

Another word on Tony Clark

Tony Clark, Galerie Seippel, Cologne, April/July 2004

Over two decades, painter Tony Clark's use of classical motifs, landscape, sculptural reliefs, cartoon-like images, myrioramas, Kufic script, abstractions, thought forms, town plans etc. has been to synthesize historically separate visual languages. Narcotic color, and impure, mixed-up transferences characterize the output.

The work in this exhibition is an assemblage of genres: landscapes, portraits, images of birds and flowers, geometric compositions. All are part of a larger project – the assimilation of various historical styles, reconciled in their modes of signification as contemporary forms. The idea of a deranged semblance is at the essence of the images. Many of the works show vegetal nature; foliage, flowers, fruit, in its category of the new and ever identical.

Referencing classicism and modernism, non-western history, and the untutored, this project has a radicality. Not content to revert to type, Clark's interest in Islamic script or Poussin and Claude-like landscapes is mixed with other interests, in, say, fascist triumphalism. Fascist triumphalism was a revival of typical features of Roman Imperial architecture. Upscale dimensions in arches, columns, pillars, domes and the use of 'noble' materials like marble were favored. The satellite city built in the outer suburbs of Rome, EUR, is an example of this kind of architecture, and Clark once painted one of the fascist-era administrative buildings there, The Palace of Italian Civilization, which references the Colosseum. Mussolini cleared away a lot of 'clutter'(read humble dwellings) from around Rome's ancient monuments such as Hadrian's Pantheon, during this era. Clark has often used the sculptural relief form, reducing landscape to starkly shaded 3-tone diagram/cartoons. In this Cologne show, a flower, as symbol of the plant world, is rendered in cyanide blue against a sky of sienna brown, within an economy of means where flourishes of paint suggest things. Clark looks at still-life subject matter as a sculptural found object, using minimal biomorphic forms and harsh contrast to show flora and fauna in terms of plastic design.

Living in Sicily for about eight years, its outside-of-time quality reminds him of living in Rome as a child. He also has lived part of the time in London since the mid-'90s, being something of a nomad, having shows in Europe etc, but has continued exhibiting in Sydney and in Melbourne, where Heide Museum of Modern Art had a survey exhibition of his works in the late '90s. Most of these new works were made in Sicily, and it could be said that a ghostly ancient Greek philosopher oversaw these paintings, particularly Clark's self-portrait. In this exhibition the human (figure) appears for the first time, presented as portraiture, recognizably in Clark's style. (Prior to the appearance of these portraits, some bird portraits were done...) Often in past exhibits reconfigured or

abstracted natural forms predominated, along with architectural or design motifs, but recently a focus on some other traditional genres, notably a profusion of floral designs, show Clark as colorist.

The artist has recently returned to the smaller scale and various restricted palettes of many years duration, this time using pale, undercoat pinks, sienna, blue (and black marker pen). In an accord of searing light and shade, starkly lit blue trees with black shadows are foregrounded; behind them, pale pink clouds on sienna make up a pure and disturbing chromatic. Sitting strangely amongst the other works is a simplified 3D portrait of King Charles I, in soft pinks. In this collision of styles and genres, an experiment mixing, for example, emblems of earliest modernity with 17th century fashions, it becomes a wayward essay in design.

Clark's position underplays the institutional significance of the 'major painting' in preference for a more ad hoc, do-it-yourself attitude. With the most recent work – the mysterious *Geometric with Bird's Head* raises an eyebrow. To one viewer, this could be seen to be referring to the denatured lives of city dwellers, as the English sparrow slowly disappears, as landscape becomes a thing contested. If a bird's song is its existential refrain, denoting territory, then the absence of song could manifest as a bird bisected by geometric, angular planes, symbolizing dystopian aspects of technology. Due to modernism's underwriting of so-called purity, anything living a non-human life has much to fear from the old 'red, yellow and blue.' Within a larger contemporary/historical axis, these works are announced by an off-key and exuberant color retinue.

An afterword by Mia van der Rohe

Even a superficial genealogy of Tony Clark's paintings reveals an inevitable awareness of 'outsideness' – a consciousness inherited from Lautreamont that derives an aesthetic from anarchic visual equations. His 'preliminary' designs, exhibited as ends in themselves, explore the emotional tenor of the personal made public. Clark has taken Venturi's ideas further than most, producing, for instance, murals both with Flintstone forms and an effusive classical Arcadia. From Arabia to China his influences extend the modernist canon via the discarded occult. Significantly, in an essay he has commented on the incisive componentry of the Gothic, in his late friend Howard Arkley's paintings – a praise of the liberty of improvisation over the dogma of the rigorously planned and enforced.

Clark's displacements and sources espouse a politics difficult to rationalize, but certainly availed to the ludic (i.e. is he a landscape artist with his *Myrioramas*?, a Pop artist with his day-glo?, a muralist/decorator with his wall paintings?, a court painter with his portraits?, a calligrapher with his Arabic? etc). His leveling of hierarchies (art, social, cultural) proceeds



Tony Clark, *Charles I*, 2004. Image courtesy of Galerie Seippel.

to an expansive underground, where, with little contradiction, *Architectural Digest* and Wedgwood designs also converge. As he has commented, "...I don't know the evens but I've always been intrigued by all the odds and the footnotes to history, the tangential connections and so on... [Painting] was a way of pursuing art historical interests without having to worry too much about it... You couldn't write a thesis on 'What if Mantegna had been an 18th century interior decorator?' but you could certainly produce a whole range of work on that subject in painting."¹ The writer/musician Nick Cave found him to be an influential teacher, aiding his ideas of pressing paradox upon the dialogue of pop music to produce a more delirious, over-inscribed type of stage/voice performance. In Clark's shadow world

what ultimately emerges visually is a scrambled algorithm of the seen. Liberty is a by-product.

Notes

1. Interview with Tony Clark by Leo Edelstein, *Journal of Contemporary Art* (jca-online.com), ed. Klaus Ottmann, New York, 1995

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Judith Elliston is an artist and associate editor at *Pataphysics* magazine. Mia van de Rohe is currently co-editing *The Correspondence of Randal White* (Jan 2005, pataphysicsmagazine.com).