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ALLEGORY IN POST MODERN PAINTING

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## INTRODUCTION

In an essay on Post Modernism Craig Owens says the following "To impute an allegorical motive to contemporary art is to venture into proscribed territory for allegory has been condemned for nearly two centuries as aesthetic aberration, the antithesis of art". [1] This was written in 1980 - a time of change in the development of artistic pursuit. A transition of sorts was being made as Post Modernism was emerging from the dying embers of modernism. Critics and artists everywhere were trying to come to terms with these changes, in particular the return to favour of painting on canvas. Since 1980 this particular development has flourished. The return to favour of painting and in particular a type of representational painting, has provided a framework for the incorporation of allegory into the work.

But some see this development as reactionary, a reaction by European artists to American dominance. American art became very dominant on the international circuit after the second world war. Europe was in ruins materially as well as spiritually, unable and unwilling to an extent, to revive itself. America came to the rescue in material terms and perhaps also on a cultural level. Europe had lost many of its fine artists fleeing from oppression, to America, and these had now set up in the "New World" and had a profound influence on the up till then somewhat provincial outlook of American artists.

From the 1950's onwards, then American painting flourished with the Abstract Expressionist movement initially leading to others like Hard Edg'd Abstraction to Minimalism. A general trend was evident in this development in that abstraction, and a concentration on formal means, came to the forefront. In this artists were in no small measure indebted to the writings of Clement Greenberg.



Greenberg became a spokesperson for the abstractionists. Their work was generally devoid of content other than its formal content. Many of the works were self-referential in that they commented on and cast a critical gaze on their own formal properties. This led partly from Greenberg's formalist thinking and writings. This period of High Modernism was derived from his notion of linear progression, of development superseding development, movement following movement. The writings of Greenberg and others in combination with the works formed a unified almost World View of art. This was to lead to the dead end of minimalism in which the applying of paint to canvas for example, became in itself an autonomous act. A work did not need to seek sustenance from, or reference to anything other than itself.

It was thus with much amazement and shock that America reacted to the works of German's Kiefer, Immendorff and Baselitz and the Italian's Chia, Cucci and Paladino in the late 1970's and early 1980's. The return to a figurative type of painting as opposed to abstract, on canvas was seen as a degenerate, barbaric act. Greenberg had written widely about an internationalism in art, but here were painters whose work contained nuances of their own nationalistic angst and culture. In the work of the German's Kiefer and Immendorff there was an attempt at coming to terms with the terrible trauma which the second world war had wrought on the German people and on those left to pick up the pieces after the fighting had stopped. No one was quite prepared for this. Critics began to speak of art as having moved beyond the confines of modernism and in particular modernism as espoused by Greenberg i.e. originality of source, constant development and formal investigation. The term Post-modern thus came to be used to describe this new imagery.

The influence of the Germans and Italians soon began to be felt throughout all of Europe and then in America itself. It became not uncommon for painting to dominate all the major international art exhibitions, a strange reversal from the former dominance of conceptualism, performance and video throughout the seventies. The new painting concerned itself with content, either cultural or political. Much of the new painting was dubbed Neo-Expressionist and later other labels like New Figuration, New Image and Bad Painting were also used to describe the works.

If anything this new wave of painting showed up that something was lacking within the general strategies of modernism. The modern movement dominant throughout the 20th Century had failed as far as these artists were concerned. Greenberg had stated that modernism should disassociate itself from content or any attempts at representation. It would thus reach a higher plain and would become more pure as a result. There should be no pondering to any form of populism. Art should concern itself only with issues that related to itself. Modern art was to be the avant-garde, the leading force. The means by which artistic activity could liberate the masses.

This notion had its origins in the 19th Century in the Socialist thinkings and writings of those who saw in socialism a new way forward. Socialism would destroy the strangle hold of the ruling classes and the bourgeoisie. In painting the art of the academics became to be associated with these ruling classes. This was a type of painting that drew heavily on Greek and Roman myth, was mainly classical in execution with allegory as a vital ingredient. Painting saw major developments from the 1870's onwards with Impressionism and Post-impressionism and it was these developments that inspired the notion of the avant-garde. Some artists who had socialist tendencies began to see in their work as a means of advancing socialist principles. This may not have been done in a direct manner but rather, as an attitude to their output.

The emphasis was on finding new means, original ideas. The past was rejected, the social implications of referring to the past (in terms of style and attitude) were such as to render this type of activity - as being in collaboration with the corrupt establishment. All the major artistic developments of the 20th century had this concept at heart. The avant garde was established and its leadership role was clear but would the masses follow. Carl Jenks in an essay entitled the 'Post-Avant Garde' (2) accuses this stage of modernism of being Heroic. The Heroic avant garde led to an over inflation of the real ability of artistic activity to change anything. This was nowhere more apparent than in modernist architecture. Jenks identifies the work of Gropius Mies and Le Corbusier and says the following of their output - "The Heroic Avant Garde was itself to be the replacement for the older institution of the elite with its intelligentsia, professionals and aristocrats. Thus its styles and virtues would be picked up by the rest of society. Le Corbusier and the Bauhaus would set the standards for mass production, The ideal types which would be endlessly repeated and thereby raise the level of mass taste. T.S. Eliot would purify the language of the tribe. Eisenstein would reform the sensibilities of the film-goer as much as Picasso, Braque and Leger would transform and purify the visual codes of the public. Never mind for a moment that this never happened precisely the way they intended! The ideal was strong enough to carry ten generations of Modernists right up to the 1960's. It served to justify their experiments, their will to power, their endless housing estates and attacks on the academics of art" (3).



Towards the end of 1830 Eugene Delacroix began work on his "Liberty Leading the People" painting based on the three day Paris revolution in July of that year. Delacroix's allegorical figure of liberty is shown leading a group of revolutionaries forward over the barricades. Here is a very striking pose, a powerful young woman, she boldly strides forward with musket, fixed bayonet and fluttering flag.



"Her pictorial character has little in common with the pallid academic allegories or awkward popular illustrations which may have suggested the basic motif. The figure is dominant not only for its placement at the apex of the complicated tumble of bodies above which she looms framed by the patriotic emblem of the tricolor but for the vigor and credibility of her presence in the midst of the combat. It is an impelling image one that is all the more remarkable for its simultaneous projection of the real and the ideal connotations of the struggle" (4). This contemporary version of liberty served as an allegory for a new spirit, for a new nation. In as sense the nation of the avant-garde and modernism can be seen to derive from this type of heroic allegory. The avant-garde like liberty mounts the barricades, in this case the constraints of the academic tradition and moves forward into the unknown and hostile territory ahead to create something new and pure.

Peter Wollen writing about the Russian Artists Komar and Malamid in 1985 says that their work could easily be fitted into a neatly made model of post-modernism, his reasons being,—"First, the breakdown of the canonical distinction between avant-garde and Kitch, the foundation of the doctrine of modernism. Second the implicit and explicit rejection of the aesthetic of originality, authenticity and purity: the sense of an overwhelming proliferation of available imagery to be scavenged purloined and bricolaged. Thus the employment of posture parody, quotation, simulation ect. in the interest of appropriation and intertextuality. Thirdly, eccentricity (poly-eccentricity?) and excess, a mixing and mellowing of styles, tones, ideologies, genres and subjects" (5). This is important not so much in the way it tries to categorise the work of Komar and Melamid, but that it offers us a view of the contrasting elements of modernism and post-modernism. He also uses a very important word that relates to the work of post-modern artists, -appropriation. Whereas it is obvious that imagery can be appropriated then it is also possible that traditional forms of the visual use of allegory can be appropriated.



These traditional forms employed Greek classical literature mostly and used it in a representational manner through painting. Modernism rejected this traditional form of artistic pursuit of being out of date. The function of the avant-garde was to find new ways of expression. But whereas the allegory of liberty leading the people can be applied to the avant-garde, it most certainly cannot be applied to the post modern. Charles Jenks says of the post-modern "it doesn't try to conquer new territories for the old shock of the new of Duchamp it substitutes the new shock of the old of Marriani"(6).

## NOTES 1

1. Craig Owens, "The Allegorical Impulse; Toward a Theory of Post Modernism, October 12 (Spring 1980) p. 67
2. Charles Jencks - "The Post Avant Garde", Art and Design magazine Vol. 3 No.7/8 - 1987 P. 8-16
3. Ibid p.9
4. Frank Anderson Trapp - "The Attainment of Delacroix" (The John Hopkins Press 1971) p. 101-102
5. Peter Wollen - Essay "Painting History" (catalogue to Komar and Melamid exhibition at the at the Fruit Market Gallery Edinburgh 10 Aug - 21 September 1985 and Museum of Modern Art Oxford 6 Oct - 7 Dec 1985 p.38
6. Charles Jenks p.17

## ALLEGORY AND THE PAINTING OF CARLO MARIA MARIANI

"In Italy today where an art historical legacy has always been more conspicuous artists are producing works in guises ranging from Pompeian wall paintings to twentieth century cubo futurist styles. Among these stylists Carlo Maria Mariani is the painter who portrays the most over adherence to Neoclassical art. In the mid 1970 Mariani had already created works which combined photography, writing and drawing of classical sculpture in a conceptual fashion. In his attempt at producing an entirely impersonal artwork Mariani has relied upon the most traditional embodiment of Italian art to bring into question the notion of art beauty and aesthetics".(1)

Speaking about his own work Mariani has said the following, "If we look at the American artists in the Sixties the exponents of Pop Art, they were taking advertising his saturation of images and making an artistic statement out of them. But as far as I am concerned personally it is something I want to go beyond - I don't want to be involved in the chaos I want to try and recover the precious individuality of us poor mortals in order to conquer, rediscover the world outside us. My work reflects, my interest in a particular historical period that is the last decade of the eighteenth century and the early years of the nineteenth. My interest in this period isn't purely artistic but also social and political . . . . this is a period I have always felt immensely drawn to." (2)

Variously described as reactionary, mannerist, and neo-fascist, Mariani's work looks to the past for its inspiration. Whereas his detractors may see his work as being thus, others see him as being Post-Modern. "If one looks at three Italian Post-Modernists, Carlo Maria Mariani . . . . , one sees their Italianness always in quotation marks, an ironic fabrication of their roots made as much for the New York they occasionally inhabit as from inner necessity. Whereas a mythology was given to the artist in the past by tradition and by patron in the Post-Modern world it is chosen and invented."(3)



Mariani has certainly chosen to work in the manner he does, his work is not the result of an ~~un~~ aware artist unaware of developments in the twentieth century. Mariani's work is a rejection of 20th Century developments. In it we see a reappearance of Renaissance illusionism and mythological allegorical subject matter. His mode of representation - neo-classism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is immediately recognisable as familiar but also somehow foreign to a modern audience. The shock of the old thus created places Mariani in a position to question contemporary values in art. But why should his work seem strange? have we forgotten the past? - "Since his themes are of such antiquity that they are no longer in our memory, Mariani's work shocks us with its strangeness that is with the recognition of our cultural amnesia. Thus his art attempts its newness not by repudiating the past and its values but by being ultratraditional. In its attempt to remake tradition into contemporary representation this painting asks us to suspend all contexts and to seek a wholly other and paradoxical sence of time." [4] To seek this paradoxical sence of time history must lose its vertical sence of progression, of linearity. To look back is to "review history without principles of cohesion synthesis and development." [5] Michael Foucault writing in *The Order of Things* sets out how this may be arrived at. Stating that "history was conceived of as a vast stream uniform in each of its points drawing with it in one and the same current in one and the same fall or ascension or cycle all men and with them things and animals . . . . and it was this unity that was shattered at the beginning of the nineteenth century . . . . It was discovered that there existed a historicity proper to nature - forms of adaptation to the environment were defined for each broad type of living being which would make possible a subsequent definition of its evolutionary outline . . . . Things first of all received a historicity proper to them which freed them from the continuous space that imposed the same chronology upon them as upon men. [6].

To arrive at some sense of sympathy with Mariani's work it is thus necessary to come to terms with this fragmentation of classification. Madoff states "Post Modern painting does not care for the nostalgia of a universal totalised past." (7) Appropriation of imagery, of style, rife in Post Modern work and in the work of Mariani, does not occur in a manner that highlights the sense of authenticity or autonomy of the original. It is thus appropriation carried out at random. A collage of imagery. Whereas Mariani paints in a manner that evokes nineteenth century neo-classical art in appearance the link though tenuous must end there. This pick and choose attitude to history is perhaps most evident in his use of allegory. Which calls to mind Walter Benjamin's remark that it is the common practise of allegory to pile up fragments ceaselessly without any strict idea of a goal. He is not alone, however in this area as several Post Modern painters use allegory in their work. Stephen McKenna, Komar and Melamid and Gerard Grouste. These artists are using the traditions of the past to re-examine the present and by doing so they pass comment on that tradition itself. Thus they are not concerned with mere duplication nor do they wish to pay homage. "appropriation is the conversion of an identity translating the past into its new territory. We hold on to the past now by deracinating it, by shifting it to the present tense. Having acclimated ourselves to splintered time we have cut free the roots of all histories and drawn them to ourselves." (8).

Mariani's reproduction of the past has its roots in his own perception of that past, that of a motionless traveller. He thus combines figures and personalities from the present and puts them in this archaic setting. Disunity is thus created. Madhof, speaking about Giarouste's work notes a similar disunity, noting passages from the paintings of Delacroix and Rubens in his work. He thus makes the following important conclusion, "There are a host of implications teeming moving in and out of each other polluting any singularity of vision. The work is about the pathos of reproduction . . . Which is to say that it seeks sympathy with all of the images, styles, techniques and histories that it collects



Carlo Maria Mariani  
\*Castellazione del Leone (La Scuola di Roma)\*



and out of which emerge its collage existence. This constant movement away from a unified vision can be said to be allegorical".(9) The strange juxtapositions in Mariani's work implies something different from what is represented. Marina Warner in her book 'Monuments and Maidens' offers the following definition of allegory - "Allegory means other speech (*alia oratio*) from allos other and *agoreuein*, to speak openly, to harangue in the agora; it signifies an open declamatory speech which contains another layer of meaning. It thus possesses a double intention to tell something which conveys one meaning but which also says something else irony and enigma are among its constituents but its category is greater than both and it commands a richer range of possible moods. (10)

Mariani expresses a conception through his use of neo-classicism, but though the use of allegory draws one away from this expressed conception to form another layer of meaning. Mariani's painting *Costellazioni del Leone* (La Scuola di Roma) painted in 1980 is an elaborate allegory on the current Post Modern School of Rome. Mariani himself, seated in the centre is surrounded by friends, enemies artists, critics and dealers. The setting an idealised landscape and the manner of painting is neo-classical. Mariani both solemn and supercilious sits below Ganymede being abducted to Heaven by Zeus; Garymede is not only the beautiful boy of Greek mythology being captured in the erotic embrace of the eagle Zeus, but a portrait of the performance artist Luigi Ontani. To the right Francesco Clemente gazes past a canvas held by Sandro Chia Mario Merz is Hercules in a bathtub, an art dealer waddles to the water personified as a turtle and critics write and admire their own profiles. Here is an attempt at documenting the present couched in terms of classical antiquity. But what are we to make of this allegorical pastiche? "The content in Mariani's paintings" writes Michael Kohn, "is subject to a sense of verbal detachment . . . . Any narrative or moralizing theme is so far removed from what is presented visually that attention is focused almost exclusively upon the ornamental nature of the image" (11) Consideration of the allegorical content of the work might lead one to look further.

Madhoff states that in Mariani's work "the allegory itself has been transmitted by its shift in time. Is it intended that we remember these concepts as they once lived? To do so would be preposterous - to imply that Mariani himself is only the most obvious ironist. The allegory has in fact become a material, a cloth of images. It has been turned inside out. It has been subsumed by the narrative allegory which values appearances, material signs over content and hence loses the authenticity the depth of post historical contexts" (12) In this sense Mariani's work becomes just a study in allegorical motif another spectacle in the information saturated culture in which we live.

But the goal that Mariani sets himself is to re-invoke this imagery to re-value the new or the present. John Roberts states that "intertextuality (i.e. the basis by which art continually transforms cognitive and aesthetic materials extant in the culture) must go towards something more than idle defences of appropriation of popular images or convocations of art historical references. This in effect means addressing intertextuality both as a set of expressive resources that might lay claim to some critical distance from the meanings of the dominating and also as a theory of art as produced production that has a continuity of interests with the past." (13)

In his work Mariani shows a continuity of interests with the past", but does he invoke this past to only engage in contrived pastiche. The interrelationships that his allegory imply must largely be lost to a modern audience and one can get the sense that he is engaged in parody. Can Mariani for example compare his allegorical work to that of the nineteenth century French Neo-Classical David?

David lived through the French Revolution and knew most of its leading figures - indeed he had seen Marat sitting in his bath (because of a skin condition) the day before his assassination. Thus when he came to paint the scene of Marat's assassination, he could recall that scene vividly from memory. David was also an active participant in the Revolution and he had a commitment to it and its ideals. David drew parallels between this struggle and the great struggles of the Roman Empire and the ideals of the Roman Republic. But his use of allegory in this manner was questioned in his own time, in terms of its temporal disjunction, by Proudhon.

"Shall we say . . . that it is neither Leonidas and the Spartans nor the Greeks or Persians who one should see in this great composition; (Leonidas at Thermopylae), that it is the enthusiasm of 92 which the painter had in view and Republican France saved from the Coalition? But why this allegory? what need to pass through Thermopylae and go backward twenty three centuries to reach the heart of Frenchmen? Had we no heroes, no victories of our own." (14)

Mariani has made copies of some of the works of David. Each copy is rendered in a precise manner duplicating the style and content of the original. These were works with which, as previously mentioned, David had a profound link as with his painting of the death of Marat. But Mariani has only taken the formal elements of these works, the political comment inherent in them cannot be as relevant to him as it was to David. Even if Mariani wishes to reassert the democratic ideal associated with the martyrs of the French Revolution his work cannot possibly have the same impact that the original had on the events of 1793 and 1794.

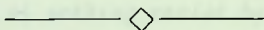
Michael Kohn comparing the work of David and Mariani questions the assumptions in Mariani's work, "However petty this type of detailed comparison between the prototype and its imitator may seem the fundamental differences of the two works as the basis of one's great acclaim and the others mere portrayal.



I hesitate to say failure because Mariani's paintings should not be judged in terms of Davids rather it is more important to try and trace the significance of the similarity in style and the social structures within which these styles are rooted . . . . For David the new political ideals were democracy and patriotism embodied in the lessons of virtue of the Roman Republic and other scenes. Then for Carlo Mariani what does this resurgence of sombre Neo-Classicism and allegory painting mean? (15) Here we must return to the notion of splintered time, of history without linearity. Mariani creates his own relevance by creating a history relevant to himself. The concepts and ideals which he cherishes become part of this personal history, it forms the framework in which his concerns for contemporary society and the interrelationship of artist, critic and dealer for example are worked out.

However, Kohn detects in Mariani a trace of Romanticism - "This definition of Romanticism is closer to what we see in Mariani's oeuvre. Mariani wisely avoids the more provocative issues of the "exemplum virtutis" and used instead the mythological and allegorical subject matter of the Neo-classicists, Angelika Kauffman and Anton Raphael Mengs, both of whom worked and lived in Rome during the latter half of the eighteenth century . . . they were concerned with ideals of beauty taken from the ancient Greeks and blend of Rococo sentimentality and allegorical allure . . . . while the tradition Mariani follows is stylistically linked to David Kauffmann and Mengs, conceptually Mariani is more concerned with the metaphysical school of De Chirico - Mariani's life size full standing figures in antique dress or heroic nudity . . . set amidst a backdrop of Arcadian landscapes and classical architecture staring off into the distance with a melancholic gaze appear to us a type of dusty relic full of mystery . . . classical ideals of beauty perfectly rendered, ask the viewer to reconsider the juxtaposition of a Greco-Roman concept of eternal beauty and contemporary painting." (16)

Is it thus his intention to see beauty as the ultimate goal in art? It would be impossible to isolate any single aspect a Marianias work as being the most important to say that any particular concept is at its foundation. For whatever the artist may feel, interpretation of this type of representation invokes a varied and sometimes controversial response from a contemporary audience. To rekindle a sense of beauty and allegorical reference to scrutinize and deliberate on contemporary society or culture would seem at this point in time, a worthless exercise doomed to falter in a sea of mimicry and parody. Allegory as Craig Owens has said has been condemned for nearly two centuries as "aesthetic aberration the antithesis of art". Faced with this attitude can Mariani find any solace in contemporary sensibility?



In the introduction we discussed how Modernism had turned its back on traditional artistic concepts. Nowhere was this more evident than in its total non-acceptance of allegorical subject matter. "The critical suppression of allegory is one legacy of romantic art theory that was inherited uncritically by modernism. The history of modernist painting is begun with Manet and not Courbet who persisted in painting real allegories. Even the most supportive of Courbet's contemporaries were perplexed by his allegorical bent, one was either a realist or an allegorist they insisted, meaning that one was either modernist or historicist." (17)

It was the use of allegory in history paintings that sent uneasy ripples up the spines of the modernists. Allegory had been used in the 19th Century to produce image upon image of the present in terms of the classical past. This allusion to classical ideals bestowed a sense of righteousness to the cause or struggle. It was an age of certainty where broad lines could be drawn between right and wrong.

The Royal Academy of Arts in London was established on 29th November 1768 and by the mid-nineteenth century was flourishing. By the time of its foundation the different categories of art, i.e. landscape, Portraiture, that were to be explored in the Royal Academy over the following two centuries were already broadly determined. These categories were discussed by Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Discourses. Living in a culture that was supremely certain of its values. Reynolds had no hesitation in asserting a hierarchy in art, a classification of subjects graded according to purpose and inherent quality. Without doubt one such category reigned supreme over all others. This was history painting. He required that the artist should "instead of endeavouring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations endeavour to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas, instead of seeking praise by deceiving the superficial sense of the spectator he must strive for fame by capturing the imagination". (18).

The natural vehicle for this attainment of fame or dignity was history painting especially the representation of mythological allegorical historical subjects. Indeed throughout the subsequent history of the Royal Academy it was pictures on precisely these themes that formed the artistic centre of gravity. For a great number of artists such as Reynolds, West, Barry, Copley Maclise the pre-raphaelites and Alma-Tademan history subjects were the vehicles for the most serious and elevated efforts.

Allegorical paintings of themes derived from classical mythology were much to the taste of the eighteenth century aristocracy who were later aped in this by the industrial middle class. It was a predilection produced by an educational system based largely upon the Classics and it fitted in with the greater world view that the aristocracy wished to create. In private city squares or countryhouses and parks they wished to see a reconstruction of the classical past.



From the Greek or Roman scenes on their walls they could look through neo-classical windows on to a landscape that was organised to make those dream worlds a reality. Allegory was a natural off shoot of this awareness for it allowed comment upon the present through the guise of classism.. Patriotism, self-esteem, moral and spiritual certainly all of these could be essayed and represented through the use of allegory.

In our own time this certainty has been eroded by the potent waves of 20th Century erudition. The conviction with which neo-classical allegories of the nineteenth century were executed is lost to us. How then can Mariani hope to re-instill this conviction or create a relevance for his work. Mariani's allegories remain a denial of the present and in doing this he is also asking us to look anew at our own circumstances. He takes a somewhat extremist stance so that we are nudged into reaction whether we want to or not.

Michael Kohn sums up Mariani's work as follows - "the contradiction that consists of an eighteenth century mode of representation presenting itself as new to our contemporary sensibility is not as retrogressive as it seems at first glance. Mariani's superb rendering of Neo classism is subversive in a convoluted manner rather than the anti art of the Dadaists we are confronted with the most ultra traditional tradition of art. It is a type of infiltration from the inside of the art world. Rather than the hints and glimpses of classical motifs in the work of de Chirico we are given the whole painting as a concentrated message, one which is ambiguous in its directness and subtle in its interpretation. As a result the viewer is provoked and puzzled more puzzled by art than perhaps he or she has been for along time. For ultimately Mariani's rendition of neo-classism is not mere idle play but a serious statement about contemporary painting its conception and execution. It is also a statement about Romanticism and the Romantic elements of the sublime which are current in painting.

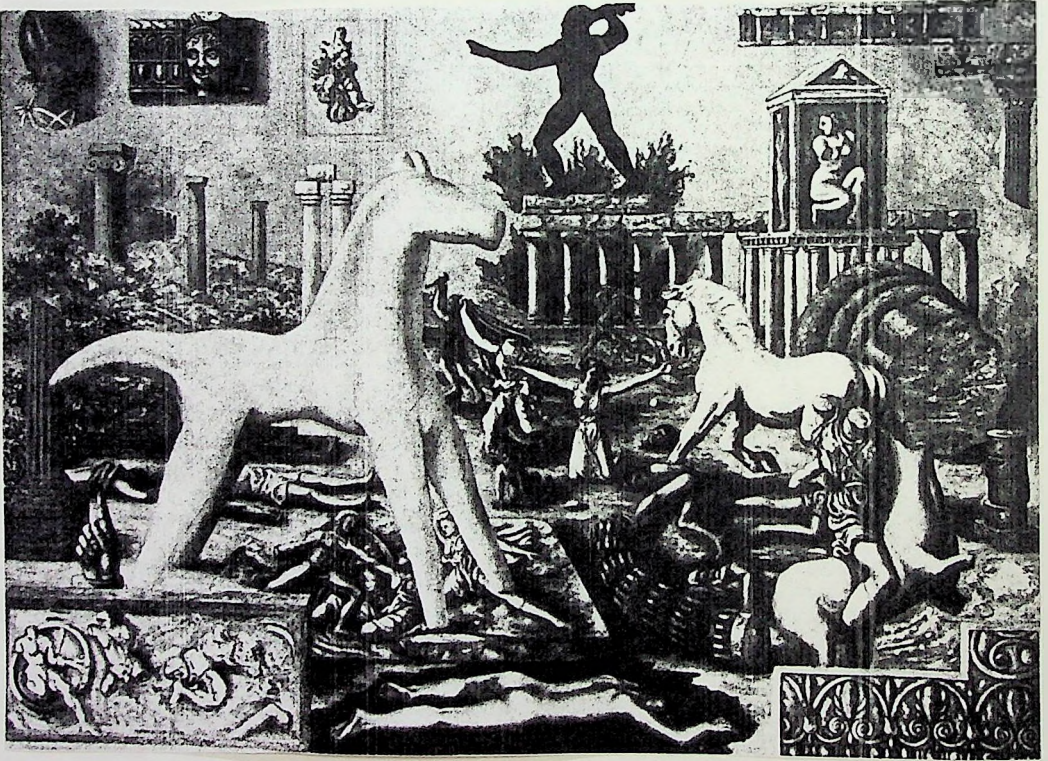
Finally, Marianis painting is evidence of a personal dictum which comes from Goethe - If every good idea has already been thought suffice it only to think it again." (19).

## ALLEGORY AND THE PAINTING OF STEPHEN MCKENNA

Perhaps if one were to annulate all the historical associations of Neoclassicism and its identification with nineteenth century academics then by such a fragmentation of historicity we could look anew at the allegory in Mariani's work. However, if one takes a painter like Stephen McKenna one cannot help but engage in comparison with academic tradition. His range of works, landscape, still life and allegorical illusion all fit nicely into the categories that Reynolds formulated as being worthy of proper artistic pursuit. In his writings McKenna also identifies with the nineteenth century aristocracy - "After dinner the ladies retire, with the heavy brandy the men light cigars. The conversation touches upon war and agriculture and topics of general cultural interest among them the history of the estate and its uncoordinated architectural form. In a lecture or rather a discourse titled parables of painting, Stephen McKenna described such a proverbial weekend in the country on an old estate owned by two brothers. The elder of the two had decided he would analyze all the various elements used at different times in the building of the house in order to establish a new method of describing the theory of architecture. The guests were invited to join the search for these ancient fragments" (20)

The word fragments is important here for fragments seem to litter McKenna's work. If one takes the painting *O Llium* (1982) we are presented with a canvas replete with a mixed assortment of classical debris. One is immediately reminded of an eighteenth or nineteenth century English garden bedecked with Gazebo and the plunder from a Greek escapade. It was common practice in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to erect an old ruin based on classical ruins on one's estate. The architectural remnants in McKenna's painting recall such ruins.





Stephen McKenna "O Ilium."

"Allegory" writes Craig Owens "is consistently attracted to the fragmentary the imperfect the incomplete - an affinity which finds its most comprehensive expression in the ruin which Benjamin identified as the allegorical emblem par excellence" (21) The ruin marks the destruction of the works of man, it identifies with the power of nature to reabsorb these creations. It also identifies with the cycles of history the irreversible process of dissolution and decay. Craig Owens quotes Benjamin as follows. "In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified premonitory landscape. Everything about history that from the very beginning has been untimely sorrowful unsuccessful is expressed in a face or rather in a death's head. And although such a thing lacks all symbolic freedom of expression all classical proportion, all humanity - nevertheless this is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise to not only the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing." (22)

In McKenna's painting the ruin as executed is a reproduction of the contrived estate garden ruin itself a reproduction of the classical ruin. What we are seeing is an image that has passed several times through the rite of reproduction. This has the effect of emptying the image of its resonance, its message, its authoritative claim to meaning. Speaking of the work of Tony Brantuch, which involves the reproduction of Hitler's drawings and those of concentration camp victims exhibited without captions Douglas Crimp says the following - "Every operation to which Brantuch subjects these pictures represents the duration of a fascinated perplexed gaze whose desire is that they disclose their secrets but the result is only to make the pictures all the more picturelike to fix forever in an elegant object our distances from the history that produced these images. That distance is all these pictures signify." (23)



Something similar could be said of the work of McKenna or indeed of Mariani. McKennas painting *O Illium* has at its heart a hint of a fascinated perplexed gaze with a tinge of melancholy - "If the object becomes allegorical under the gaze of melancholy, if melancholy causes life to flow out of it and it remains behind dead, but eternally secure then it is exposed to the allegorist, it is unconditionally in his power. That is to say it is now quite incapable of emanating any meaning or significance of its own. Such significance as it has it acquires from the allegorist. He places it within it and stands behind it not in a psychological but in an ontological sence" (24). Allegory thus exists on two levels in McKennas work both in the content of what is painted and in the process of recycling that content. In that recycling process, the image loses its original content and it becomes a stylized gesture. "The allegory moves backward from a perceptable present to an inperceptable past. Images are leaped upon this pure anteriority. This restructuring of the past in which the historical instant is buried under a ceaselessly fragmentary present is a schizophrenic revision of temporality . . . the allegorical tendency in post-modern painting intends precisely to erode the past and indeed to erode the levels of allegory to an even surface." (25). This is in opposition to where formally allegory depended on vertical levels of hidden meaning and the "hieratic difficulty of interpretation". (26)

Madhoff further states "It may be said that what is most attractive about allegory to the post modern mentality is the possibility created by temporal disjunction. The fissure opened by allegory between anterior and present images and the rift of meaning allows the post modern work of art to exhaust allegorical meanings and finally to fill the fissure not with meanings but with appearances. Indeed the post modern work does not appropriate allegorical meanings in the old sence which would return the work of art to that verticalness those infinitely descending levels of knowledge and consequent difficulty." (27).



At the heart of Madhoffs assertion is the belief that the present is fragmented in a state of chaos. Post modern allegorical art looks to a brighter future by recycling the past. He states that - "what is most remarkable about this paradox is the discovery that this future anterior art still desires to find categories that would fit some table of unity, albeit an extraordinarily expanded one. Its desire to formulate rules that are at this point paradoxical tells us two things - first that such art appears ostensibly to the ironic, it wishes to find an order in the face of surrounding chaos, and second that its irony is foiled that such organization is unsoundable, that rules of unity are unreachable in our epoch of irreversible time. Order is either in the future or in the past yet it eludes our presentness. The present made up of fragments from all conditions of time, not only appears to make every epoch equivalent with the moment but now fabricates appearances in so rapid a process of consumption that memory knows the present only by the tangibility of the appearance that has just taken place" (28).

If we can no longer identify with the fidelity of the past with its implication of a higher goal or that which proposes that appearances transcend their materiality, the allegorical subject can only be valued for its own material presence. It cannot, in our secular times, with any measure of conviction appeal to a higher order or instill a notion of cardinal certainty as in the past.

In *O Illium* the inventory of scattered fragments, that it embodies, become like displays in a museum with items reproduced as they might be found in cases or on plinths. "In a museum the object has priority preceding its audience and existing apart and timelessly." (29)

The museum tries to rescue from the past that which threatens to disappear. It has been the role of allegory throughout history to function in the gap between past and present, a past which without allegorical reinterpretation might have remained foreclosed. McKenna takes the objects of the past and puts them in front of us. We can only identify with the chaos and destruction that the objects reflect, we are reminded of what has happened and can happen again. In this way the past is not called up to underpin a belief in certainty but to identify with the cursive cycles of destruction.

With O'Ilum one is faced with the dilemma of whether McKenna wishes to deconstruct his classical motifs or if they are being used to reapply a sense of value to them. The answer is not clear but if one takes into account other works in McKenna's output the latter would seem to apply. There is, however an element of deconstruction in this activity. McKenna has rejected a lot of what has been termed art in the late modernist period and continuing to the present rejects that which takes for its subject either itself or the life of its maker. McKenna is of the opinion that both artists and public have been educated to reject those metaphysical, iconographical and technical foundations upon which art has been based from earliest times. "Although strongly conscious of the separateness of his positions he has not given himself up to polemic but more positively to the formulation of proposals and suggestions both tentative and speculative. Working in this way has allowed McKenna to maintain links with the literate tradition of the art of the past as well as to preserve his own integrity and autonomy. He would make few lavish claims about what art can and cannot do, and would, of course accept that as part of a broader cultural context art can only follow in the wake of other developments - in metaphysics or the natural sciences for example. He starts from a pragmatic basis knowing that out of making a description of things he sees new perceptions or thoughts may well arise." (30).

There is a danger in this deconstruction of current norms, that the work may taken on some of the norms and conditions it sets out to expose. "This is of course the constraint to which any deconstructive discourse is subject as the deconstructors themselves frequently remind us. Derrida for example, speaks of the methodological necessity of preserving as an instrument a concept whose truth value is being questioned. There is thus a danger wherent in decorstruction; unable to avoid the very errors it exposes, it will continue to perform what it denounces as impossible and will in the end affirm what it set out to deny". [31] There is in McKenna a hint of High Art, of the autonomy of mythical allegory which seems at odds with the notion that art can only follow.

De Man writing about Rousseau's Second Discourse as the narrative of its own deconstruction speaks about the allegories of unreadability - "To the extent that it never ceases to advocate the necessity for political legislation and to elaborate the principles on which such a legislation could be based, it resorts to the principles of authority that it undermines. We know this structure to be characteristic of what we have called allegories of unreadability. Such an allegory is metafigural; it is an allegory of a figure which relapses into the figure it deconstructs. The Social Contract falls under this heading to the extent that it is structured like an aporia; it persists in performing what it has shown to be impossible to do. As such we can call it an allegory." [32]

Perhaps in this sence the allegory in O'Illoom and in McKenna's other allegorical work is metafigural - by the assertion that art is passive and submissive to outside forces yet producing an art that owes its conception tot he idealisation of a past when art was sacrosanct. Why then does he use these tools to destroy, when he believes that what must be destroyed are the tools themselves.



McKenna's critical proponents are quick to point out that he represents a rejection of innovation. The corollary that McKenna's work provides an adequate alternative to this tendency is more problematic. We have seen that allegory exists in his work on several layers indeed his work remains the allegorical symbol par excellence. Craig Owens makes the assertion - "despite its suppression by modern theory - or perhaps because of it - allegory has never completely disappeared from our culture. Quite the contrary: it has renewed its (ancient) alliance with popular art forms, where its appeal continues undiminished. Throughout its history allegory has demonstrated a capacity for widespread popular appeal suggesting that its function is solid as well as aesthetic." (33) Both McKenna and Mariani might be accused to pandering to populism in the manner in which they work. Their imagery is more appealing to a mass audience than the cerebral dissertations abundant in much modernist art. "Allegory may well be that mode which promise to resolve the contradictions which confront modern society - individual interest verses general well being for example. The withdrawal of the modernists arts from allegory may thus be one factor in their ever-accelerating loss of audience". (34) The allegorical works of McKenna and Mariani no doubt comply with this, it is work that begs to be looked at and in our troubled present, when genuine public discourse is more important than ever before, these works must surely provide an important catalyst for such discussion.

Whatever misgivings one may have about post modernism its greatest achievement may be its deconstruction - that unavoidable necessity of participating in the very activity that is being denounced precisely in order to denounce it. "This deconstructive impulse is characteristic of post-modernist art in general and must be distinguished from the self-critical tendency of modernism.

Modernist theory presupposes that mimesis the adequation of an image to a referent can be bracketed or suspended and that the art object itself can be substituted for its referent. This is the rhetorical strategy of self-reference upon which modernism is based and from Kant onwards it is identified as the source of aesthetic pleasure . . . Post Modernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent but works instead to problematize the activity of reference. When the post-modernist work speaks of itself it is no longer the proclaim its autonomy, its self sufficiency, its transcendence; rather it is to narrate its own contingency, insufficiency, lack of transcendence. It tells of a desire that must be perpetually frustrated, an ambition that must be perpetually deferred; as such its deconstructive thrust is aimed not only against the contemporary myths that furnish its subject matter, but also against the symbolic totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art." (35)

If modernism has played its role and must now succumb to this latter day scrutiny then Post Modernist deconstruction is to be welcomed. However, there is another aspect to this process, and that concerns this new arts active participation in the current capitalist market structures. Painting on canvas is by its nature, a dealable product and it also has "collectibility". Its permanence, its allusion to High Art thus renders it a suitable entity for investment. In this scenario of course the content of the work becomes immaterial.

There is an inherent danger with contemporary allegorical painting that it may be misread and misinterpreted and become soaked up by the mop of fiscal rejuvenation.

Perish the thought but I do hope that the work of McKenna and Mariani do not become allegories that will give sustenance to the thinking of the New Right.

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