

Francesco Clemente in Conversation with Pamela Kort

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PK: When did you first come across the word palimpsest?

FC: I imagine, given that I belong to the last generation that received a classical education, I must have encountered the word in school. But I suspect that it's used more frequently in Italian, as it appears to be an uncommon English word.

PK: Did the concept attract you because you find languages intriguing? You enjoyed learning Latin; is that correct?

FC: I did, for many years. There was always something enigmatic about the story of the palimpsest, about the story of a text that gets erased, gets rewritten. The layering was attractive to me then, and remains now; it resonates with the view I have of my work as a fragmented narrative that rewrites itself as it goes along. Bear in mind that I come from Italy, and that Giorgio De Chirico wrote at the bottom of what is maybe his most poignant self portrait, "*Quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?*" What shall I be able to love, if not the unspoken mystery of things?

PK: Are you aware that the majority of palimpsests discovered—there haven't been all that many—were found in Italy?

FC: I didn't know that. But I guess if I think of it, the word palimpsest in Italian is also an ironic notation of something ancient, very complicated, and difficult to approach.

PK: But when did you really come into contact with the significance of the word palimpsest?

FC: I don't know that I ever 'came into contact' with the word. I don't know that I've ever 'come into contact' with any word. As a painter, I tend to look at words in a more pictorial way. This can be disconcerting for a literally-oriented person who thinks that words are words and mean what they mean. But for me, a word has a more atmospheric value. 'Palimpsest' seems to have a certain gravitas. It has weight. There is a mystery to it. There is an austerity to it. Part of the show is a series of three long, long scrolls—three 18-meter long watercolors. A palimpsest is not a scroll per se, but invokes the idea of a work that has been rolled and that has been opened and that has been continuous in length.

PK: Now, that's interesting to me, because the word has this meaning of erasing but it also has the meaning of inscribing. I was wondering if this back-and-forth process is part of your manner of working.

FC: Yes. I've always thought that there are painters who are builders, who accumulate what they make and manufacture, and there are painters who are more like sweepers, who clean up. I've always seen myself as belonging to the second category. My objective in painting is to clean up, to remove, to eliminate, to wash. I have the same attitude toward 'the line' as I have toward 'the word.' The lines are meant to indicate the other lines that you don't see, rather than to be taken literally. There's a form of imbalance in my work which once made someone say I know nothing of composition, which I thought was very amusing as it's probably true. On the other hand, it's very distinctive, how I move across the limits of the canvas, across the paper.

PK: Isn't it so that the sweeping process you just described as characteristic of your method is similar to the one that brings the palimpsest into view? It's scraping. It's rubbing, rather than building. Do you want to comment on this?

FC: Certainly. I don't literally scrape and rub when I paint, but the way the paint is applied is less of a brushstroke than a trace of brushstroke. It's exactly like sweeping the ground. You have this thin layer of dust that's still sitting there, and that's the painting.

PK: Beautiful; an image as a trace of something rather than the thing itself. Is it for you a matter of allowing something to come up to the surface, the way a palimpsest somehow pops up into view? Do you think that's an element of your painting?

FC: Yes, it is, definitely. In these paintings the attention paid to the ground is equal if not superior to the attention paid to what is applied to the ground. The same is true for the iconography. There is never appropriation in the work, never a literal quoting from traditional iconography—where traditional doesn't mean conservative or old, but traditional with a capital "T": belonging to the contemplative and gnostic traditions that exist all over the world. Instead, the references are actualized exactly as is in a palimpsest: by erasing in the mind and in the image the original story, and re-writing, re-telling, re-painting it.

PK: To what degree would you say that your works are in a sense written in paint?

FC: I should add one more element to what we were saying before, which is related to the formalities of the paintings, to the actual appearance of the paintings. There is a preoccupation with openness. The ambition to make work that is open without sacrificing detail and simplicity, work that is not taken for granted, and that is not literally simple. There are all these dilemmas and questions related to the idea of the palimpsest: of

having a pre-existing score and getting rid of it and re-writing it.

PK: You know that the word palimpsest also has a geological connotation: it can indicate a geomorphic surface that has not been completely erased by marine transgressions. When we were working together in 2004 on the exhibition, “Clemente: Shipwreck with the Spectator,” at MADRE in Naples, we talked a lot about how important the city’s archeological heritage is to you. I recall in particular how drawn you felt to the image of the diver in Paestum. Talk to me about this in relationship to how a palimpsest works, in terms of diving through layers of experience.

FC: Absolutely. The palimpsest in relation to archeological layering is a wonderful metaphor for how I work with iconography: referring constantly to traditional images—i.e. images that have or traditionally have had the power of healing, the power of harmonizing human beings with themselves and others—but without the context. I’m not a mystic; I’m not a contemplator. I’m a contemporary artist, so I use traditional material and rewrite it for the audience. But I never provide a final text. I never provide a final...

PK: Script?

FC: Script! So it really is a layering: unveiling, veiling, saying, unsaying. I think “shifting” is the key word here; it’s very important to constantly shift your view, the viewer’s view, to make clear that this is not religion. These are just artifacts related to the experience we have of the world now, in our time right now, and that’s it.

PK: As you were speaking just now, I was thinking that there’s also a psychological dimension to the word palimpsest. The record it proffers is very different than a Freudian decoding of experience. I was wondering whether you wanted to comment on your early interest in people like R. D. Laing, and his affiliation with the anti-psychiatry movement? Obviously in this show the term palimpsest implies the fluctuations of your life, your experiences and your recollections of them, and how these function in your paintings.

FC: R. D. Laing was very close to Trungpa, who was the Vajirayana teacher of Allen Ginsberg. Trungpa came up with a wonderful definition of our experience of self and other as the experience of “the continuity of discontinuity.” My ambition is that both my life and my work can be expressions of the acceptance of the continuity of discontinuity, and can be a manifestation of freedom. The moment you accept that there is no continuum; that there is no reality to a solid notion of self; that there is no reality to the historical narrative of art; that all of these are mechanically contrived tools that serve one purpose or another, or should I say the designs of one class against another—the moment you accept this, you can be free.

PK: It seems to me that from the beginning, though, you are often the subject of your own work. For example, let's take the 3 Polaroids from 1972. Even there you seem to be interested in the process of obscuring and revealing. Is this something that carries through the whole exhibition? Often what seems to be a self-portrait just isn't that at all. How can we understand that hard-to-pin-down element in connection with the palimpsest, as something that is underneath and above at the same time?

FC: That shifting viewpoint you find in the exhibition is a translation of something that exists in our experience, because either we are the witnesses or the witnessed. Either we objectify ourselves, or we act. There is nothing in between. So when it comes to approaching a painting or an object, again, there aren't really that many choices. Either you objectify the knowledge that you believe you have—and then the result will be that limpid iconography, those images in the body of my work which invite a remembrance, a comforting familiarity, the clarity and seduction that is more easily shared by the audience—or you simply act to absorb and be absorbed by the self that you are, and make something without knowing where it's going.

There is, I believe, a minority of paintings of this kind in the body of my work. They are fewer because this is a harder way both to live and to make things. It is also a more inaccessible stance. On the other hand, I am very fond of these “unpopular” works; they are the fibers of a thread woven into the work, a thread of formlessness. I don't want to call it abstraction, but formlessness. As with a palimpsest, to write something new in your life you have to erase what has been written for you by someone else. This someone else is always writing, so our life is this constant struggle to erase what has been written so we can write our own story.

PK: When I first got to know your work I thought the funerary paintings were such an unusual break. But the more we're talking about this, the more I see that the idea of resurrection or subterranean space—which is related to the place of the palimpsest—has had to do with the work from the beginning.

FC: Again, we're talking about layering. The most immediate layers one encounters as a human being are underground, ground, above ground, the subterranean, the superficial, the ethereal. I've always asked myself, where do the works I make come from? And I've always liked to imagine that these works don't belong to me, an individual artist, with an individual story, with an individual problematic. I've always wanted to imagine that the works belong, if not to a civilization, at least to a place in space, and that I am simply unearthing the material from the different places I find it. Some of it underground, some of it on the ground, and some of it I have to catch as it's flying above my head.

PK: Those thoughts are in a way primary motifs in your work. Take, for example, what seem to be thousands of pebbles in one of your largest works, *Sky* (1984). Isn't such an

image deeply connected to a palimpsest because it gives form in a sense to what is cast up? Do you see your work like that—as a stream? It washes free?

FC: Consciousness, the irresistible wish to live, the irreversibility of life: this also is the scroll, the image of the scroll. But the horizon of the scroll, if we are wise, immediately leads us to an image of verticality, to the necessity of verticality. I mean, there is a reason why the cross exists in every tradition. This is the motif we find both in our experience and in the experience of making art: the script that we are given is horizontal, mechanical. We go from one thing to another. With the palimpsest, we can rewrite. We are able to verticalize our experience, to place our experience not in the mechanical flux of time but in the individual timelessness of work, of a moment of contemplation. I don't believe in eternal life but I do believe in timelessness. I do believe that it is a vital human need to be confronted with pauses of timelessness, and paintings can provide that.

PK: One of the things that seemed most obvious to me when we started talking about the palimpsest was the horizontality of your painting itself, its frequent scroll-like nature. How do you think you got into this practice of making primary horizontal paintings?

FC: I first became aware of the scroll while driving across the Southwest of the United States, aware of the unfolding of the horizon. But it was in India, collaborating with traditional miniature painters from Orissa, that I fell in love with horizontal double squares, the format of their work. All of a sudden, in that same period in my life, I was spending time in the American Southwest and in Orissa, and being reminded in such distant places of this image of horizontality. But what is really horizontal? The walls of a room can be, no?

PK: But going back to your more distant past. You're Italian. Since adolescence you admired large baroque wall paintings and funerary monuments too. Weren't these even earlier factors that encouraged you to explore the possibilities of working in a horizontal format?

FC: Rewinding things, I began the funerary paintings after a visit to the tomb of the kings in Egypt, where you see these tremendous corridors and these endless painted surfaces that go on and on and on.

PK: But there were earlier ones?

FC: The affinity with the scroll is there from the beginning. "Bruno Taut" is a much earlier work, more than twenty meters of paper which I drew and rubbed with various colored earth I dug from the garden of the Theosophical Society in Madras, where I lived at the time. I think in that moment the idea of the scroll had relations with oriental art and with, again, this wonderful strategy of absconding and revealing. As you know, most

oriental art in that way is closer to funerary art because it's not meant to be seen. All of the Japanese scrolls are not meant to hang anywhere. They are kept away and then unveiled for a particularly special guest or for a connoisseur and I was very much in love with that idea of secrecy.

PK: Do the paintings also, even the earlier ones, have a ceremonial aspect?

FC: Yes. I've always thought from the very beginning—I simply assumed—that paintings are the equivalent in our time of ritual implements. So you build an altar, an invisible altar in our case, but the altar is really a cosmogony. It is a representation of the world and the implements are the tools that you use to relate to this representation of the world. Of course, in a relativistic society and in the relativistic world we live in, the wise way to satisfy this need for what is not relative, for the absolute, for the comfort of true knowledge—the wise way to present all of this is to present it under a relativistic disguise. Not static dogmas, but constellations of fragments, of non-coherent statements, again revealing, absconding, hiding, uncovering, all of it to maintain the implements, the artifacts, in a state of flux.

PK: Thomas De Quincey, a writer you greatly respected at one point in your life, was actually the first to define the palimpsest as a thing, not as a process. He actually thought about them being involved, meaning that they were unrelated things that somehow got entangled, enmeshed and began to inhabit one another. Do you see this meshing, entangling, involved process as central to your work?

FC: I think it's essential. The connection between one work and the next is essential. There are always remains, remains of one work, in the next. But it doesn't really go into a loop; it goes into a scroll. So in that sense, again, if we refer to oriental traditions, in seventeenth century Japan there were poems called *rengai*. They were celebrative poems where each poet would write a number of verses and the next poet would have to continue their narrative. That's the way the work develops. You open one door and it leads to one place and I think it's very important that things should be kept impure. I'm afraid of purity. I think what is left over is many times more revealing than what is central, you know?

PK: And that is what a palimpsest is because the palimpsest is supposed to be erased, and then it comes back. What about the idea of collaboration? One of the things we talked about is your close relationships with writers, poets. Do you think that has anything to do with this theme, or is that just a coincidence?

FC: Well, I don't think anything is a coincidence (laughs lightly).

PK: You use writing in your work.

FC: That stems from the formative time of my work because when I began to draw, what I was really doing was writing and then the words would break into drawing. So this has been the original impulse in my life as an artist: to write and to break from the writing into image. Many years later I found myself as a legitimate painter, if that's what you want to call it, but the nostalgia for words was very strong. I wanted to go back to words, and that's how those collaborations came to be.

PK: Are these thoughts that one might apply to a painting like "Dictionary" (1997), where we see almost shard-like forms that are words coming to the surface and reappearing and the suggestion of an opening? I'm trying to understand...

FC: Well, sometimes the very primary impulses originating the early work stay on. But again, as we go back to the palimpsest, the character of the underwriting is that it is not something you actually see. Yes, in "Dictionary," you do find some words but what matters is that the original impulse of the work was to tell a story to myself and that I didn't have the patience to go through the writing and that broke into the impatience of the image, which is more concise and more communal and has the power of harmonization I am interested in.

PK: What about a work like "The Black Shroud" (1984)? Can you comment on that?

FC: That comes from Allen Ginsberg. He wrote a poem called "White Shroud," then he wrote one called "The Black Shroud," and we collaborated on both. We made two books on both. They are both prophetic dreams, if you want.

PK: Are they about resurrection?

FC: They are about his mother and the death of his mother. And his mother was a key figure in his narrative, a woman who was unstable and who suffered a great deal.

PK: But they are about you, too, because death is one of the key themes in your work, right?

FC: Yes. Yes, and in both of these collaborations my hand got lighter to balance the weight of the poetry. But definitely I do have an interest in death. I don't think my work has a relationship with death. I think art has a relationship with death. I mean the origin of art is funerary art. This link has not been erased; it's there, and continuously gets renewed with new questions.

PK: You know that the term palimpsest is also involved with the idea of memory of an image. So that what seems to be an outer memorial can also be a deeply internal and

personal memorizing. Do you think it's a technique you use deliberately to sort of try to free up unconscious images?

FC: I grew up in a time where an expansion of consciousness was actually the communal effort of a generation. And the idea of renewal of consciousness was not a utopia but actually a social and political practice. I think that one of the original impulses for me to be an artist was to participate in a specific way, in a competent way in this renewal of consciousness. But I knew that all you can do is to present tools that can be used to indicate this possibility of renewal. It's a very, very minimal gesture. But it's useful.

PK: We've been talking about why you've named this exhibition "Palimpsest." Is what you are doing a new kind of history painting?

FC: It's a good question. I think the answer is yes and no. These are not history paintings if by history we mean a history of will or of power. In that sense, the true history paintings are landscapes. It is looking at landscapes that men state their will to order and coagulate the fluidity of things. But if by history we mean a history of consciousness, or of those faculties that don't pretend to order and better the world but rather to enjoy it, then these works could be seen as history paintings. They chronicle one possible field of relations inspired by all those contemplative languages still alive in spite of the onslaught perpetrated by industrial society.

In no other time could we have looked at contemplative traditions from the outside as we look at them now. To look at them from the outside means we are cut off from them, in a sense, but in another sense, we have an unprecedented opportunity to understand what they are about, beyond superstition and fear. So, yes. I had never really thought about it, but definitely, if someone were to write a "History of Consciousness," a history of the relation between consciousness and the representations of consciousness, these paintings could illustrate a page of it.

PK: So even though they so often seem to be narratives of yourself—a story of your country or a history of the heart—they're in a sense to be understood as an unfolding? A witnessing?

FC: A witnessing, yes, one based on the acceptance of two very fundamental traditional beliefs that may not be popular at this moment in time, but they are there. First: that each one of us is a complete parable that counts for the entire universe, so one's individual experience is enough to be source material for anything that needs to be known. This is a basic tenet of any contemplative tradition. And second, in few simple words, "as it is above so it is below."

PK: You wanted this show to unfold both in a chronological manner and with the paintings not isolated as such. Can you explain the philosophy behind this exhibition?

FC: All of my work has developed as collections and sequences and scrolls, where every image led into the next. So in the case of this particular exhibition, what we've done is extrapolate items from all these different collections and make a collection of the extrapolated items. It's not so much a "showing" as an experiment, asking a question, then watching and seeing if in extrapolating a fragment from a discourse another discourse can be seen. If these paintings are the equivalent of visual implements, and part of an organic view of life, the answer should be yes. Even if the view cannot be summed up, at least not in one show, the organic nature of it, the coherence of it can be observed.

PK: Francesco, I thank you very much for the interview.