

The Art of Decypher

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by ROBIN MASON

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Should a piece of artwork dictate its meaning to us? I love the unique work of the art collective Platoon, though their eclectic and anarchaic pieces may be misconstrued by the viewer. I also love Sebastian Horsley's crucifixion paintings. It is undeniable that the grotesque process has produced a torturous emotional beauty that I see rarely, but again, viewers may associate these works with 'suffering for your art' nonsense (though this has never been my opinion). This led me to look into the question of what art means. Is it up to us to decide what we read into a piece of art, or is it dictated to us? Robin Mason talks us through meanings within historical, religious paintings and Christos Tolera and Sam Spenser ask how much do we really need to know?

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part 1 The Dove and the Mobile Phone

A rainy Sunday afternoon in 1982. I was a painting student at the Royal College of Art. My tutor, Mario Dubsky, suggested I visit the National Gallery to see the Early Italian Paintings. Without this guidance I would probably still be seeing these paintings as merely something from the past, failing to understand their continual activity in the role as mentor to contemporary artists.



The paintings in the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery speak a language which, although initially may not be understood, begins to communicate like an aria or operatic work in a foreign language. They can be admired and responded to without knowledge of the subject. It is this poetic resonance of communication stirring something inside us that speaks beyond the bounds of subject.

While maintaining the lineage of biblical, theological tale, the works hold, within the skin of paint, a medieval 'sign language'; a use of metaphor and symbol which folds the theological with the mystical, arousing deep-

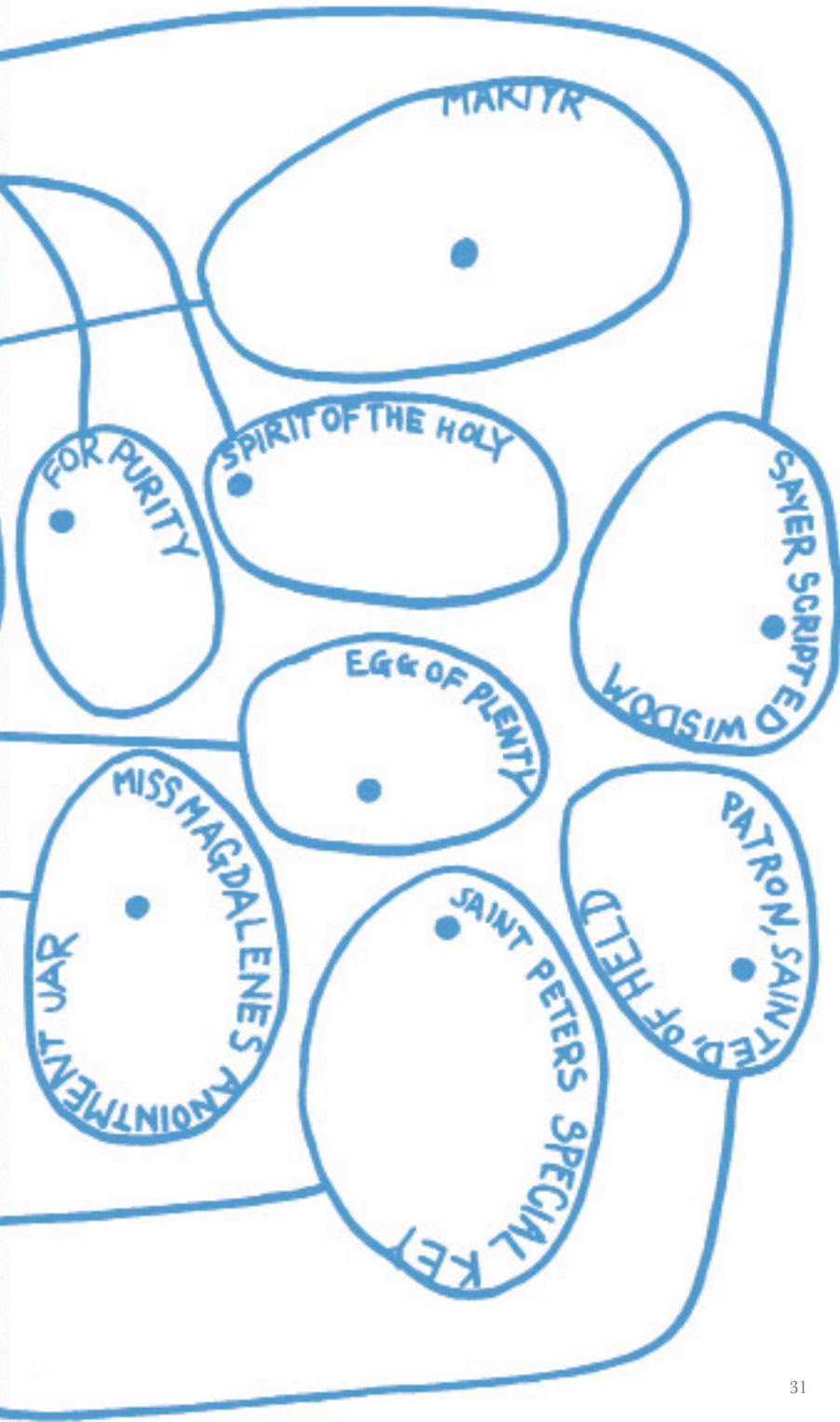
seated personal reveries that are constantly weaving their way out of the beauty of the paintings. Try to imagine a supernatural form of communication. This is the sort of task that challenged the medieval image-maker.

The Holy Spirit (an aspect of God that links the sacred and the profane) could be seen today as a personal mobile phone line between God in Heaven and individuals on Earth. In medieval painting this phenomenon was represented by a white dove. Whenever users of sacred imagery viewed a dove, tumbling from the sky, nestling against the ear of a saint, or hovering above the image of Christ, they knew they were seeing a moment of communication or blessing from God.

They knew that a hand coming from the clouds was the Hand of God. Small dashes of gold paint that flickered in the candlelight were seen as rays of divine light. A white lily represented the Virgin Mary's purity. The pomegranate, often held by the child Jesus, was a symbol of both the Church and the resurrection.

A walled garden symbolised Mary's virginity. Mary Magdalene is recognised by the anointing jar she holds. Cuts or folds in robes often echo the wounds of Christ and are sometimes eroticised. They can act as both the representation of the point of impregnation of the Virgin Mary, a slit emanating divine light and, in the case of Mary Magdalene, echoing her own sexuality in relation to her mourning and longing at the loss of Christ. The person holding a key (the key to heaven) is St Peter.

Writers of sacred literature held books (scriptures). Small models of buildings (churches or cathedrals) are held by the patron saint or founder of the building. A palm



leaf held over the shoulder tells us the individual was martyred for their belief, stone and knives on their heads show us the implements of their martyrdom. And so it continues...

As viewers of art works we can discover that, rather than events like the crucifixion of Christ taking place in the Holy Land, artists often depicted the event in the regional landscape of the church or cathedral for which



the work was created. A good example of this can be seen at the National Gallery in ‘The Assumption of the Virgin’.

The visiting of the Virgin Mary’s grave (which is filled with white lilies, a symbol of her virginity and a sign that she had ascended into Heaven) takes place on a Tuscan hilltop with the walled city of Florence in the distant landscape.

We should also remember that while we view the historic gowns of the participants involved in the theatrical re-enactments of the events of the Holy Land, the stand-ins are often wearing the most fashionable contemporary clothes of the medieval period. Today’s equivalent would be to dress the attendants at the scene in the couture clothes of Comme des Garçons or Julian Macdonald with the Millennium Wheel and the Gherkin in the background.

Thanks to Mario Dubsky, who sadly died soon after I left the Royal College, I continue to be intrigued by these art works. I still borrow and transcribe from their dynamic compositions. I understand how the artists of the past speak across the centuries to mentor us in our attempts to make different artworks that are contemporary and relevant now. This is our creative world breathing in a pigmented medium at the National Gallery, full of potential, full of possibility. Why not try wandering, on a rainy Sunday afternoon, into the mystical world of painting?

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His specialist research is on the impact of the Isenheim Altarpiece on contemporary painting practice. He is Head of Painting at City and Guilds of London Art School. robinmasonlondon.com

Adoring Saints (previous page and inserts) by Jacopo di Cione and workshop, provided by the National Gallery nationalgallery.org.uk

Annotation (previous page) by Craig Barnes.

Craig was recently selected as one of the UK’s emerging artists to watch by The Catlin Guide 2010 craigbarnes.co.uk.

part 2 Lost in Translation

How I had come to believe what I thought to be true is a mystery to me. It was as though I had been passed the baton and in turn realised I had handed a banana back to myself.

However, rather than be grateful for the enlightenment that was being offered to me by way of the ‘truth’, I felt as though I had been robbed of something far more precious to me, my freedom to choose. Explanation

would take away the opportunity for interpretation, which in turn will stifle my imagination. I will be robbed of the reverie that is ever present in the not known, the reverie I delight in when I am in the presence of the art that I love.

Jacques-Louis David’s painting ‘The Death Of Marat’ is one such work. Am I now to be governed by the restrictions imposed upon me by the ‘truth’? Do we really need to know what a painting means?

In a discussion regarding the ‘sense of purpose’ that this issue of .Cent is exploring, we spoke about works of art that had a message to carry and a life beyond the time when they were made. We spoke of how it was possible to assign different meaning to work in the context of contemporary issues. We also talked of the use and influence of symbols in historical and religious paintings in how we perceive meaning in art.

Responding to this topic almost immediately, in my mind I could see the man in a turban, in the tub, letter in one hand and pen in the other, in a beautiful repose. ‘The Death Of Marat’, I explained, was one of my favourite paintings and held as much resonance today as when it was painted. And that is when my imagination took over.

This painting, I proceeded to excitedly chatter, that I held in such high esteem, that I made a pilgrimage to see at The Royal Academy in London three years ago, only to be disappointed due to the queues and an illness that kept me from standing for any length of time, was one of suicide. A young man caught up in the conflicts of the French Revolution that had lost the heart and the will for battle. Faced with the inevitable choices ahead of him, he chose to take his own life. Presented in a

quasi-religious composition, evoking the sufferings and sacrifice of Jesus, I had always held a romantic view of a noble death portrayed, one that makes a stand against war, a very modern and contemporarily significant gesture. Yet, this was not really the case.

Researching the history of the painting, in preparation for writing about it, revealed the facts that I was not aware of. It turns out that the man in the painting was in fact a radical journalist, a friend of the artist, who was murdered by an enemy. Jacques-Louis David actually painted this portrait in order to highlight his own causes, in support of the beliefs that he and his friend shared. The painting was a piece of propaganda, consequently placing its significance to me very much in the time it was made. What happened to me in light of these ‘facts’ is that my pleasure was suddenly curtailed, albeit temporarily.

In the immediate aftermath of this revelation, I had found myself in the position of an observer rather than a participant experiencing this painting. I thought I had lost something that I held dear until I realised that I had merely replaced one set of ‘truths’ with another.

Over this time, I have come to believe there is no such thing as ‘truth’ in art, only a subjective perception according to information available. So is it better to not know? Is Marat’s death, or ‘The Death Of Marat’, any less noble in my eyes now that I am not under the illusion of the ‘facts’ as I knew them or have now come to know?

For me one of the joys of the participation in the arts is the indulgence in a reverie, which can bypass the intellect and lead us to magical places, unexpected and



unforeseen. David makes use of all the tools available to him to take us where he wants us to go but long after his death, and ‘The Death Of Marat’ the painting has a life of its own that each individual accompanies to their own particular destination. The sense of purpose is never diminished in art. It just changes.

Christos Tolera is an artist who lives in London. He is .Cent’s Creative Associate for Art christostolera.com

Death of Marat (previous page) by Jacques-Louis David provided courtesy of the Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium fine-arts-museum.be

part 3

What’s He Building in There?

Let me set the scene...

A team of three figures work into the night, behind the locked door of a former warehouse in London’s East End. The room is cold and almost empty. There’s a desk littered with scribbles, blueprints and plans, a photocopier, overhead projectors displaying symbols and a bunch of satellite images sellotaped to the walls. You can sense the camaraderie.

These three are the masterminds behind an operation to create five structures, which will be placed in some of the most hostile, bleak environments on the planet. The areas in which these structures will appear are the antithesis of the city. They are faraway regions, virtually void of any human imprint. Such spaces are sublime, vast and magical, literally thousands of miles from the nearest white wall. This unconventional, elusive studio refuses to tell you where they are going, what they are



building or why.

This is about posing questions not presenting answers.
This is an art of ambiguity, myth and mystification.

A puzzle.

One of the three artists, Sam Spenser, listens to the Tom Waits track, What's He Building, as he works, and answers the questions the song poses of his work.

What's he building in there?

What the Hell is he building in there?

No, I'm not even sure if I know what these things are.

I know they're just right.

I know where they've got to go.

There's a lot of faith and intuition.

He has subscriptions to those magazines...

Logistically, this is massive. There's a lot of research and studying to be done.

He never waves when he goes by,

He's hiding something from the rest of us...

There is a very good reason why the rest of you don't know yet.

You are blissfully oblivious.

It would be counter-productive to say too much.

It's not about being cagey or coy.

I simply have to hide something in order for it to be found.

Answers are boring.

He's all to himself... I think I know why...

You're wrong.

We are, in fact, a force of three.

Introducing: Lara Lesmes and Diego Cano Lasso, as well as myself.

Now what's that sound from under the door?

He's pounding nails into a hardwood floor...

There is timber

There is metal.

There is fire.

There is light.

It is relentless.

And I swear to God I heard someone moaning low...

It's just beautiful.

And I keep seeing the blue light of a T.V. show...

The screens aren't for a T.V. signal.

At the moment we just get static. It will take time...

He has no friends...

We keep ourselves to ourselves...

But he gets a lot of mail,

I'll bet he spent a little time in jail...

No comment.

I heard he was up on the roof last night signalling with a flashlight?

Signals and transmissions.

We are working with light and the hue needs to be just right. The signals are everything...

And what's that tune he's always whistling...

It's a kind of soundtrack or theme tune.

A heartbeat.

What's he building in there?

What's he building in there?

We have a right to know...

all in good time...

Sam Spenser's words from somewhere in Hackney (2010).

Tom Waits' words from What's He Building?

Mule Variations (1999).

Beacon For Land, 2009, photograph (previous page) by Marta Michalowska.