



Fabrizio Gerbino: Remembering Forms and Essences

The curator of the 1999-2000 Carnegie International, Madeleine Grynsztejn, identified, in her exhibition, a characteristic of contemporary art that seems to me to be as relevant today as at the turn of our century. She spoke then of the 'slippage between reality and fiction that is deliberately fostered in artworks'. It may be that when we look at (or experience) a work of art we are no longer completely 'grounded' in what we know. We are cut adrift in the moment.

Fabrizio Gerbino lives somewhere in the suburbs of Pittsburgh, a far cry from his native Italy, and thus experiences another form of slippage, common to (if differently sensed by) both exile and immigrant alike. As an artist his formative experiences are not local but they underpin his current practice. In this exhibition, quite unusually for a contemporary artist, you will find a small 'shrine', steeped in the memory of historic painting of his Tuscan homeland. It is all his own painstaking work, flawlessly executed; the gilded frame personally bespoke of a Florentine craftsman; all spotlighted and set apart, to serve as a kind of presiding genius. A wise Pittsburgh artist, Robert Lepper, once observed that such priceless gifts 'can become formidable constraints for ease of statement'.

Much of Gerbino's work is concerned with the effects of memory and its separation from the present. Some of the newest painting in this show revisits certain experiences in the past that have been documented with his camera. (Walter Benjamin memorably noted that 'the camera gave the moment a posthumous shock'.) The façade of a cathedral is damaged by fire; the wooden doors are badly burned by the flames: an unusual if not exceptional tragedy. The recorded aftermath is poignant, sad and not a little beautiful. The images are enlarged, abstracted and edited; they are ultimately probed for some particular thing that Gerbino finds essential. Ask him and he will slip into the language of formal philosophy, theology and even alchemy (these all have a common vocabulary). Things are difficult, recondite.

A deserted menagerie (another poignant setting), bereft even of its resident beasts, is subjected to Gerbino's searching eye. Here he finds only abstract forms and balances the limited tones of his palette (grays, sulphurous yellows, blacks and white...alchemy again) with fastidious precision.

The rendering of both of these subjects calls to mind the work of the contemporary Belgian artist, Luc Tuymans, and further back in time to the late, photograph-based paintings of the Englishman Walter Sickert. All are distanced, exclusionary, editorial and evoke a sense of the gravity of things. But neither Tuymans nor Sickert seems so personally engaged with his materia as is Gerbino.

The other works in this exhibition were made just a little earlier in time and explore slightly different materials and concepts. They are all profoundly enigmatic. The palette remains much the same and we encounter the same obsessive concern with formal matters. It gives us the opportunity to examine once again his controlled handling of paint, which has become almost a signature style. It stops short of pure bravura technique but is always knowing and balanced. There are no, absolutely no, flat passages beloved of strict abstractionists, but organic and nuanced surfaces. Sometimes he uses oil paint, rather liquidly and sometimes acrylics. Sometimes, and rarely, he uses the two in close juxtaposition, which seems to me to indicate that he wants his viewers almost to stick their noses to within centimetres of the canvas.

Finally, there is a work of sculpture on show here, the elements of which were made many years ago in Italy and which he reconfigures from time to time in differing site-based installations. These elements are minimalist and structural, meticulously fashioned (polished sheet lead, I think, over a wooden form), each repetition identical with each other. The effect is fugal, cool and elegant.

Speaking to him in his studio a few weeks ago, I asked him about the opening of this show, about its staging and whether music (yes, ubiquitous music!) was planned. No music, he asserted. But this show should have some sound accompaniment if only the steady beating of the human heart or the deliberate pacing of human breath.

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