

ART FIRST

CONTEMPORARY ART

Lino Mannocci

Stories from the Sea

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In association with the Italian Cultural Institute



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Lino Mannocci: Of Land and Sea

Lino Mannocci tells us stories of the sea. Not the salty tales of an old sea-dog, but modern parables of deep resonance. The British notion of the seaside resort, of sticks of rock and naughty Donald McGill postcards, of shrill Punch and Judy disputes, of sunburn and amusement arcades, finds few echoes in Mannocci's imagery. His paintings have a classic calm much dependent on the pellucid Mediterranean light which suffuses them; here is a very different sort of Arcadia. Mannocci draws deliberately and intelligently on a wide variety of sources, making reference to mythological and biblical stories, as well as conscientiously employing the contemporary, albeit with a timeless air. His pictures identify key moments in the quotidian drama of existence: the ordinary event raised to heroic proportions (in terms of the pictorial spotlight devoted to it), but without jeopardizing its innate modesty.

Mannocci paints landscape, most often within sight of the sea. He was born in Viareggio, a coastal town in Tuscany, and returns every summer to Montigiano, a village just outside his birthplace. His great loves are Claude and Corot, but his real appreciation of an English painter such as Paul Nash is evident in the clarity of structure he brings, for instance, to depictions of a particular old Italian port which he regularly paints. (I'm thinking here of Nash's great series of paintings of the sea-wall at Dymchurch, in Kent, as to be found in *The Shore* of 1923.) Mannocci is as eclectic in his looking as he is in his thought.

Mannocci admires many of the painters of the Italian Novecento, such as Sironi, Carra and Morandi. Between 1980 and 1984 he was a member of a group of Italian artists called *La Metacosia*, who painted simple objects, interiors and the urban environment, in a highly-detailed style in order to reveal the essential non-sense at the root of existence. Painting became a form of metaphysical speculation, but Mannocci was not for long satisfied with the group's overriding concern for the external world of appearances. In order to achieve more intense results, Mannocci began to research further within himself. As de Chirico put it: 'profound statements must be drawn by the artist from the most secret recesses of his being.'

Often the landscape Mannocci now paints is inhabited. Single figures will occupy centre stage, as with the extended series of paintings and prints featuring 'The Great Conductor'. Another key theme in recent years has been 'The Annunciation', which Mannocci has depicted with various degrees of metaphor and literalness. (In a recent painting on this subject, the focus is on a female figure confronted by a pair of downy white wings.) Mannocci is not interested in anecdote, yet he retains an unswerving and very personal involvement with narrative at the service of his art. History is here, and imagination, as well as man's physical nature. Nor does Mannocci neglect the soul. Humanity's spiritual dimension is constantly referred to, hinted at, suggested - in a sufficiently gentle and oblique way, to sketch its presence without confining it. There is a metaphysical factor at work here, quietly active like yeast, which we should acknowledge without striving to define it.

Introduction

Also Mannocci paints portraits of the sea itself, in many moods and guises. He interprets it as a ball or a bowl, with a horizon which curves sharply like the moon. Sometimes he paints the sea as a desert, at others as a pyramid. (Again there is a reference to Paul Nash - compare his 1912 ink and watercolour drawing *The Pyramids in the Sea*. But whereas Nash places these monumental structures *in* the sea, Mannocci transforms the sea itself into pyramidal form.) Perhaps the most impressive image (and the most potentially terrifying) is when the sea becomes a vertical wall, like a vast tidal wave heralding the end of the world.

The water's face is frequently shown encrusted with waves formalized to look like handles or steps, as if the high facade of the 'Tirreno' Sea could literally be scaled like a wall. Perhaps a foreground figure or two, rapt in some harmless pursuit, going about their daily life, or carefree on holiday, is included against the marine backdrop. In another recent picture, a de Chirico-like sculpture of a head on a plinth rings the narrative changes. In other paintings, distant figures appear with trees, or clumps of snow, or a pond, or clouds. The important point is that the very specificity of these things (their identity) is deliberately left ambiguous - they exist primarily as elements, readily interchangeable, entirely at Mannocci's pictorial discretion.

Mannocci is careful never to be too direct, for he has a horror of empty rhetoric. Over the years he has refined

and developed both his palette and his compositional approach to painting. The palette has now been deliberately restricted to Burnt Umber and Blue-Black, with a controlled appearance of red for the figures. Mannocci prefers to paint upon the heavily-textured back of prepared jute because it is dry and difficult, and discourages the grandiose gesture he distrusts so much. The viewer is further distanced by Mannocci's favoured device of a picture within a picture, or internal framing. Just as he once exhibited paintings of paintings (the painting depicted leaning against a wall within a fully-realized setting such as a small windowless room or cupboard), he now merely sets a large blank border of jute around his images. The spatial complexity of the earlier paintings has thus been effectively simplified and made more coherent.

The paint is applied with meticulous small touches, in a kind of tonal pointillism. No luscious swirls of pigment for Mannocci. So averse is he to the presence within his images of anything deemed to be extraneous, that he takes a palette knife to the surface after applying the paint in order to smooth away all trace of the brush. In a considered effort to escape the overtly descriptive, Mannocci makes stencils of his figures before allowing them to appear in a painting. First he draws on paper, seeking out the least eloquent but still serviceable form, which he then transfers to acetate sheet and cuts out. This stencil is used to convey a schematized figure - an idea of a figure, real *not* a mannequin, yet not intended

to be especially individuated - into the composition. Restraint is the watch-word.

Edges are important, as dividing lines, like frames in a cartoon strip. When Mannocci breaks a painting down into a number of rectangles, they are sometimes meant to be read individually, sometimes sequentially, and sometimes in groups. More than one storyline is likely to be proceeding, and Mannocci makes a number of the rectangular cells appear calmer than others, emptier of incident, so that the eye (and mind) may rest.

In 1979 Mannocci began to paint over postcards and to exhibit the results. There is a kind of modesty inherent in this miniaturism, though matched by a firmness of intention. The postcard format (which has evidently influenced the structure of his oil paintings), neither overblown in size nor scale, with a printed picture already in evidence and waiting to be adapted, permits a range of interpretation from the conceptual to the surreal. The postcard is eminently suited to Mannocci's subversive but *intimiste* spirit.

Mannocci's paintings are like worn tablets or the illustrative plates of some rare alchemical codex, abstruse in their symbology, but promising to yield their secrets to the true adept. They evince an interest in eschatology, the study of last things and the final destiny of the world. This has long been one of art's subjects,

but more often as a demonstration of doctrine (as an aspect of the Christian religion, for example), than as a form of speculation or enquiry. Mannocci sets up a pictorial situation in which the viewer is invited to consider these things, to ponder the unthinkable, rather than be directed safely by an established formula. Equally there is no necessity to meditate along these lines - the pictures will please on other levels, not least the purely painterly and formal. Mannocci is subtle in his investigations, not tub-thumping.

Does the emphasis on restraint indicate a psychological delicacy on the part of the artist? I am not suggesting a lack of emotional robustness, so much as an ability to respond with unusual sensitivity. Mannocci has proved in past work that he can be fierce, but that impetus seems now to have become less extreme, even at times to have modulated to a lyrical melancholy. Is it for this reason that a Mannocci painting is often the vehicle for other people's dreams? Or perhaps nostalgia for a lost Golden Age is responsible for Mannocci's vision. As Degas said so conclusively: 'the painter does not draw what he sees, but what he must make others see. Only when he no longer knows what he is doing does the painter do good things.' In the last analysis, it's dangerous to try to explain too much.

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