortal, since her own conception was immaculate. But the belief became official dogma only in 1854.⁽⁴⁾ Before that her personal attributes — purity, humility and piety — were emphasised. Renaissance painters often show her reading the Bible, preparing herself, as it were, for her mission: «finding a purpose. In that sense», says Mannocci, «she is an artist: that's what it's all about». Mary has no direct power, but people pray for her to intercede on their behalf. Mannocci invokes her presence as an intercessor and also as an alter ego, a model for those who hope to become mediators: bearers of the word.

The descent of spirit into matter gave meaning to human life: God showed his love. The moment at which this seed of hope was planted became a favourite subject for artists of the Renaissance, inspiring some of the loveliest paintings ever made. As a theme, the Annunciation therefore represents the apogee of the Western tradition and embodies the fruitful union of religion and art: the impregnation, as it were, of art with belief. In choosing this subject, Mannocci both celebrates the tradition and acknowledges the potency of art inspired by belief.

(4) See Marina Warner «Alone of All Her Sex» Picador 1985, p. 236.

But a question is also implied: what, in the absence of religious belief, gives life meaning? Self consciousness is one factor that distinguishes men from beasts; another is religion, a third culture. Gabriel appears as a pair of wings — as consciousness or spirit (as a symbol of the spirit, the bird dates back to Egyptian times); as a cloud — a symbol used by the artist to suggest sexual and artistic potency; and as light — the source of life and also of painting (culture).

These paintings are not, then, about the annunciation, per se, but the state of grace which it embodies: being filled with the spirit of God or with inspiration and creative energy. They are also a meditation on the importance of art. As religious belief dwindles, culture helps to fill the widening void.

«L'annunziata» and «Meritatio» contain a sunrise and sunset, as thought to suggest the span of a human life. The water between them has swelled as though in pregnancy, and the two suns appear like the nipples of enormous breasts — as if the whole landscape were a fecund female figure. Mary merges with the scene roughly in the position of the navel, as though stressing her centrality as a fertility goddess. The paintings seem to celebrate all forms of fertility — spiritual, cultural and physical — and to suggest, through the symmetry of the images, that art (light) frames and gives form to life. While he was working on this series, Mannocci's partner became pregnant, so his use of female fertility as a metaphor for artistic creativity has profound personal significance.

In «Archaic Annunciation» the figure of the virgin reclines, like a classical Venus, before a swelling ocean suffused with silvery light.

Like her pagan forebears, she has dominion over the realms of light and water, elements long since associated with the origins and maintenance of life. The image is like an embodiment of the sublime well-being of the oceanic experience: that sense of one-ness with the mother enjoyed by the infant and briefly recaptured in adulthood through meditation, religious ecstasy, sexual union, an overwhelming aesthetic experience, or an encounter with the grandeur of nature.

The painting is like a meditation on motherhood. By linking Mary with the pagan goddesses that preceded her, Mannocci has released her, by implication, from the bonds of virginity that distinguished her from them and other women. This Edenic image is drenched in celestial light: sexuality has been purged of the sin accorded it in Christian doctrine. The story of the Annunciation has dwindled into insignificance: Mary has become so tiny, she is only an observer, almost swallowed up by light.

Martin Heidegger sardonically observed that «we are too late for the gods, too early for Being». But «Archaic Annunciation» is a resounding affirmation of human potential. It portrays Being as a state of ecstasy, rather than of deprivation or despair.

Sarah Kent