

Lino Mannocci

B O N F I R E S A N D O T H E R S T O R I E S

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A CONVERSATION

We should talk less and draw more. Personally, I would like to renounce speech altogether and, like organic nature, communicate everything I have to say in sketches.

Goethe

Gillian Adam I have noticed that you have never written anything about your work. Why is that?

Lino Mannocci I have always been attracted by words: I like their ability to be extremely precise or when necessary to open up and become all-embracing in order to convey meaning. Yet, I find it difficult to talk about my work beyond the description of the process. As soon as I attempt to define my intent, words become heavy. They feel like straightjackets.

GA Is that the reason you started painting... because you felt you say more through images than you can with words?

LM There are many reasons why I started painting and this is one of them. I have always been equally attracted by the world of ideas

as by what you see around you. What I felt within was as important as what I saw without – and still is. Then a miracle took place when I discovered that what I was painting made a big difference to the way I felt. This in turn affected the paintings and so on – an endless process started in which I am still involved.

GA So is art a therapeutic activity?

LM It certainly was, and maybe still is, for me. But I didn't realise this for a long time. Other discoveries bonded me with this activity and made it more and more interesting, though also more difficult.

GA What kind of discoveries?

LM The most important one must be that image-making had been "therapeutic," so to speak, to lots of other people, from cave man to today. A primary activity to satisfy a primary need. With it there was my discovery of history of art with its richness of approaches and offered solutions. The idea of becoming part of this continuum, even as the smallest footnote grabbed me and is still with me.

GA Very salvational?

LM Yes, salvation through painting. Pathetic, isn't it?

GA To which tradition, if any, do you think you belong?

LM Ten years ago Paolo Baldacci in an introduction to one of my catalogues referred to an approach to painting, which he called

"Transrealism": According to him it started in Rome with Claude in 17th century. It was further developed by the German Romantic Symbolists and eventually returned to Italy via the metaphysical brothers: De Chirico and Savinio

GA Do you see yourself in this tradition?

LM The artists in question are all very important to me, but I'm not too sure about "Transrealism". I have never liked to be labelled a surrealist of any kind. I would prefer to call this tradition Meta-realism, whatever that might mean.

GA Baldacci also said that it was the meeting between the north and the south that characterised these artists. And you too have done this journey... but backwards. You have moved from the light, sun, warmth of the mild hills of Tuscany to the grey clouds and harshness of London.

LM Very true...which might account for the fact that my first long-lasting love in this country was William Blake. An artist propelled by inner vision.

GA Over the years you have moved from theme to theme, Islands, the Annunciation, the Stations of the Cross and more recently the sea. Why the sea?

LM I grew up by the sea. During the most difficult and vulnerable years of my childhood I always found safe refuge and comfort along the sandy beaches of Viareggio. It was a perfect hiding place from the

indiscreet and demanding eyes of the town. When I started working on the theme of the annunciation I felt the need to revisit and personalise the traditional iconography of this long-running theme. The sea then appeared to me as the ideal setting for such a miraculous event. The sea as the great mother.

GA Is that how you arrived at the mare-muro?

LM Yes, but after a long journey. Little by little the horizons of my annunciations started to bend. Eventually they became convex. This allowed me to paint different sources of light within the same space, a cold and a warm one.

GA Masculine and feminine?

LM Yes, the meeting of opposites often creates tension and life.

GA The annunciations were followed by landscapes of the memory.

LM These landscapes contained features from observed reality, like the long distance view that I enjoy from Montigiano but they were shaped primarily by emblematic details of a landscape that found its origins in memories from my adolescent years, like the all-embracing concave horizon. Like most Italians of that age alongside a love of girls, I started developing an irrational passion for our campanile.

GA Do you think this marked the beginning of nostalgia for Italy?

LM I spend enough time in Italy every year to keep any creeping

nostalgia at bay. But something did happen a few years ago when I started, in a very hesitant way, to paint landscapes and seascapes. Up to this point, I only painted interiors. I date to that period a re-appraisal of my relationship with Italy and my roots.

GA Is there a similar logical link between your last theme, the sea, and the current one, the smoke?

LM There were columns of smoke in my landscapes of the memory, often arising from the bottom right-hand corner of the pictures. The large columns of smoke had the dual purpose of creating a sense of depth and suggesting movement. Movement within the picture, but also away from the picture. A hint of my departure from Viareggio.

GA So you are the smoke in this picture?

LM To think of oneself as smoke it's even more depressing than being dust Probably the best way to suggest the link between sea and smoke is to quote this poem by Franco Marcoaldi, *Fu-mare*. He wrote it after a recent visit to my studio:

**The sea, the wall and now
The smoke, yet the working
of the texture shows that there is
no diminution in what was the sea
but only the letting go
(the wall surmounted, the sea
crossed) that serves to re-create.**

Il mare, il muro e infine
Il fumo. Eppure il lavoro
della materia mostra che non v'è
svanire in quel fù-mare
ma soltanto l'abbandono
(il muro scavalcato, il mare
attraversato) che serve a ri-creare.

It's impossible to translate successfully the poem, given that it centres on the pun of *fu-mare*, which in Italian means it used to be the sea and *fumare*, one word, which means smoking.

GA Marcoaldi has also written beautifully about your postcards. How do they relate to your paintings?

LM They didn't relate very much at first. I started painting over postcards because I became fascinated by the contrast between the ease with which we select and send a postcard and the emotional and aesthetical complexity that such a simple action entails.

GA Complex and also revealing.

LM That's right. When we select a postcard, that is an image, we often have someone in mind. We expect this image somehow to convey, define or reinforce our feelings towards that person, at that moment, from that place. It was a conceptual trigger that made me want to paint over and somehow privatise these postcards.

GA You showed your postcards for the first time in 1984.

LM Yes, and the text of that catalogue eloquently testifies to my interests at that time.

GA What's the difference now?

LM I am now more concerned with the final image rather than the process. But what has not changed is the magical process



Il balena, 1997, oil on postcard

of painting away all those anonymous people from busy photographic images from a town square or a seaside view and recreating a new scenario within which the very few survivors have been transformed into dramatic protagonists.

GA So in your postcards you arrive at your image by using paint to remove a context and recreate a new one. A process of subtraction? In painting you obtain your surfaces and final image by superimposing layers of paint, a process of addition. What about print-making which I know you attach special importance to.

LM My preferred method of print-making at present is a combination of drypoint and open-bite. In a way this combines the 'adding' that is drypoint and the 'taking away' the open-bite into one process.

It's a wonderfully physical procedure that gives me great pleasure. Because I like my prints to be small they are closer to the postcards, both in the way they are conceived and executed but primarily in the way they are meant to be looked at.

GA I am often asked about the little figures in your "stories": Why so little? Why red? Are they lonely?

LM They are not lonely. They are fully engaged in difficult tasks. At times bigger than themselves, like *Mary* or *Marsyas*. Yes, they are very red. A spot of red animates the surface of the painting. They are small because we are small and we know it. We first invented God to remind ourselves of our smallness. Now, having killed Him, we have chosen a new master that makes us feel even smaller in the universe: science. But I haven't given up the hope of painting larger figures.

GA Is that more difficult?

LM At present I find it emotionally and intellectually impossible. But, as I have said I don't despair, one day, to find a key into it.

GA Have you been more influenced by Italian or British art?

LM I can't say. I could not help noticing that critics in Italy often remarked on the englishness of my work, while by contrast British critics have felt necessary to mention my italianess. Probably they are both right. I am a cultural mongrel and as such I find it impossible to separate what I have taken from one culture and what from the other.



Viareggio's *Burning*, 1998, drypoint and open bite on zinc

GA Sure, but regardless of their nationality which artists have been inspirational to you?

LM The greatest is Titian. In the 17th century, apart from Claude, certainly Poussin. Goya is a giant. The avant-gardes at the beginning of the last century are pivotal. Their experience altered dramatically the way we now think and work. Most of the art produced today finds its *raison d'être* in Futurism and Dada. I find the artistic events of the first thirty years of the last century in Italy paradigmatic and a continuous source of inspiration and reflection. To the already mentioned artists of the Italian Novecento I would want to add Carrà and Morandi.



L'ora del bagno, 1999, drypoint and open bite on copper

GA And in Britain?

LM Blake and Turner amongst the old masters. Soon after my arrival in London in 1968, the intensity of Blake's world, so forcefully presented by his epigrammatic style, became my lifeline. Also for the force with which he had fought adversity. Later on, when I felt more secure I learnt a great deal by looking at the Turners.

Of the contemporary artists, when I came to London, Kitaj impressed me the most and I still admire his work. I am sorry he left London. I very much appreciate the work of Ken Kiff and Andrzej Jackowski.

GA Could you say why these artists?

LM Not easily, but probably a good answer to this question can be found in the catalogue by Tim Hyman, for an exhibition in 1980, called *Narrative Painting*. These three artists were included in the show and Hyman writes very clearly and intelligently about their work. I wish I had seen the show.

GA I remember you telling me once that your pictures acted as mirrors to the way you felt.

LM I am sure I did. Can I take it back? The semantic relationship between painting and mirrors is so long and complex and frankly abused, that in spite of its usefulness, it has become a cliché. Let me look in a different direction. Let's say that my paintings are the result of a struggle to organise formally an image that though it retains a reference to the visual world, matches my spirit. An impossible struggle given that there is continuous movement – by all parties. A struggle that can transform your life. Jacob and the angel comes to mind.

GA Are you now saying that your paintings are angels?

LM I'm saying that I prefer angels to mirrors. ☺

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