Clouds and Myths

Monotypes by Lino Mannocci

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The Fitzwilliam Museum
Cambridge

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> 'Think of a white cloud as being holy, you cannot love it; but think of a holy man within the cloud, love springs up in your thoughts, for to think of holiness distinct from man is impossible to the affections.'

Lino Mannocci animates these prints with figures that resonate with meaning but typically resist exact definition. Their identities, like their outlines, are often blurred or broken. The figures derive from a variety of visual sources (paintings, prints, sculptures, newspapers, soft-porn postcards) and bring the vestige of a narrative to which they no longer precisely belong (Greek mythology, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible). The titles also spring from a miscellany of sources – including Ovid, the Bible, Romantic poetry and twentieth-century novels – suggesting fragments of narrative or moments of poetic resonance without telling the whole story. The prints are not illustrations. Indeed a title from one narrative might be attached to a print with figures that come from another narrative. And the use of stencils and cut-outs allows figures also to be repeated and quoted in different contexts. Mannocci is like the conductor figure who appeared in a previous series of his works, keeping all these elements in play – formal, symbolic, spiritual, literary – conjuring a work where they can all have their effect, and where none of them precludes the others.

Everything is up in the air at the moment that the viewer looks at the print. Each viewer brings levels of experience from other contexts to bear: wondering, for instance, whether the shape of the clouds is significant, why the print is called Ganymede, whether Ganymede is within the clouds or if he is implied by that dark shape hovering between them; remembering, perhaps, that Ganymede, the Trojan youth taken up to Olympus by Zeus to be his cup-bearer, has appeared in paintings by Mannocci as though he is elevated to the sky between two clouds rather than by Zeus in the form of an eagle; or even realising that the figure in those paintings is actually modelled on a drawing by Michelangelo of the crucified Christ, so that the ascension could be as much Christian as pagan, Biblical as mythological, or perhaps neither; or all of these things. And that is the crux – everything in Mannocci's art is suggestive rather than definitive, and every move he makes opens up possibilities rather than narrowing our understanding to a focal point. The cloud is intended to enrich – formally, spiritually, atmospherically – rather than obscure the subject.

If clouds and myths offer the artist imagery and subjects rich in association and metaphor, the particular distinction of Mannocci's prints derives from his adaptation of the medium of monotype so that it not only expresses and reacts to his touch on the plate, but opens

up new technical and formal possibilities that contribute layers of meaning to the print. As in most really effective prints, technique is a corollary of content, and before pursuing clouds and myths further, we should look at what Mannocci brings to his medium.

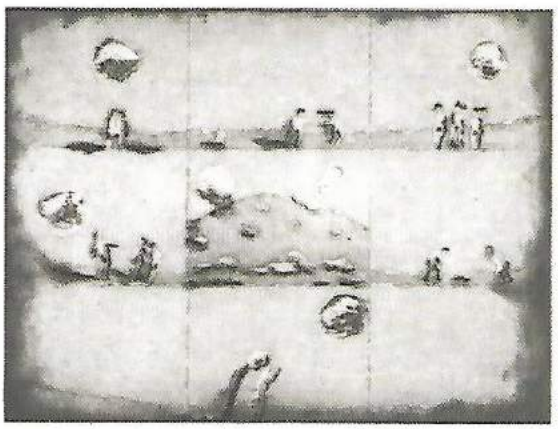
Mannocci and monotype

Monotype should be the least mysterious of printmaking processes, because at its simplest it involves the artist simply painting with ink directly onto a plate, and then running the plate through a press with a piece of paper laid on top of it. The image is thus transferred to the paper. Only one strong print can be made (hence the name *mono*type) because when the paper is lifted off, it takes most of the ink off the plate, leaving just a ghost image behind. By running the plate through the press with a second piece of paper, a second, much fainter impression can be produced, but after that the artist has to start again by creating a new image on the plate. This second impression (or 'cognate') lends itself to being worked on further after it is printed – the most notable examples of this were produced by Degas, who used pastel (and sometimes ink) to draw over monotypes, particularly the second, 'ghost' impressions.

Degas was the most famous exponent of monotype during its greatest period of use in France and Italy towards the end of the nineteenth century.[1] Its invention is generally credited to Giovanni Benedetto Castiglione in the seventeenth century, but it was little used for two centuries, and the name *monotype* was not coined until the 1880s. It has been used a lot in recent decades by contemporary artists, but often by painters with no previous experience of printmaking who were seeking an apparently easy and direct way

Edgar Degas, *Femme à sa toilette*, c.1880-3, monotype (The Fitzwilliam Museum)

of making prints. This has resulted in many monotypes of little subtlety: all too often they betray the medium's weakness, its potential for producing rather flat images, in which the ink is squashed on the paper and there is no variety of texture in its surface; it would have been better if they had been painted on paper in the first place. The best monotypes, on the other hand, have been produced by artists and printers with a deep understanding of intaglio printmaking, who could bring to monotypes the subtleties and graphic potential of inking an etching plate. This was the heritage of monotype in the nineteenth century. It arose from the 'mobile' or 'variable' etching (*eau-forte mobile*), whereby ink was left on the surface of an etched plate (rather than just being worked into the lines) and moved around to create areas that would print as light or dark tone. These techniques were developed by master printers and artists who printed their own prints, and it was only one step from this for them to do away with the etched lines completely.



Protagonisti, 2000, etching
(The Fitzwilliam Museum)

Lino Mannocci is ideally placed to make monotypes because of his experience as an etcher and printer, and his inclination as a painter.[2] After finishing as a postgraduate in printmaking at the Slade School of Art in London in the 1970s he ran a commercial print workshop from his home (then in Clapham) for several years, printing editions for other artists. When he returned to making his own etchings in the 1990s he not only brought this experience to bear, but also that of scrutinising thousands of Old Master prints in the years that he had spent researching and writing the catalogue raisonné of the etchings of Claude Lorrain that was published in 1988.[3] He was a connoisseur of the surface of prints, with an intimate appreciation of how the slightest mark on the copper might affect the result, how accidental scratches would contribute, and how the manipulation of ink on the surface could illuminate each impression differently. Adapting the etching process to

his purpose, he made prints where the surface of the plate was as important as any etched or scratched lines. He painted acid directly onto the plate ('open-bite') so that the image is suggested by mottled and textured surface as much as by definite line. The manipulation of etched mottling and accidental marks on the plate mirrored the looser painting style, with its incorporation of open canvas weave, which he had developed during his move away from the precise delineation of objects in his works of the previous decade.

If manipulation of surface ink is important in an etching, it is everything in a monotype, and when he began making this group of monotypes in 2005, Mannocci brought the feeling for surface that was so important in his etchings and developed it further. There are two basic ways to make a monotype: one is to work on a clean plate ('light-field') and paint on the individual elements of the design (for example, *Nobody else was there*); the other is to cover the plate, or most of the plate, with ink ('dark-field') and then wipe away ink to create highlights (for example, *I'm the very slave of circumstances*). Mannocci often uses the latter, but then adds additional elements to the plate.

And the nursling of the sky

Looking at *And the nursling of the sky*, a relatively simple print technically, we see Mannocci's mastery in the subtle distinction of inks. A thick undiluted ink has been brushed onto the copper plate through a stencil from which the shape of the figure has been cut; this ink withstands the pressure of the press and deposits densely on the paper, while a slightly more dilute ink distinguishes the vaporous forms in the sky. This richness and variety avoids the blandness of many monotypes, and gives a tactile strength that one would normally associate with intaglio printing (etching, engraving, drypoint), where the ink stands proud of the surface. And in fact other elements of the print are informed by intaglio printmaking: the curved lines across the bottom are created by ink trapped in scratches that Mannocci made in the plate (using sandpaper) before he used the plate for this group of prints. You can see the same scratches in other monotypes made using the same plate, sometimes at the bottom (for example, *There were clouds in the sky*) and sometimes (when he used the plate the other way up) at the top (for example, *May it be to me as you have said*). They are a 'given' each time he starts working on this plate, but

they are an element that he has chosen and can control so effectively because of his understanding of the effect of similar lines accidentally present on the surface of etching plates. (In other prints, like *Ganymede*, Mannocci makes use of stains already on the zinc in the depiction of clouds.)

Another effect that is more normally seen as an 'accidental' element in intaglio printing is the dark framing round the image: this is usually a result of not bothering to wipe clean the plate edges, but even in some of his 'light-field' monotypes (for example, *People say that life is the thing...*), Mannocci consciously inks the edge of the plate, giving the image a physical presence emphasised by the plate-mark (the indented line round the edge of the image where the plate has embossed the paper under the pressure of the press). In other 'light-field' prints, Mannocci has left the surface and edges of the plate very clean, as in *Nobody else was there*. A comparison with a more tonal print like *And the nursling of the sky* shows that Mannocci is by no means a slave of circumstance: all the marks and subtle tone in the sky are within his command. The ink is modulated by wiping with a tissue – a non-absorbent tissue to move ink around the plate, or an absorbent tissue to remove ink. The edge of the silhouette is blurred, actually with a tissue, but in the image it seems to be blurred by the gleaming backlight of the sky. It is not only the uplifting gesture of the figure – Mannocci calls him his 'happy man' – but the contrast of inking and light that gives the image its buoyancy. The facture of the print is matched to its imagery.

Susanna the daughter of Hilkiah

This is more obviously apparent in *Susanna the daughter of Hilkiah*, which is actually the second impression taken from the plate (the cognate first impression is illustrated in Amherst 2009[4]). Before printing it, Mannocci took a brush and added on the plate with liquid ink the seven black marks (the relatively dry ink already on the plate remained undisturbed by this more liquid ink). The black marks not only contrast with the grey but give it a particular vibrancy. Although there is great control, the result is not completely calculated but rather a process of taking intuitive advantage of serendipitous effects. There

was no way of knowing that this second impression would produce this particular grey, nor that the disc at the top, created in the first place by dropping turpentine on the plate to disperse the ink, would print in this second impression like an eerily luminous moon. Again the facture of the print is matched to its subject. Because of the two levels of inking, the dense black marks seem to come from another world, heightening the sense of alien threat to the figure: we could see them as suggesting the crude assault of the Elders on Susanna's innocence.

If we look at another 'Susanna' print, *Then Susanna shrieked*, we find Mannocci using a more complex process to create a broader range of expressive marks for an image with a different emotional tone. The contrast partly derives from the source that Mannocci has used for the figure: an engraving by Agostino Carracci in which Susanna, limbs akimbo, gestures in alarm as she tries to escape from the lecherous Elders on emerging from her bath; this is in marked contrast to the more muted supplication of the figure in Mannocci's *Susanna the daughter of Hilkiah*, which derives from a painting by Artemisia Gentileschi (although we should bear in mind that Mannocci uses both these figures differently in other prints, for example, *Nobody else was there* and *The Lord heard her prayer*).

Then Susanna shrieked

The creation of *Then Susanna shrieked* gives an insight into the subtlety of Mannocci's approach. He first spread relatively dry ink over the plate, and wiped it with tissues to create the background tonality. He then brushed on the hovering dark shapes using a much more liquid ink. To create the texture on the liquid marks he ran the plate through the press with a piece of previously-crumpled tissue, which, when lifted from the plate, removed some of the liquid ink but left the drier ink of the background untouched. We see similar coagulated texture in all the prints where Mannocci has used crumpled tissue in this way (for example, *May it be to me as you have said*). To create the blobs of light at the top and bottom, he dropped turpentine onto the plate to disperse the ink. He finally created the figure of Susanna by placing her shape, cut out of tissue, on the surface of the plate before printing.

When the image was then printed on paper the tissue cut-out of the figure stopped the ink getting to the paper, except that a slight porosity results in a speckling of ink over the white silhouette (another serendipitous effect that Mannocci has embraced). He could of course have chosen to blur the stark outline, as in other prints, but here the contrast against the dark background – with its lurking shapes – helps convey the energetic alarm of the figure.

An even starker outline is created when a thicker paper, rather than tissue, is used for the cut-out, as in *Il primo amore di Apollo fu Dafne*. The resultant embossing gives an almost sculptural effect to the figures, which echoes their source in a marble statue – the famous Apollo and Daphne by Bernini. In other instances, Mannocci has even inked the cut-out so that it embosses and prints at the same time, and we see this in *Cosí davanti al lupo l'agnella*, where the figures of Apollo and Daphne appear black instead of white.

Solo una banda raccoglie i suoi capelli scomposti

In his exploration of the ways of incorporating figures, so that they can be quoted differently in different contexts, Mannocci has introduced the element of collage, in which the cut-out is actually stuck to the print surface. This is ultimately an extension of another technique familiar from nineteenth-century (and later) intaglio printing – the idea of *chine collé*, in which a sheet of tissue is adhered over the printing paper to provide a finer surface for printing. Mannocci has simply done the same thing with some of his cut-outs. So if we look at a third version of Apollo and Daphne – *Solo una banda raccoglie i suoi capelli scomposti* – we find the figures in the form of coloured tissue stuck to the surface of the paper before printing. Despite the fact that they are an added piece of paper, they seem more incorporated into the print surface because some of the ink on the plate has gone over the figures. The cut-out of Bernini's figures fractured at some point, and Mannocci took advantage of this to give the semblance of ancient rather than Baroque sculpture, setting up another resonance with the Greek myth quoted in the title, here and in *Cosí davanti al lupo l'agnella*. In both these prints he also added brushstrokes of oil paint to the surface of the printed image; the oily ink creates a good base for oil paint, and the custom of adding afterwards to monotypes goes back, as mentioned before, to Degas.

May it be to me as you have said

More overtly radical, perhaps, is Mannocci's introduction of collage using paper or tissue that has already been printed with an image. This is true of the figure apparently representing the Virgin in two prints from the sequence related to the Annunciation: *I am the Lord's servant* and *May it be to me as you have said.* Both were created by cutting out an inkjet print of a photograph of a painting by Domenico Veneziano. Both were printed on the same pink tissue, but the former is printed on the side that has gold flakes embedded in it, with echoes of gold-ground religious paintings and the aura of a celestial shower bringing God's message and seed. Elsewhere we find inkjet images of nineteenth-century pornographic postcards (*Concedimi verginità perpetua, Un Essere a parte...* and *...che non è bruto, nè uomo, nè tantomeno Dio*), and a newspaper photograph of Rodin's sculpture studio incorporated into *People say that life is the thing...* and reproduced as inkjet in *...but I prefer painting.*

I am the Lord's servant

In *I am the Lord's Servant* the figure is attached to the paper so that it passes outside the platemark, a possibility using *chine collé*, or collaged figures, which is outside the normal ambit of monotypes. In other prints Mannocci has added fragments of coloured paper within and outside the platemark (*The Lord heard her prayer*, and *...partì dalla Cornovaglia per recarsi a Roma*). In *Conversation*, the paper elements were added to the paper surface

after printing, two of them serving to blindfold the heads (the image is related to a painting of two similar heads, closer together and more intimate than these, based on the artist's own head). In *Un signore che possedeva un cavallo di rara eleganza* a cut-out of the rider has been used as a mask within the print and then again as a printing element in the margin, transferring a mirror image of the ink that it has picked up from the plate.

The quotation and deployment of these figures outside the normal frame of technical reference brings us back to the questions about their meaning and narrative context raised at the start of this essay.

'Those clouds had made him wonder'

It is part of the point of these prints that you can't distil their meaning in words – parallel interpretations can co-exist in the experience of looking at each print and absorbing its references. The quotations from art and literature encourage ambivalence, and while there is clearly no point in trying to pursue their source for a simple definition (the artist prefers not to divulge the source of his titles so as to avoid attaching to the work the cultural baggage and unwanted associations that a famous author's name might bring), a couple of examples can serve to show how Mannocci keeps alternative possibilities alive.

The sequence of prints that Mannocci has made in the last year inspired by figures from Domenico Veneziano's two predella panels in the Fitzwilliam Museum evidently deals with the story of the Annunciation, the subject of one of those panels. The prints each show recognisable elements of the traditional iconography of the Annunciation, and they are titled with familiar quotations from the Gospels. But only one of the prints from the group exhibited here actually takes the figures of the angel and the Virgin from the Annunciation panel (*She who was said to be barren*). The angel appears elsewhere, but the figure used for the Virgin in most of the prints actually has its source in the figure of the grieving mother from the other panel in the Fitzwilliam, showing the miracle of St Zenobius. This is the inkjet figure incorporated into the prints *I am the Lord's servant* and *May it be to me as you have said*. The ostensible reason for choosing this figure rather than the Virgin might be simply that she has a more expressive profile that will work better as one of Mannocci's silhouettes. But there is a more powerful and compelling reason. Implicit in the story of Christ's conception is his destiny to suffer and die on the cross. Christian iconography twins the two events, and images of the Virgin and Child often contain a reference to his crucifixion. The young Virgin bears this burden, and her own destiny as a grieving mother at the foot of the cross informs the Annunciation. By using the desperately grieving mother from the Zenobius panel, Mannocci brings all these elements into play. The figure is not only powerful formally and expressively, but she is charged with huge significance.

Then the angel left her

In other prints she appears on her own, painted on the plate rather than collaged. In *The power of the Most High will overshadow you* she kneels beneath a cloud. In other Annunciation prints the cloud perhaps represents the Holy Spirit, or symbolises the giving of life, but here it seems also to embody the idea of the 'power' overshadowing her. In the print *Then the angel left her*, the cloud is replaced by smoke, an element familiar from previous works by Mannocci connected with a sense of leaving, but here powerfully connected with the idea of death. Even a viewer unaware of the Biblical associations will glean much of its emotional meaning from the expressivity of the figure.

Concedimi verginità perpetua

In a very different print, *Concedimi verginità perpetua*, we see other sorts of shifts and ambiguities of identity. The source of the figure is a nineteenth-century soft-porn postcard, recreated on the print in an inkjet cut-out; the pose of the figure suggests a Venus Pudica – the type of 'modest' Venus who uses her arms to try to cover up her nakedness, deriving from antique statues like the Capitoline Venus; the vulnerable naked figure seems to be threatened by the impending clouds in a way that aligns it with the sequence of Susanna monotypes; the title (meaning 'let me live always a virgin') is taken from an Italian version of Ovid's retelling

of the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Mannocci himself thinks of this print as dealing with the Susanna story, but it inherits other associations that are to varying degrees still in play, particularly the plight of Daphne as she tries to escape Apollo. Another Venus Pudica figure from a similar source appears in the print entitled *... che non è bruto, nè uomo, nè tantomeno Dio* together with a figure derived from the cut-out used for the Elders in other Susanna prints; but a second version of the same image (illustrated in Amherst 2009), is entitled *May it be to me as you have said*, which brings us back to the Annunciation story.

... che non è bruto, nè uomo, nè tantomeno Dio

The association of the Venus Pudica with the Virgin brings another possible layer of meaning, because the Venus Pudica type has been used by numerous artists as a model for the figure of Eve in scenes of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Paradise. A drawing by Michelangelo after Massaccio's fresco of the Expulsion has recently been used a source for the Virgin in Mannocci's paintings of the Annunciation (and these include a work that pairs it with the angel figure from the Fitzwilliam's Veneziano panel: *Annuncio*, 2009, illustrated in Amherst 2009). The pertinence of using an 'Eve' figure to represent the Virgin is (again) the linking of the two in Christian teaching and iconography, in which the Virgin is interpreted as 'redeeming' Eve's original sin. This is not to say that any of these prints should be read as religious images, because although Mannocci takes figures, emotions, words and ideas from religious texts, their use is mythic rather than Christian. Indeed the artist has said that he sees the Annunciation, with its mystery of the incarnation – spirit becoming flesh – as an irresistible metaphor for the creative act of the artist, 'the possibility of embedding matter with aesthetic or spiritual value': another possible layer of allegory.[5]

This compendium of layers of possible meaning and interpretation might seem burdensome or complex, but that is not the effect of the prints. One of the great binding qualities of Mannocci's work is his lightness of touch, and this is as true of his incorporation of symbol as it is with the marks he makes on a canvas or plate. Ambiguity of identity and narrative is not meant to be mysterious in the sense of confusing the

viewer, but it does bring mystery in the sense of touching on matters of spiritual import. The feeling of immanence or transcendence can be conveyed as much by smudging the form of a cloud on a plate, or wiping away the cloud so that the sky shines, as by building layers of allegory. Indeed, Mannocci embraces ways of evoking direct emotional responses that are familiar from the idea of the Sublime in Romantic art, where 'what is wonderful goes always together with a sense of dismay, and prevails over what is only convincing or delightful' (quoting Longinus, an author important to the artist).[6] Mannocci's development of imagery that incorporates poetry, religion, and myth, accords with Longinus's preference for an elevated language that transports rather than persuades or intimidates, and which is combined with an essence of simplicity.

Mannocci's lightness of touch is allied to a sense of play, keeping everything possible in the air, playing with ideas as much as forms. What comes over in conversation with him as a wariness of the explicit comes over in the work as a joy in the inexplicit. Or to put it another way, in words that Mannocci uses when explaining the enigma of his titles, he likes to 'have his cake and eat it': he can borrow poetry without the poet, phrases without their context, characters without their identity, narrative without its back-story, Christ without Christianity. This play extends to his deployment of parts of the image outside its normally perceived frame, the platemark, which is similar to the effect in his paintings where figures exist outside a painted border, communing yet not communing with the figures within. There is a sense in which this questioning of the integrity of the normal constraints of an image puts the work itself in quotation marks, and this is reinforced in the monotypes by the use of collage and printed images from other contexts.[7] We can be transported by the image while still being aware of its constituent elements (a literary critic might call these meta-monotypes!). The representation is the image, but it is also about the image. This is an artist aware that he is operating in an artistic environment that has gone way beyond the disconcerting cityscapes of De Chirico that influenced his early work, beyond the mind-bending landscapes of Surrealism, to a post-modern world where everything is imaginable but everything is questionable. Yet Mannocci is temperamentally incapable of the cool irony or cynicism that distances much contemporary art from the viewer. The pleasure of his approach – and it is surely why the quote from William Blake at the head of this essay is one of his favourites – is that his work is so affective.

Notes to the Essay

This essay has its basis in conversations between the author and the artist in Cambridge, London and Italy over the last four years, particularly in Montigiano on 18 and 19 August 2009. It also draws on Mannocci's comments in interviews with Elizabeth E. Barker on the occasion of the exhibition *Lino Mannocci Sea Sky Smoke*, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, 28 August 2009 to 3 January 2010 and at the New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting & Sculpture, 28 January to 13 March 2010 (www.amherst.edu/museums/mead/programs/exhibitions/mannocci/videointerview).

The quote at the beginning is from William Blake's annotations to Emanuel Swedenborg's *Wisdom of Angels concerning Divine Love and Divine Wisdom*, *c.*1789, see Geoffrey Keynes (ed.), *Blake Complete Writings*, Oxford, 1984, p.90. The quote at the head of the third section, 'those clouds had made him wonder', is from Giorgio Manganelli, *Centuria*, 1995 (translated from the Italian by Henry Martin, New York, 2005).

1. See Carla Esposito Hayter, *The Monotype. The History of a Pictorial Art*, Milan, 2007, especially pp. 71-113.

2. For Mannocci's etchings see Cohen 2002.

3. Mannocci 1988. Claude's etchings, with their small figures – sometimes from mythical or biblical narrative – have other connections with Mannocci's own work, and helped shape his preference for prints that have an intimate relationship with the viewer – to be read at close-quarters and, ideally, held in the hand.

4. The exhibition catalogue *Lino Mannocci – Sea Sky Smoke*, Mead Art Museum, Amherst College, 2009; abbreviated here as Amherst 2009.

5. See Mannocci 2010.

6. From the aesthetic treatise, *On the Sublime*, by Cassius Longinus (third century AD).

7. The same might be said of Mannocci's 'postcard works', in which he takes commercial picture-postcards and paints on top of them (the addition of photographic source material to the surface of a hand-made print enjoys a sort of inverse relationship with these).