

Matter and Metaphor – Angus Pryor’s ‘Canterbury Giant’ with Rembrandt’s ‘Woman Taken in Adultery’.

It is sufficient that philosophically we understand that in all imitation two elements must coexist, and not only coexist, but must be perceived as coexisting. These two constituent elements are likeness and unlikeness, or sameness and difference, and in all genuine creations of art there must be a union of these disparates.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, On Poesy or Art, 1818

I.

With Coleridge's famous formulation in mind, this analysis will consider likeness and unlikeness in recent work by Angus Pryor by referring to historical painting with which, in Pryor's own admission, his paintings aspire to engage in dialogue. Likeness, though, is not considered simply in the sense of finding something in the incidents of representation that are to be found in his paintings – a bird here, an Ionic column over there – the likeness of the recognizable image. Nor is unlikeness defined here by degrees of abstraction. Instead, they are sought in the metaphorical content of the paint and the image - substantially real paint (likeness) and metaphorical meaning (unlikeness) are explored by using painting's historical language, specifically in the work of Rembrandt. In Pryor's paintings the two aspects are literally inscribed into each other, and are to be found in the most idiosyncratic and awkward elements of the work – the excessively rich and dense surfaces, the lumps of congealed paint sitting right on the surface of the image, and the startling shapes and imagery that give the paintings their immedia



Canterbury Giant, Oil based mixed media on canvas, 2.4m x 2.4m

Pryor's painting 'Canterbury Giant' (2007), on first analysis, appears to represent two large, pink centipede-like forms wriggling up the length of the canvas, embedded in a dense mass of voluptuous and acrid colour. Some relief to the central section's heated agitation is provided by the small oases of blue and pale brown in the corners of the painting. What appears to be a yellow path meanders along the base of the painting and up the left-hand side, toward a small, forlorn-looking grey, yellow and white shape suggesting the tower of Canterbury cathedral; this is then encroached upon by the constellations of abstract fleurs-de-lis which proliferate across the painting's surface. The surface is richly encrusted with many layers of paint, squeezed on like icing sugar, brushed, sprayed and smeared into a congealed pictorial mass. There is a strong sense of an event taking place - a fleshy, libidinal striving-upwards of the pink centipede-like forms embedded in a celebratory frenzy throughout, like fireworks or a carnival. These, the 'road' and the cathedral-like element resonate with certain themes and ideas from art history, the analysis of which – with a degree of retroactive interpretation – can be made to illuminate some of the content of 'Canterbury Giant'.

III.



Rembrandt 'The Woman Taken in Adultery' (1644)

Take Rembrandt's 'Woman Taken in Adultery' (1644, National Gallery, London) – distinct events are pictorially dramatised to convey the Biblical narrative of this tale of transgression and forgiveness. Here, however, painting's nature as metaphor also operates in a richly suggestive way. The adulterous event – its lure and the judgement which is present at its core – is transferred (and hence seen in the context of judgement) to the high priest's

throne on the right - the two columns in this domain standing as metaphors for the two phallic members within the woman's adulterous marriage, and the richly painted gold of the throne suggesting both spirituality and decadent sensuality. In the foreground, by contrast, we have the event of Christ's sacredness, illuminating the shame and humiliation of the woman - her veil lifted, she is exposed, her face made naked (Levinas spoke of the 'nakedness of the human face'). There has been a journey – and this is the fateful encounter toward which the journey was made.

Pryor's painting contains a similar constellation of events - sexuality and the sacred – expressed in a way which is revealing in its likeness and unlikeness to Rembrandt. Here, there is a conflation of events that are to be seen separately in Rembrandt, and a consequent replacement of their narrative function with a metaphoric one. The wriggling, pink, flesh-like phalluses in 'Canterbury Giant' embody the essence of nakedness – but whereas in Rembrandt, the nakedness of the woman is painfully exposed to the compassionate gaze of Christ, here nakedness itself is embodied as a blind intensity, unaware of itself. And where, in Rembrandt, the double-phallic metaphor retains its veiled understatement in the background, here it is the central focus, and the Cathedral tower shape, emblematic of the spiritual, is squeezed into the margins. This tower shape contains a simplicity of mood in its relative 'purity'; it is untouched, as such, by the excessive tumult of paint accretion, and seems even to wear a sorrowful expression on its face. We see here a parallel hint of the formal simplicity and sorrowful expressions of Christ and the woman – the tower as a naked face.

'On one level, these paintings are about evolution' says Pryor of the series of works to which 'Canterbury Giant' belongs. The journey in Rembrandt, which culminates in the woman's meeting with Christ, is paralleled by the road leading to the cathedral – the journey of pilgrimage. This is significant in the context of a work 'about evolution' - there is a co-existence of two disparate elements here too. Coleridge's formulation of 'a union of..disparates' can be extended to the relationship here between the spiritual and the blind forces of evolution. It may also be the case that evolution sidelines the church – there's another metaphor.

IV.

The joining together in 'Canterbury Giant' of these events that are separate in Rembrandt replaces the narrative and representational dimension – there is no clear story – with an 'open space' in which interpretation can find meaning. Yet nor can we call this an abstract painting. Quite apart from whether we look at Pryor's paintings as figurative or abstract, there are layers of metaphor that operate from the oscillating dialectic of likeness and unlikeness.

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6.7.08