NATIONAL COLLEGE OF ART & DESIGN

'Return of the Figure & Post-modern allegory'

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C O N T E N T S

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Dedicated to Sean and Aoife

TEXT

INTRODUCTION

The revival of figurative painting and sculpture in the last few decades holds particular interest for me, as I have chosen the figure as the metaphor of expression in my work. It is not surprising, therefore, that I should explore in this thesis the role the figure has played in recent European painting, with direct reference to the influences of classicism, modernism, postmodernism, tradition and the uses of allegory.

In the first chapter,"Post-Modernism defined", modernism and Post-Modernism are explained in relation to the artist. The "Return of the Figure", Chapter 2, focuses on the current universal revival of the figure in painting and sculpture, including several different attitudes to this idiom. In this chapter, there is also an investigation into why painters throughout the Twentieth Century seek to revive the classical traditions and figurative images. The emphasis is put on the political, social, economic and cultural influences that persuaded these artists to work the way they do. In the final chapter "Allegory, McKenna and Mariani", the use of post-modern allegory as a form of narrative in the figurative painting of Stephen McKenna and Carlo Maria Mariani is highlighted.

CHAPTER 1

POST-MODERNISM DEFINED

The modern world is chaotic and contradictory. Modernity, in the minds of early twentieth century visionaries, was expected to lead to an emancipated society, but the great technical and scientific advances and the "progress in knowledge" have failed to rid the world of "poverty", despotism and ignorance. (Lyotard,1985,p33). Every aspect of life reveals a gap between the optimistic idea of modernisation reality. Men and women fly in space and artificial skin is made in the laboratory, yet national and religious wars remain insoluble. Some of the worst aspects of poverty have been reduced in the West, but, internationally the gap between the rich and poor grows ever wider. As work, transport, communications and consumption have been transformed, so too have class relations, education, the family, sexuality and the arts. Every activity, every part of life, is now subject to the market and can be packaged, bought and sold.

The ubiquity and power of public images are two of the most significant aspects of the changing world. They surround us - images with messages, images with information, images as ideas. The reproduction of images from person to person, institution to institution and country to country is now taken for granted.

With the speed of travel and communications, this saturation of images reinforces the impression that we live in one world..

As we recognise the control of the technological resources that produce them and the control of their distribution through news, fashion advertisements, architecture, art and entertainment, so we recognise images as one of the binding forces in a "global culture".

Images are not free, even outside a totalitarian state. What can be depicted, represented or expressed is limited not so much by law by social convention and expectation. One of the important cultural functions of the modern media is the selective construction of our understanding of society. Through media images we perceive, as Stuart Hall writes, 'the "lived realities" of others, and imaginarily reconstruct their lives and ours into some intelligible "world-of-the-whole", some "lived totality"' (Hall 1977,p341)

If some images help construct a "global culture" in a restrictive manner, others can help to counter this. The use of stereotypes is one of the most powerful mechanisms for assimilation in masscirculation imagery, but there is an eventual fatigue inherent in all sterotypic images. Artists may deliberately accelerate or retard this fatigue.

> History is always in practice a reading of the past. We make a narrative out of available 'documents', the written texts [and maps and buildings and suits of armour] we interpret in order to produce a knowledge of the world which is no longer present. And yet it is always from the present that we produce this knowledge: from the present that it is only from what is still extant, still available, that we make it: from the present in the sense that we make it out of an understanding formed by the present". (Belsey,1985,p1)

We know the past, and the present, through histories that are far from neutral, histories constructed from particular viewpoints. There is no single history: only the combination of many, the views of individuals, groups, classes and countries. Yet 'history' is in constant use, as sets of images from the past employed in the present. Politically conservative thinkers often present the future as a version of the past: modernised and revitalised, with all the awkward parts effaced. Conversely, some socialists use the past as resistance to the bureaucratic and authoritarian aspects of the present, as the repository of elements of life untouched by market relations. The languages of consumerism, tourism, and even welfarism attempt to find a solidity, an undefined value, in images from the past. Old subjects, old buildings and old associations are used to counter the widespread feelings of dislocation and displacement in present society.

> At some point following World War II a new kind of society began to emerge [variously described as post-industrial society, multinational capitalism, consumer society, and so forth.] New types of consumption; planned obsolescence; an ever more rapid rhythm of fashion and styling changes; the penetration of advertising, television and media generally to a hither to unparalleled degree throughout society; the replacement of the old tension between city and country, centre and province, by the suburb and by the universal standardisation; the growth of the great networks of super highways and the arrival of automobile culture- these are some of the features which would seem to mark a radical break from that older prewar society (Jameson,1983,pp124-5)

The term post-modern is increasingly used to refer to several different, but inter-related concepts. Virtually the

first positive use of the prefix 'post' was by the writer Leslie Fieldler in 1965 when he repeated it like an incantation and tied it to current radical trends which made up the counter-culture: 'post-humanist, post-male, post-white, post-heroic... post Jewish' (Fielder,1965,p189-210)

Ihab Hassan, by the mid 1970's became the self-proclaimed spokesman for the Post-modern [the term is conventionally elided in literary criticism] and he tied this label to the ideas of experimentalism in the arts, ultra-technology and architecture. Today it suggests the possibility of a new era in society to succeed the modern - one characterised by the unprecedented acceleration of change, in which the did certainties of politics, religion, ethics and philosophy become confused and paradox abounds. Secondly, it refers to a resistance to 'modernisation', an anti-modern position that no longer presumes the benefits of the modern world, combining cynicism and detachment with a renewed commitment to "fundamental" values. A third usage denotes a **stylistic** break by which the consciously modernist aspects of western culture are contested and overtaken. This change is uneven;and in architecture, art, literature and music, the term post-modern is a debated critical concept.

From a stream of conferences, seminars and publications in which the concepts of modernism and post-modernism have been discussed, a variety of descriptions has emerged. At an extreme, the post-modern world is seen as totally commodified; culture is flattened our, with little remaining differences between "high"

and "low" culture, there is little argument between fine art and kitsch,or between the avant-garde and the academic. The world is reduced to a series of simulacra: a new depthlessness, appearance is everything. Nothing is original or authentic because the world is experienced second-hand. There is a new nostalgia as we lose a secure sense of our place in history; all culture becomes a parody of past forms. [Jameson,July 1984]

Such pessimistic descriptions point to the collapse of identity, and to the impossibility of individual expression under the bombardment of images within the fragmentation of culture.(On the one hand there is this fragmentation and on the other, economy and social forces are producing a homogeneous "global culture" which is an apparent continuation of modern values and goals). But still this may be a productive moment. Released from the critical constraints of a single supposedly universal value system the artist is free to explore and expose contradiction itself, to heighten the ironies, to work from chaos and to address. Specific issues. Alternatively, the artist may feel free to dream, to fantasise new worlds out of the old, to play with past images and associations.

CHAPTER 2
RETURN OF THE FIGURE

The re-establishment of painting as a central concern of the art-world has been the target of attacks from many artists and critics, who see the conflation of the interests of painters with those of the market as excluding from critical attention performance, video, installation and more overtly progressive work. The "New Painting" of the past decade, signalled by the exhibitions **A New Spirit in Painting** and **Zeitgeist** (see fig 1) has been characterised by an electicism of style which draws on both the pre-modern and the modern. (The "New Painting" like "Neo-Expressionism", is one of several terms used to denote the exuberant figurative painting that gained prominence in the late 1970's and early 1980's).

Those exhibitions contained an enormous variety of work, consistent only in a predominantly large scale, and in expressive types of brushwork. The work was united, however, by a common antipathy to the late modern abstract painting championed by the American critic Clement Greenberg in the 1960's and 1970's. Greenberg's modern art was obsessed with the specificity of painting, with its flatness, its saturation, its colour composition, its emotional depth corresponding to the emotions of the painter. By contrast, the work of Mario Merz or Bruce McLean exemplifies the determination to establish painting in relation either to an aspect of everyday life or to a conceptualised framework of thinking, questioning the modernist presuppositions of the primacy of the individual artist and his or her spontaneous creative impulses.

Conceptual art was a term used in the mid-1960s to describe work which no longer relied on the particular qualities of painting or sculpture and tried to resist the pressure of the market to make every work of art another commodity for sale. It self-consciously questioned the meaning of 'direct' or 'authentic' expression, and was often made from text drawings or diagrams which stressed the idea in art above all else. Although the 'New Painting' is a reaction to the aridity of many conceptual approaches, it often itself depends on certain 'conceptual' features and is contrived in ways that involve a conceptualised strategy. The recent paintings of George Baselitz have all their subject motifs depicted upside-down; Julian Schnabel often paints on the fractured surface of broken crockery, precluding a coherent image; and Francesco Clemente paints himself at the centre of every metaphor and dream. **[Nairne,p25,1987]**

Their work is expressive while questioning the possibility of 'true expression', they have formal interests, but they are not formalists. They incorporate fantasy, the 'psychic' and the 'real' as elements to juggle with, and not as subject or object to be experienced and then defined. The desire to speak to an audience, to break with the perceived coldness of much late modernist, minimal and conceptual art, (as do McKenna & Mariani) encouraged the desire to make less hermetic works and to attempt the grand statement.

By the end of the 1970s it was a common but exaggerated complaint that fine art courses in art schools taught more about the wiring of neon lights than about drawing from life or about the properties of oil paints. Much has changed; there is a revival of interest in materials, techniques and subjects that had previously remained in use only in the most academic practices.

In Britian, while sculptors like Anish Kapoor, Tony Cragg, Bill Woodraw and Edward Allington have extended their range of unconventional materials and techniques, others like Barry Flanagan and Stephen Cox, have explored the carving of stone and marble. Flanagan also uses bronze-casting techniques, traditional patinas and gilding; Francesco Clemente and other Italian painters have experience with fresco techniques the Germans,George Baselitz, Anselm Kiefer and Jorg Immendorff work at times with wood-block graphics; Enzo Cucchi, Julian Schnabel and Gerard Garouste create notable dense canvasses, sometimes with sculptural attachments. Throughout this range of styles there has been new emphasis on drawing as a medium for sketching, for creative planning and for traditional 'study' before the larger work.

Although all these artists are returning to traditional techniques and classical modes of expression possibly the most interesting development in the recent past is the 'return to the figure' in painting. Abandoned in minimal and abstract painting, the figure has found new footing in the work of the neo-

expressionists [Kiefer, Immendorf and Baselitz]; the transavant garde [Clemente, Chia and Cucchi], the Americans [Schnabel, Salle, Fischl] and in the work of McKenna and Mariani.

However one might argue that paintings recent 'return to the figure' is an important episode in the history of the medium, so important that if overwhelms vision: we talk as if we've witnessed the return of the figure. But the figure never went away. The lineage of figure painters extends unbroken from anti-guilty to the present. So the hordes of human forms in the work of young painters do not signal the sudden reappearance of a venerable subject: rather these artists' return to the figure is like a first pilgrimage to a sacred site, a place one knows because it is part of ones heritage, but which for reasons of extreme youth one has never visited. For those who became artists when Minimalism and Conceptualism still had the aura of the new, the figure appeared only in the periphery of vision. Its significance was easy to overlook - a young painter 'returning' now to this subject undertakes a migration to the core of painting, to the site of the crisis in the very purpose of paint. [Ratcliff,p1,1984]

This crisis has been with us for a long time, which is to say that painters have managed for decades to ignore it. I'm talking about the familiar failure of 'advanced' art to sustain an optimistic linear vision of history, of progress, of an advance ordained by our best hopes in the future. When those hopes were strong and much energetic art was Utopian, many

painters believed that progress required the pictorial equivalent of deportation - the figure had to be banished so that rising above individuality, the medium could attain to universals.

Oskar Schlemmer, for example, continued throughout his career to populate his art with images of men and women, but these were the creatures of a mechanical heaven - robotic angels. Even Alberto Giacometti's melancholy produced an Everyman, an Everywoman, and the monumental figure of Everydog. Willem de Kooning displays a rhetoric of private anguish, yet the 'Women' who float up and out of his painterly mess have the glow of myth. They are latter day goddesses, sweetheart versions of Hecate and Cybele. Whether filled with a faith in paintings social role or entranced by heroic visions of modern destiny, these artists have all sustained a belief in art as an agent of progress.

The idea of the 'Return to the figure' in painting is simply inaccurate unless we mean it to point to the way certain young artists have returned to basics of figure and ground, image and space. Though the stylistic surface of their art is complex, a primitivism rages just out of sight - a desire, historically retrograde in the light of the avant-garde faith, to revive the Romantic claim that an artist succeeds by permeating an artwork with his or her will. These younger painters have "solved" their historical dilemma by acting as if the loss of the avant-garde momentum were and empty issue.

When a painter's presence permeates a painting, distinctions of figure and ground persist only to demonstrate their tenuousness, for example, **The Death of SardanPallus,1827,Fig 2,** asserts the life of Delacroix, an energy of will that inhabits the forms of ruler and ruled, human and animal, the animate and the inanimate, the texture of light and dark, the surge of colour and the reach of space itself. Finally the painting is Delacroix, an image of the artist in his most ambitious incarnation, hence fit to stand as a monumental figure against the backdrop, the mere ground of the world. That is not to say any of the new painters; some tagged with the unfortunate "Neo Expressionist" label - have the stature of Delacroix. But the presence of will in their art is as insistent, as nearly palpable, as Delacroix's will in his. Unlike Delacroix they are figure-painters in spite of themselves, painters at the mercy of human forms demand to be seen in their work, to defy the rationales that lead beyond the self, to remind us that all of the painting of the last two centuries - Modern painting - is inhabited, haunted by the willful figure of the artist.

The questions to be asked now is why these new painters are using the figure in their work and why are they also reviving classical themes and iconic references.

If the perceptual conventions of mimetic representation - the visual and spatial ordering systemsthat had defined pictorial production since the renaissance and had in turn been systematically broken down since the middle of the nineteenth

century - were reestablished, if the credibility of iconic reverentially was reaffirmed, and if the hierarchy of figure ground relationships on the picture plane were again presented as an "ontological" condition, what other ordering system outside of aesthetic discourse had to have already been put in place in order to imbue the new visual configurations with historical authenticity ? Is there a simple casual connection, a mechanical reaction, by which growing political oppression necessarily and irreversibly generates traditional representation ?
[Buchloh,p1,1981]

Does the brutal increase of restrictions in socio-economic and political life unavoidably result in the bleak anonymity and passivity of the compulsively mimetic modes that we witness, for example, in European painting of the mid 1920's and now the painting of the "pittura colta," "anacronisti", trans-avantgarde and the "neo-expressionists".

The question for us now is to what extent the rediscovery and recapitulation of these modes of figurative representation in painting reflect and dismantle the ideological impact of growing authoritarianism; or to what extent they simply indulge and reap the benefits of this increasingly apparent political practice; or worse yet, to what extent they cynically generate a cultural climate of authoritarianism to familiarize us with the political realities to come ?
[Buchloh,p4,1981]

In order to analyze the contemporary phenomenon, it may be useful to realize that the collapse of the modernist idiom is not without precedent. In the present excitement over "post-modernism," it should not be forgotten that the collapse of the modernist paradigm is as much a cyclical phenomenon in the history of the twentieth century art as is the crisis of capitalist economics in the twentieth century political history over-production, managed unemployment, the need for expanding markets and profits and the resultant war mongering as the secret promise of a final solution for late capitalism's problems.

It seems necessary to insist upon seeing present developments in the larger context of these historical repetitions, in their nature as response and reaction to particular conditions that exist outside the confines of aesthetic discourse.

To save the existing power structure there is political oppression. In such a climate are the symbolic modes of concrete anticipation transformed into allegorical modes of internalized retrospection. If one realizes that melancholy is at the origin of the allegorical mode, one should realize that this melancholy is enforced by prohibition and repression. This is particularly evident in the work of Mariani and his fellow painters to-day.

George Steiner describes very well in his introduction to Walter Benjamins' "The Origin of the German Tragic Drama," the melancholy and misery reflected in art as a direct result of war

mongering and political tension.

> As during the crisis of the Thirty Years war and its aftermath, so in Weimer Germany the extremities of political tension and economic misery are reflected in art and critical discussion. Having drawn the
>
> analogy, Benjamin closes with hints towards a recursive theory of culture: eras of decline resemble each other not only in their vices but also in their strange climate of rhetorical and aesthetic vehemence
> **[Steiner,1977,p24]**

It is generally agreed that the first major breakdown of the modernist idiom in twentieth century painting occurs at the beginning of the First World War, signalled by the end of cubism and futurism and the abandonment of critical ideals by the very artists who had initiated those movements. Facing the deadlock of their own academicization and the actual exhaustion of the historical significance of their work, Picasso, Derain, Carra, and Severini - to name a few of the most prominent figures were among the first to call for a return to the traditional values of high art. Creating the myth of a new classicism to disguise their condition they insisted upon the continuation of easel painting.

By 1913, their ideas had been developed further by younger artists working in cultural contexts which offered broader historical, social and political options to dismantle the cultural tenets of the European bourgeois. This is particularly the case with Du champ in America and Macalevich **(fig 3+4)** and the constructivists in Russia, but even in Paris, such artists

as Francis Picabia recognised the imminent demise of cubism. Upon his return from his first journey to New York in 1913, he wrote:

> But as you know, I have surpassed this stage of development and I do not define myself at all as a cubist anymore. I
>
> have come to realize that one cannot always make cubes to express the thoughts of the brain and the feelings of the psyche.
>
> [Picabia,1976,p66]

Artists who had been allied with the cubist movement realized by the end of the second decade that it was exhausted, without however, necessarily advocating a return to the past.

It is endemic to the syndrome of authoritarianism that it should appeal to and affirm the "eternal" or ancient systems of order [The law of the tribe, the authority of history, the paternal principle of the master etc]. This unfathomable past history then serves as a screen upon which the configurations of a failed historical presence can be projected.

In 1915, when Picasso signals his return to a representational language by portraying the cubist poet Max Jacob, recently converted to Catholicism, in the guise of a Breton peasant, drawn in the manner of Ingres, we get a first impression of the degree of electicism that is necessary to create the stylistic and historical pose of classical simplicity and equilibrium, with its claim to provide access to the origins and essentials of universal experience.

In Picasso's work the number and heterogeneity of stylistic modes quitted and appropriated from the fund of art history increases in 1917: not only Ingres' classical portraits but, as a result of Picasso's journey to Italy, in the company of Couteau, the iconography of the commedia dell'arte [which McKenna also uses as a theme] and the frescoes of Herculaneum not to mention the sculpture of the Parthenon frieze and the white figure vases at the Louvre, the peasant drawings of Millet, the late nudes of Renoir, the pointillism of Seurat. And of course there is the self-quotation of synthetic cubist elements, which lend themselves so easily to the high sensuousness of Picasso's decorative style of the early twenties. [fig 5,6+7]

Perhaps the most potent myth for all these painters from the early twentieth century, and likewise from many of the present painters mentioned, is that of the world as 'Arcadia' - and earthly paradise protected from Sordid materialism of the modern industrialised world, free from strife and tension, pagan not Christian, innocent not fallen, a place where a dreamed - of harmony is still attainable. The myth nourished by the pastoral poetry of Theocritus and Virgil, and by innumerable pastoral paintings of earlier periods, generated sensual images of sweeping fertile landscapes bathed in sunlight, calm blue seas, confident handsome nudes, and peasants going about their daily lives as if nothing had changed for centuries. As its heart there lurked the potential for profound melancholy - the sense

of loss and the knowledge that the ideal can never be attained. And just as melancholy pervades the pastoral paintings of Claude, Poussin, Carot, Mariani, so it pervades the work of Derain, Picasso, de Chirico and Chia, Clemente and McKenna.

The "commedia dell'arte" provided a set of standardised types. Derain [fig 8], Picasso [fig 9], Andreau [fig 10], Gris fig 11], Severini [fig 12] are among those who plundered this resource. In part they were motivated by traditional images of the "commedia", whether those by painters like Watteau and Cezanne by eighteenth - and nineteenth-century print makers and illustrators, for there was much interest in the 'call to order' period in the old, endangered traditions of popular theatre. In part the stimulus came from Diaghilev and his commissions to reading avant-garde artists for sets and costumes for ballets with folk themes. ('Parade' fig 13] in 1917, designed by Picasso, was an important event because the drop-curtain, suggested, in the context of a public spectacle, the rich potential of this kind of poetic imagery). But most important of all perhaps was the fact that the old Italian comedy, with its stock characters, costumes and situations suggested a viable alternative - still Latin in its roots - to classical mythology.[Cowling,p14,1990]

The conversion of the futurists, parallel to that of the cubists, involved not only a renewed veneration of the cultural tradition of the past - but also a new iconography of haunting, pointlessly assembled quotidian objects painted with meticulous devotion to representational conventions.

> De Chirico describes his paintings as stages decorated for imminent but unknown and threatening acts, and insists on the demons that are inherent in the objects of representation:"The metaphysical work of art seems to be joyous, yet one has the impression that something is going to happen in the joyous world. [De Chirico n.d. p45]

De Chirico speaks of the tragedy of joy, which is nothing other than the calm before the storm and the canvas now becomes the stage upon which the future disaster can be enacted.

As was in the case in Picasso's "conversion", the futurists fully repudiated their earlier non-representational modes and procedures of fragmentation and pictorial molecularization. They further rejected the collage techniques by which they had forced the simultaneous presence of heterogeneous materials and procedures within the painted surface, and through which they had underlined the interaction of aesthetic phenomena with their social and political context. It is surely no accident that one of Severini's first paintings to manifest his return to history is a work called 'Maternity' [fig 14], which represents a mother suckling an infant in the traditional pose of the Madonna. Even more conspicuous, perhaps, is the case of Carra, who had been one of the most important futurists due to his development of non-mimetic pictorial signs, his systematic transgression of verbal and visual codes through the insertion of verbal fragments within painting, and his mechanization of pictorial production processes and their juxtaposition with pictorialised remnants of mechanical production processes. Carra turned at that time to representational depictions of biblical scenes in the manner of Tuscan painting. [fig 15+16]

The idealization of the painter's craft, the hypostasis of a past culture that serves as a fictitious realm of successful solutions and achievements that have become unattainable in the present, the glorification of the other culture - in this case Italy - all of these features currently discussed and put into practice once again - recur through the first three decades of twentieth century modernism just as they do to-day. They seek to halt modernism and to deny its historical necessity, as well as to deny the dynamic flux of social life and history, through an extreme form of authoritarian alienation from these processes.

> For Couteau, a return to narrative clarity and to from in the novel did not mean a denial of paradox, and in the same way neither did a return to representation in painting. Indeed it seems possible that it was at least partially out of a sense of paradox that Picasso turned against the antirepresentational dogma associated with Cubism to revive Ingres in 1915.... Counteau suggests that where audacity had become convention - as in Parisian avant-garde - the resurrection of the old modes could create a special kind of novelty: that working backwards the artist could even more dramatically look forward.
>
> [Green,1976.p218]

The Harlequins, Pierrots, Bujazzos and Pulcinelles invading the work of Picasso, Bechmann, Severini, Derain and others in the early twenties (and in the mid-thirties, even in the work of the former constructivist Rodchenko in Russia) can be identified as ciphers of an enforced regression. They serve as emblems for the melancholic infantilism of the avant-garde artist who has come to realize his historical failure. The clown functions as a social archetype of the artist as an essentially powerless,

docile and entertaining figure, performing his acts of subversion and mockery from an undialectical fixation on Utopian thoughts (Poggioli,1965,p327). The transformation of the subversive function of aesthetic production to plain affirmation necessarily manifests itself in every detail of production. The discovery of "history" as a treasure trove into which one might dip for the appropriation of abandoned elements of style is but one obvious

step. The secret attraction of the iconography of Italian theatre for Picasso and McKenna becomes more comprehensible in such a perspective [Buchloh,p10,1981].

In the adventurous painting of young Italians today, iconography is revived only to be confounded with stylistic flourishes.[Chia] personal remembrances [Clemente and Longobardi] or stern ironies [Mariani]. We can't separate the iconography of boy and fish from Chia's knowing flourishes of style. They are what the artist asks us to see and to see through - all of these reminders of early 20th century resourcefulness become iconography, just as iconography wells up out of style. Chia's "Paintings, Sculpture and Dust" (1981) suggests that to see is to render homage to those father figures [Morandi and Cezanne, in this case) who guide the eye in our times. The "dust" is indistinguishable from the object it covers and dust is to be brushed away. The artist must defeat authority of prior selves, or at least make others feel the weight of his own style's provisional regime. Further, his own mannerisms have to find a way to defeat themselves to remain elusive - see "The

Pharmacist's Son" 1981 [fig 17] where the boys meddling in his fathers alchemy had produced a Deco like version of a nude by the Mannerist sculptor Giovanni Bologna - a Mercury, perhaps. What message does this figure bear into the Orpho-Futurist depths of the scene ? Something about the ambiguity of any message, I think, about the way its meaning resides now in what it says, now in the way it says it, always in the tension between what and how. [Ratcliff 1982,p155]

Sandro Chia's point nearly always concerns fathers and sons. Francesco Clemente treats more of infants and the world. Fathers come into this too, for they, along with mothers, are among the notable figures in the world to which the infant turns when it is, in Clemente's favourite word "hungry". He presents images of young men, anxious of infant "hungers" and infant rage at adults' inability to satisfy those cravings. A grown-up heir to that inability, he feels himself vunerable to his own early, unrecapturable self. Hence the ancient children, the putti of the Renaissance and classical times, who dominate the action in so many of his paintings. "Priapea" [fig 18], a fresco of 1980, shows one of these creatures holding up a head of the artist himself - or of someone very like him. An adult arm reaches for the putto's genitals, but the arm, too, is severed. Elsewhere in the painting, other infants pose with other portions of adult bodies. A full figure of Clemente appears in the lower left hand corner, whole and fully dressed, yet his head seems unstable on his shoulders and one hand reaches out as if to remove it.

Clemente ingests memories of Pompeii; putting the entire classical past, aswell as its partial recovery by the Renaissance, to work in the spectacle of his infancy's cannibalistic pressure on his later life. "Priapea" is priapic in so far as it suggests the incestuous intimacy between the present moment and its origins.

This contemporary move by 'post-modern' painters is similar in its iconic eclecticism to the neo-classicism of Picasso, Carra and others. A variety of production procedures and aesthetic categories as well as the perceptual conventions that generated them, are being used as themes, techniques and inspirations.

The works of the contemporary Italians explicitly revive, through quotation, historical production processes, iconographic references and aesthetic categories. Their techniques range from fresco painting (Clemente) from casting sculpture in bronze (Chia), from primitive drawing to gestural abstraction. Iconographic references range form representations of saints [Salvo] to quotations from Russian constructivism (Chia). Free standing figurative sculpture combined with an installation of etchings, architectural murals with small-scale easel paintings, relief constructions with iconic objects.

The German neo-expressionists are similar with their use of atavistic production modes.

All of these artists have rejected modernist idioms, systems, techniques and vices. They hold a common belief in the "Great Tradition" in art, and their work is:

> Quite unlike the modernist collage, in which various fragments and materials of experience are laid bare, revealed as fissures, voids, unresolvable contradictions, irreconcilable particularization, pure heterogeneity, the historicist image pursues the opposite aim:that of synthesis, of the creation of a unity and totality.
> [Jameson 1980,p8]

CHAPTER 3.

Allegory, McKenna & Mariani

Many contemporary figurative painters are employing post-modern allegory as a form of narrative in their work. This form of allegory replaces the redemptive, purified and organic concept of form with textuality and arbitrariness of meaning as it is read into the already existing fragment, rather than emerging from an original totality. For Craig Owens, and American critic in allegory, the expressivity of the artist-genius is supplanted by a supplementarily by the reader. Allegory is a mode of re-reading the already written.

> In allegorical structure, then, one text is **read through** another.... the paradigm for the allegorical work is thus the palimpsest.... Allegorical imagery is appropriated imagery; the allegorist does not invent images but confiscates them. He lays claim to the culturally significant, poses as its interpreter and in his hands the image becomes something other (**allos** = other + **agoreuei** = to speak). He does not restore an original meaning that may have been lost or obscured; allegory is not hermeneutics, rather he adds another meaning to the image. If he adds however, he does so only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement. **[Owens,1980,p205]**

Stephen McKenna, a Briton working in Italy employs postmodern allegory in his paintings. Abandoning Abstract Expressionism in the 1970s he sought to reanimate classical figurative imagery. He makes paintings of demonstrable skill that speak of art history, the present, the artist and with optimal clarity. He wishes to rearticulate a pictorial rhetoric and in effect he evokes heroic models provided by Poussin and by David. 'The most obvious task of any specialist', he has written, 'is to study the skills conditions and method of practice of his own metier', and it seemed to him that Modernism

had finally turned art into the Great Masturbator that Dali suggested it was - had made of it a form of onanism.

McKenna is very aware of the implications of classicism today. His engagement with the 'grammar' of Classicism, can no doubt be traced to a fringe involvement with **'Art & Language'**. McKenna published his first text in this journal. The visual sensibilities and intellectual depth of the artist leave behind the tedium of Baldwin, Atkinson, Harrison and Co. McKenna on Poussin is instructive here.

> In contrast to the 'naive, stereotyped, intellectualism' of Late Modern idea dominated art, with Poussin it was different. When he chose a subject he set his intellect to work on it, at the same time allowing the subject to stimulate both his poetic imagination and his search for fresh knowledge.....For the spectator, Poussins stories provide both information and the stimulus to acquire more.

This eulogy can be applied to some of McKenna's own pieces, for instance **Clio Observing the Fifth Style 1985 (fig 1)**, a magnificent and alluring display of images and symbols. The pervading sense of this turbulent arrangement of stylised figures of painted and carved reliefs, and artfully arranged fragments, is allegory: St Sebastian is tied on the right to a pillar; at his feet a fragmented figurine from a crucifix, a sarcophagus with a carved scene of death as a fisherman; on the left Clio; the muse of history accompanied by a female nude reclines on books and musical instruments. The emerging themes of martyrdom, suffering, history and myth are backed up by the scenes set in

interlayed panels in the wall behind the female figures where a violent frenzied activity, possible the rape of the Sabine Woman is depicted; or in the friezes running along the base and top of the canvas which have dismembered limbs set into mud like corpses from a long forgotten battle. The complex structure offsets different spatial depths; four isolated heads of Roman women to the left of Clio appear like mural paintings, while the figures of Clio and the nude occupy a perspectively defined stage, yet their postures are more stylised and rigid than the naturalistic 'painted' heads. An intermediate spatial illusion is created by the sections or objects in which carving is depicted, which McKenna handles by picking out subtle details in the monochrome mottled texture.

Between 1971 and 1979 McKenna lived principally in Remagen, near Bonn, in railway station quarters allotted him by Johannes Wassmuth, under whose auspices Remagen's train station, saved from demolition, was transformed into small civic and cultural phenomenon. A tableau by McKenna of figures variously associated with the station - including Wassmuth, Bismarck and Kaiser Wilhelm II, Willy Brandt and Helmut Kohl, Liszt, Freud and Marcel Marceau - now hangs there. In 1979 McKenna left Bonn for Brussels and his present wife, the photographer Maria Gilissen, widow of Marcel Broadthaers. An allegory painted that year **The Muse of Metaphysics** in which a woman resembling his former wife is shown holding a represent-action of his old paintings, can be seen as a double rite of passage.**[Liebmann,1985,p115]**

In Italy to-day, where an art historical legacy has always been more conspicious 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 overt adherence to Neo-classic art.

In the mid 1970, Mariani had already created works which combined photography, writing and drawing of classical sculpture in a conceptual fashion. Mariani like McKenna has relied upon the most traditional embodiment of Italian art to bring into question the notion of art, beauty and aesthetics.

With sources culled from antiquity and the sixteenth through to eighteenth centuries, Mariani began to paint works which were exacting copies of paintings by a variety of Neo-classic artists such as Mengs, Kauffman, David and Ingres. For Mariani,

> the classical ideals of beauty, perfectly rendered asked the viewer to reconsider the juxtaposition of a Greco-Roman concept of eternal beauty and contemporary painting
> **[Kohn,1982,p63]**

The imitation of the past demonstrates the artists repugnance and contempt for the present. This case has been made in explaining these strikingly retrograde paintings of the Italian Mariani. He is known for his impeccable neo-classical images rife with antique allegories and praise for the ideas of Wincklemann.

In Michael Kohn's words

> The precision and clarity of [Mariani's] allegorical painting prevents us from seeing any message other than a denial of the present. [Kohn 1982,p63]

If we look at Marianis' **Constellazione de Leona [La Scuola di Roma] fig 2** an allegory of Post Modern Parnassus with friends, enemies critics and dealers connected around himself in the centre - a modern day version of Raphael's and Meng's versions of the traditional subject. We see here a series of texts layer one on top of another as an enigmatic commentary, like the structure of a myth. Is it serious, or parody, or more likely the combination, ironic allegory ? The facial expressions and detail would suggest this is double-coding. Mariani both solemn and supercilious sits below Ganymede being abducted to heaven by Zeus: Ganymede 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 Ontari, hence the hoop and stick. To the right, Francesco Clemente gazes past a canvas held by Sandro Chia; Mario Merz is Hercules in an understated bath-tub; a well known New York dealer waddles to the water personified as a turtle; critics write and admire their own profiles. All this is carried out in the mock heroic style of the late eighteenth century, the style of **la pittura colta** which Mariani has made his own.

The actual pathos of the image of the painting is not its sympathy with the past but its painstaking mimicry, its desire

to produce a hybrid representation; its desire to introduce the appearances of history into the present and in fact to fill this particular history with the faces of his contemporary life.'By strictly repeating this **circle** in its own historical possibility'. Derrida writes, 'we allow the production of some **elliptical** change of site within the differences involved in repition' **[Derrida p93]** and true to the practice of irreversible time, the time of things, cyclical time is replaced by the production of the shifting, expanded inventory of collaged identity, of mutating appearance.

Craig Owens sees allegory as a critical emancipatory strategy. Post-modernism does not allow the clean avantgardism associated with modernist radicality, and its critical component is difficult to disentangle from careerism and a complicity which could be read not so much as deconstructive as opportunist. This vulnerability of postmodernism to the accusation of too great a degree of complicity is connected with its deconstructive purpose. The boundaries are more blurred than is the case with autonomous art:

> 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, that adequation of the image to a referent, can be bracketed or suspended, and that the art object can be substituted [metaphorically] for the referent. This is the rhetorical strategy of self-reference upon which modernism is based.... Post modernism neither brackets nor suspends the referent [but works instead to problematize the activity of reference].
> **[Owens 1980]**

When the Post-modernist work speaks of itself, it is no longer to proclaim its autonomy, its self-sufficiency, its transcendence; rather, it is to narrate its own contingency in sufficiency, lack of transcendence. **[Newman 1986,p45]**

Thus against 'the symbolic, totalizing impulse which characterizes modernist art', post modernism tells of a desire for origin and finality, the ambition for authentic, self-created full-meaning. "A conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present - these are [allegorys'] two most fundamental impulses". **[Owens opcit,p64]**

The redemption of the classical past using allegory is fundamental to McKenna and Mariani:

> If we look at the American artists in the sixties, the exponents of Pop Art, they were taking advertising, this 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, and is something very private and specific to me, this great admiration, this great love I have for this time.
>
> **Carlo Maria Mariani**

McKenna uses traditional painting techniques as a militant proselytizer for the classical tradition of history painting and allegory, landscape and still-life. His breaking away from the dogmas and axioms of formal abstraction show the pursuit of an independent path which entails taking account of three thousand

years of culture and ' acknowledging his debt of kinship to the past' to quote Goethe's Divan poem. This was not because of any inclination towards historicism or eclecticism, nor was it simply because of his conviction that the present cannot be understood without knowing the past. It was in order to extract from the past those values, those images and that pictorial language which would enable him to express all those questions,feelings and desires that have been the perennial concern of mankind - but to do so in the context of this day and age. What at first sight looks like historicism is on the contrary a transformation, a metamorphosis of it; what seems superficially viewed, to imitation turns out upon closer inspection to be imagination. For this work one can truly say: "Look what you see is not what is there", if McKenna is a 'realist', he is a realist in the sense of medieval scholasticism; for him 'universalia', 'the idea', are 'realia', and not 'nomina'. He sees it as a fundamental task of painting to attempt to see ourselves and our surroundings... with an eye which can discern the poetic reality rather than the deceptive wrapping.

[McKenna,1984,p38]

This poetic reality, this creative, surrealistic imagination, gives McKenna's retelling of stories from mythology their compelling power of conviction, which raises them above the merely ancedotal into pictures whose mythical language even we, who have lost touch with the world of gods and goddesses, are able to understand,

> Mythology with its sisters Legend and Fable...provide us, even to-day, with a set of interlinked models for virtually

all our dreams, fears hopes and memories.
[McKenna 1981,p4]

I cannot move on without mentioning a composition which occupies in McKenna's oeuvre such a central position, which is such a paradigm of it, both in form and content, as the moving lament for the sacking of Troy O Ilium (fig 3) completed in 1982. It was profoundly significant that one of the drawings that served as preliminary studies for this masterly painting concluded the exhibition was Troy, Legend and Reality Brussels 1982. For in this painting the Legend has become a (higher) reality, the past a hic et nunc; the lament for the deconstruction of the Trojan civilisation is an outcry against the deconstructive forces that threaten the whole of mankind and our entire human 'civilisation'

O Ilium is not only a powerful synthesis of the extents of ancient Troy whose repercussions are still felt to-day.
[Hammacher,1983,p12]

but is at the same time a synthesis of the artists means of expression, of the imagery and the genres he employs: mythology, landscape and still-life.

One might be inclined to speak of a jumble of impressions, were it not that through the colours and the light, but above all through a co vert symmetry of equivalents, the painter has created in this at first sight 'ungoverned superabundance of details that seemed interesting to him', in this well nigh conglomeration of fragments - a unity of composition [Burchardt 1938,p85]

This painting can be aptly described as 'the timeless key to the home of a concealed and inexpressible reality and truth' P. Vanschiltgaarde.

It is this inner meaning that gives even his still-life paintings, with their naturalistic realism, a surrealistic effect. The almost tangible depiction of the objects, their emphatic 'presence',lend these carefully considered well-balanced compositions a magical quality which distinguishes them fundamentally from the still-lifes of Courbet or Chardin, to which they show some superficial kinship. If one looks for equivalents in the past, then they are rather to be found not only because of the manner in the 'spiritual acquires dominance over the mere vegetable'. [Voss 1925,p437]

Characteristic of McKenna's still lifes is the autonomy of each object and the tension which is thereby created between the objects multually. That autonomy is manifested in frontal arrangements which respect the individuality of each object, avoiding the overlapping and subordinations so typical of the baroque still-life. Once again the compositions receive unity and balance from a symmetry of equivalents. Many elements regularly recur: the book, open or shut; the apple; the wine glass and the carafe; grapes; the fish; stones worn by erosion and charred tree trunks and branches; fragments of antiquity. [fig 4+5]

McKenna's Twentieth century mentors include Magritte, de Chirico (all periods) and Meredith Frampton, with affinities most apparent in his still-lifes. For McKenna, still-life is not arbitrary arrangement of common object for the purpose of perceptual dissection, but a genre rich in poetic and allegoric dimensions.

Mariani's allegory is perhaps most prominent in his portraiture and figurative compositions. In his studio in Rome, he is surrounded by his canvases- portraits of contemporary artists and art world figures, each portrayed in a particular costume. Francesco Clemente wears an Indian turban and holds a small bird, Paul Maenz wears Goethes' famous wide-brimmed hat, Jannis Kaunellis holds a dagger and a Greek mask, and Sandro Chia, Mimmo Paladino, Roy Lichenstein and Mario Merz are all dressed appropriately. On an easel Andy Warhol stares out imperiously from under his shock of white hair; he wears the costume and cloak that Napoleon wore at his coronation as Emperor [fig 6]

Two figures look out from a canvas. One wears Goethe's hat, the other wears the hat that was associated throughout his life with Joseph Beuys. They are depicted in a neo-classical style, a kind of formal realism where every fold, drape, shadow and even leaf is in place; not naturalistic but composed. Behind the figures in **Deutschland, Deutschland (fig 7)** 1985, is the pyramidal monument from the English Cemetery in Rome, a place where Mariani often goes to draw. In a larger painting, **It is**

Forbidden to Awaken the Gods, 1984 (fig 8), two muses, or artists are asleep. Each has a brush in his hand. They lie with putti at their side among some vast antique sculptures: a veiled head and a massive stone hand. The scene is like a stage setting with evanescent, luminous lighting. Another painting shows a seated artist with Laurels adorning his head. With his right hand he holds a brush and is putting the last touches to the image of the baby. The unfinished baby looks startled. A soft glow surrounds the illusion of **II pittore Mancino.** The left-handed Painter 1983 **(fig 9)**

> The only means of becoming great and, if possible, inimitable is by imitating the ancients.....For me the opposite of independent thought is the copy, not the imitation:by means of the latter what is imitated, if it is done with understanding, may assume almost another nature and become original.
> **[wincklemann** quoted by Sandy Nairne **1980,p113]**

Carlo Maria Mariani and Stephen McKenna employ post-modern allegory in their paintings. Their use of allegory upholds the view of Wincklemann, they do not merely imitate the past, they are sensitive,understanding and through their use of allegory as a form of narrative their work takes on new meaning. Their techniques long abandoned by the modernists, has until now been deemed conventional, even reactionary. McKenna's paintings appear anachronistic: his still lifes have symbolic meaning, his figures are allegorical. He is trying to reinvest with unity a culture which has long since abandoned that unity; his paintings are reminiscent of the work of Magritte, Bocklin and de Chirico, they question and criticize modernism so that he is now being considered post-modernist.

It was Goethe who said, 'Every good idea has already been thought:suffice it only to think it again' Mariani's work proposes exactly this kind of continuity between the past and the present. But in doing so there is a sense of loss, of frustration and disappointment. Marianis' ideals are personal and particular and he incorporates irony into his relation with his works. It is less certain that a gallery or museum audience will read the irony he intends, and the work is always in danger of being perceived as no more than a bizarre 'reproduction' of the neo-classical values of the late-eighteenth century.

> In allegory the observer is confronted with the **facies hippocratica** of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that from the very beginning, had been ultimately 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 on which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise to not only the enigmatic question of human existence as such, but also the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the allegorical way of seeing.
>
> **[Owens 1980]**

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