

Clemente: Shipwreck with the Spectator

Pamela Kort

The technique of fragmentation is on the other hand a political stand, since all parties are working towards the . . . destruction of all diversities. So someone who wants to be political in this direction has to be a dilettante. He can't belong to any group On the other hand, in the private sense . . . psychoanalytical techniques and so on, are all about making all these pieces into one thing that is under control, which you can hold tight to throughout your life. Maybe one can try the opposite, and just let it go to pieces. So the model of fragmentation might be a strategy for survival, for freedom.

This exhibition highlights some one hundred and fifty of Francesco Clemente's works made between 1974 and 2004. Created using a variety of media, all of them are united by a quest that has become ever more central to his aesthetic: the reconciling of the heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity with a contemporary take on the world. Born in Naples in 1952, Clemente moved to Rome in 1970, making the first works he considered art in 1974. Thereafter, he increasingly left the shores of Italy behind him, moving to New York City in 1980. Ironically, the more Clemente focused on distancing himself from cultural and aesthetic traditions innate to the area around Rome and Naples, the more his art came to include fragments of ideas and forms inseparable from this place. This process culminated in 2004. That year, he commenced work on a monumental fresco spread over two floors of the Museo d'arte contemporanea Donnaregina in Naples (p. ##).

The importance of "movement and dislocation" to an understanding of Clemente's artistry was noted on the occasion of his first big museum exhibition in 1985 at the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art in Sarasota, Florida. Five years later, the Philadelphia Museum of Art mounted a large survey—*Francesco Clemente: Three Worlds*. This show argued that "the subjects, materials, and working methods" of Clemente's art were determined by the specific place in which he produced it. While Italy, India, and New York have certainly steered Clemente's choice of media and method used for the works he made while there, the present exhibition contends that the place he left behind—Italy—remains decisive to the themes of many of his works of art, whether made in Italy or not.

In 1999, a retrospective of his work opened at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. This exhibition took as its point of departure the notion of the artist as an internal voyager. The decision to loosen Clemente's work from its chronological development so as to focus instead on the artist's continual return to various systems of thought—metaphysics, numerology, mythology, and astrology among them—unwittingly made his art appear somewhat retrograde.

Clemente: Shipwreck with the Spectator heads straight into this maelstrom, highlighting the degree to which Clemente has indeed continually looked back in time, particularly to the myths, rituals, and aesthetic histories that informed his emergence as an artist in southern Italy. Essentially forward-looking, his work evokes elements from utopian visions in currency there during the seventies with the aim of generating new ones.

The exhibition also takes to task those who charge Clemente with being a traitor to post-modernism, alleging that he uses art-historical references as so many clichéd quotations to embellish the usual modern painting. Clemente's art advocates experience, not theory. It argues for the need for a break with one's engrained notions of Self, rather than a break with past aesthetic traditions. This is the meaning of shipwreck for him: existence must be fragmented in order to be repossessed through self-discovery. His ongoing effort to delineate with his art the gap between fact and fiction, Self and collective, amateur and professional is infused by far more than personal concerns. Fully aware that what counts as experience is neither patently obvious nor clear-cut, Clemente's art subtly contests entrenched classification systems governing the production of knowledge about experience, an activity inherently political.

What follows focuses on several works of art in order to arrive at answers to three questions: To what extent does Clemente's early aesthetic have utopian dimensions and how was it conditioned by his experiences in Naples and Rome between 1968 and 1979? How does his work during the eighties and nineties continue or revise these concerns, even though he was no longer based in Italy? To what degree can the work he created after 2000 be attributed to the same interests?

Part 1. Anchors (1971–79)

1.1 Framing

Clemente's desire to construct a utopian aesthetic enclave outside the realm of politics was generated by at least two political factors: the first—utopian in nature—reached a

high point in 1968, the year he decided to become an artist: the student revolts that took place in Naples, as they did elsewhere in Europe and North America. The second was an essentially anti-utopian attitude: the mentality of the Red Brigades movement founded in 1970, which made “everyone responsible for everything that might happen anywhere in the world.” The catalyst to which he attributed his opting for art was, however, far from political: his encounter with the 1968 film *SKMP2*, produced by Fabio Sargentini, featuring performances by Jannis Kounellis, Eliseo Mattiacci, Pino Pascali, and Luca Patella (ill. 1). Soon thereafter, Clemente began to cast around for a “non-place.” Such a site belongs to the etymology of utopia—a Greek term compounded from the words for “not” [*ou*] and “place” [*topos*]. Coined by Thomas More in 1516 in his book *Utopia*, it described a place that meant “nowhere.”

In 1970, Clemente decided that Rome was such a place. There he formed a close friendship with the performance artist Luigi Ontani, often visiting Sargentini’s Galleria L’Attico with him (ill. 2). Just as he refused to accept political ideologies, so did he shun converting to ready-made religious systems pursued by many during the sixties. Instead, he tread the path of self-knowledge through experimenting with LSD. After taking a large dose of the psychedelic in 1971, he realized that there was a considerable gap between who he believed himself to be and what he in fact was. Clemente likened the experience of having his identity temporarily washed away to dying. He subsequently read various psychoanalytic, cybernetic, and philosophic texts, complemented by trips to India.

Describing the situation later, Clemente stated:

If a ‘breaking-off’ is necessary . . . in order to distance oneself from one’s own community so as to gain a new sense, I believe Italy in the seventies provided an ideal situation, a sort of collective abyss . . . I’m a bit astride two generations; the one a bit older than me was a Stalinist generation . . . and the one directly after me the heroin generation. Mine was a kind of strange window, a bit more . . . I don’t know . . . mystical.

The strange window that Clemente alludes to is the one opened by the emergence of left-wing utopianism in the sixties in southern Italy as elsewhere, of which the trend toward “mysticism” was an important aspect.

Like others of his generation, Clemente also read Herbert Marcuse. The German-born philosopher’s concept of the possibilities of the “utopian imagination”—“the imagination of otherness and radical difference” of succeeding by failing—attracted the maverick in him. Not yet willing to come to terms with the burden of Greco-Roman art, and even more reluctant to become a “second generation” Arte-Povera artist, his initial

points of orientation drew just as much from an international counterculture as they did from so-called high art.

In 1974, after returning from a brief sojourn in India, he saw a production in Rome of *La partenza dell'argonauta* (The Departure of the Argonaut), a 1917 chronicle of wartime journeying by the writer and painter Alberto Savinio. It starred Alba Primiceri, who would soon become Clemente's wife and muse (ill. 3; p. ##). Soon thereafter, Clemente departed for Afghanistan with Alighiero Boetti. Reinforced in part by these points of reference—a kind of bible, safe harbor, and a captain with whom to sail the high seas—Clemente began to produce the first works he considered to be art.

These took the form of Polaroid photographs that he mounted in black enamel frames. Commenting about them later, Clemente stated: "All of the [photographs] had to do with the process of centering . . . of establishing a border or territory that belongs to you." This process is perhaps most evident in *Untitled* (ill. 4; cat. no. 2). An upright form that looks like calipers dominates the photograph to the left. Positioned against the wall near the threshold to a seemingly empty room, it marks off an inside area from the outside one into which the entranceway leads. In so doing, it lays claim to the space within which it is positioned. A group of similar-looking gauges populate the image to the right. Chaotically lined up at the far edge of a room and opened to various degrees, they seem to demarcate a boundary. Whereas there is something human-like about the singular pair of calipers, the ragged series of gauges looks more like a picket fence.

Inscribed with the place and date they were taken—Rome, 1974—these photographs were inspired in part by the work of Pascali as well as Boetti. While Pascali had died in 1968, two years before Clemente arrived in Rome, more than thirty years later the artist had not forgotten several frames of *SKMP2* devoted to his performance. In particular the sequence in which Pascali lifts the head of an apparently ancient sculpture from the sea to light and kisses it, only to push it back under the water (ill. 5), remains engrained in Clemente's memory. Such a scene encapsulates the aesthetic predicament in which he found himself at the beginning of his career, described by the artist as follows: "Italy . . . is a unique deposit of marvelous paintings and sculpture, but how to fit into that terrifying past? To believe you belong to it is a delusion. To ignore it is ingenious." Pascali's contribution to *SKMP2* suggests that this was precisely his stance: after looking the heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity squarely in the face, he dashed it downwards and swam away. The next sequence in the film indicates the route he then took. In it, Pascali uses a handsaw to delineate an area in the sand. He then makes its boundaries real by hammering in wooden stakes along its edges, prepares the interior space by watering and

raking it, takes possession of it by erecting five smaller markers inside it, and finally occupies it by lying down within its perimeters.

Clemente met Boetti in Rome some four years after seeing this film, soon spending more and more time with him. Later, he came to equate such strategies of demarcation with Boetti's work, stating: "The iconography of [Boetti's] work was very eclectic . . . but the focus, the soul of this whole system, was that you had to build your own territory . . . just for the fact that it has to have a reality of its own." For awhile, that reality became for Clemente the one reified by the lens of his camera rather than created by his hand. Such a choice was guided by aesthetic strategies employed by Boetti, for whom the intrusion of the artists' hand into the work robbed it of its collective sensibility.

Clemente's decision to mount these images in black enamel frames, a material otherwise "alien to Mediterranean culture," suggests his reaction to Beuys's *Arena*. Encased in one hundred ponderous metal frames, *Arena* is a storehouse of photographic fragments documenting Beuys's art, carefully selected yet assembled in a seemingly haphazard fashion. Lucio Amelio first exhibited the work in Italy at his Modern Art Agency in Naples. Clemente attended the opening of the show on June 15, 1972, catching Beuys's action *Vitex Agnus Castus*. Later, in October that same year, he saw *Arena* again at the Galleria l'Attico, viewing it once more in the underground parking lot of the Villa Borghese in Rome, where it was exhibited during the run of *Contemporanea* from November 30, 1973, to February 28, 1974 (ill. 6). The subtitle—*dove sarei arrivato se fossi stato intelligente!* (where would I have got if I had been intelligent!)—would have also appealed to the sensibility of the twenty-one year-old Clemente, who had just dropped out of architecture school. His encounter with *Arena* may have also helped to prompt Clemente's later self-styling as an aesthetic "dilettante."

By 1974, Clemente had fallen deeply under Beuys's spell. That year he made a drawing that features a seated figure holding a banner inscribed with the words "Joseph Beyus" (ill. 7). Below, a seemingly lifeless pockmarked man lies enclosed in a kind of cocoon. While the rose growing out of his heart directs attention toward the daily presence of the flower in Beuys's *Büro für direkte Demokratie* (Office for Direct Democracy) at the 1972 Documenta, the misspelling of Beuys name as "Beyus" (reminiscent of the pronunciation of Jesus) elicits Beuys's alignment of his artistry with shamanistic practice. Intent on changing society, he deliberately fastened on such so-called regressive signs as "the archaic figure of the shaman," because he felt they were the best vehicle "to express something about the future."

No later than 1968, Boetti, too, had begun to identify the goals of his art with those of shamanism. That year, he attached an image of his head onto the body of Adam Kadamon for the poster announcing his solo exhibition at the Galleria de Nieubourg in Milan, *Shaman/Showman*. Such an image suggests that by then, Boetti had come to view his art as capable of transmitting collective ideas back into a social order via the vehicle of a singular artwork. Within a few years, Clemente commenced making art that began to differently posit such utopian aims.

1.2 “*il viaggiatore napoletano*”

Privately, Clemente continued to make drawings even after meeting Boetti. His first experiments date back to 1971. Coincidentally or not, that November 13 saw the opening of Beuys’s first exhibition at Lucio Amelio’s gallery. Entitled *Ciclo sull’opera di Joseph Beuys 1946–1971* (Cycle of the Work of Joseph Beuys 1946–1971), it consisted of 130 drawings. Its invitation card included a declaration that soon became inseparable from the artist’s persona: “La Rivoluzione siamo Noi” (We are the revolution). His vision of the role art could play in society was not only utopian, but highly political. During the opening, he held a lecture called “Die politischen Probleme der Europäischen Gemeinschaft heute” (The Political Problems of the European Union Today), and had a four-hour discussion with the audience with Amelio serving as translator. Although Pascali and Boetti produced art anchored in bridging the difference between practice and utopia, its aims lay outside the realm of politics. Nevertheless, all three artists’ testing of the possibilities of an aesthetic with utopist objectives helped focus Clemente on such an endeavor.

Unlike the photographs he was taking at the same time, Clemente did not consider his drawings works of art. Instead, he photographed them and then enlarged, assembled, and framed these shots, displaying them in his first show at Gian Enzo Sperone in Turin and Rome in 1974. It was not until 1982, two years after creating his first oil paintings, that Paul Maenz finally convinced Clemente to show seventy-two of his works on paper produced between 1971 and 1978. The title of that exhibition, “*il viaggiatore napoletano*,” was taken from one of his so-called psychic reports, a drawing ultimately not included in the show. The artist’s production of such “reports” directs attention to his concern with radical psychology. Soon after becoming friends with him in 1972, Boetti’s wife Anne Marie had recommended that Clemente read books by Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. He did so, consequently having “endless discussions of ideas

of his worth with him and his wife . . . ideas of order, ideas of autonomy, and again, a critique of politics.”

As is generally known, all three French writers made contributions to the anti-psychology movement. While Foucault’s *Madness and Civilization* (1961) spurred this trend, Deleuze and Guattari’s *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) marked its high point. The latter, translated into Italian the year of its release in French, began by posing a question that harked back to the heritage of fascism and the work of Wilhelm Reich: “How could the masses be made to desire their own repression?” It then proceeded to make a case that the same sickness characterizes the plight of modern man in so-called democratic societies. The cure is not to be found in the condemnation of schizophrenic behavior, as advocated by psychologists, *but in the acknowledgement that a breakdown in fact connotes a breakthrough*. At heart, this is what shipwreck really is for Clemente.

It may have been in *Anti-Oedipus* that Clemente first came across a reference to R. D. Laing’s *The Politics of Experience* (1967), which had been translated into Italian just a year after its publication in English. Laing, a Scottish psychoanalyst who is now largely forgotten, was at the forefront of the anti-psychology movement. His book took Foucault’s notion of experience as a departure point, one that the French philosopher had argued was essential for effectuating social renewal. *The Politics of Experience* appealed to Clemente for at least three reasons. For one, it continued a long line of thought that advocated that schizophrenics and artists came closest to seeing the essentials of the authentic Self. Lines such as this are exemplary: “In our ‘normal’ alienation from being, the person [i.e., the artist] who has a perilous awareness of the non-being of what we take to be being . . . gives us in our present epoch the acts of creation that we despise and crave They are bridgeheads into alien territory.” Clemente continues to describe this as the mission of his art—to build bridges between worlds and people. Secondly, Laing gave unequivocal voice to the need to close the gap between those issues usually considered private—sex, thoughts, human interactions—and those regarded as belonging to the sphere of politics, arguing “There is no such ‘condition’ as ‘schizophrenia,’ but the label is a social fact and the social fact a *political event*.” Finally, *The Politics of Experience* proposed a revision of balances between the biological versus the psychological sciences. It argued that the future of man was just as dependent on a psychological knowledge of Self as upon an awareness of his physical makeup. This had been Beuys’s view as well. Clemente reacted by beginning to align his art with the slogan “the personal is the political.”

This forward-looking compost of ideas and attitudes nourished Clemente's early drawings. Their rich vocabulary of epigrammatic forms would in turn fuel his art until at least the nineties. In 1974, for example, he brought a drawing to paper in which a slender, genderless figure holds between his legs a giant fish just above its tail (ill. 8; cat. no. 14). Riding it, as it were, with its body and looking straight out at the viewer, the figure uninhibitedly flaunts its libidinal desire. The gesture of the hand supporting its head also suggests both a complete giving up to erotic fantasy as well as an absorption in the meaning of such a state of mind. Meanwhile, a figure in a fetal position is suspended in the belly of the huge fish. A kind of twin of the reflective figure, the small drawing advocates the importance of repossessing the action of fantasy common to children as a mode of experience. With such off-the-cuff, private works, Clemente initially questioned the feelings he experiences while looking at them as well as the nature of his thoughts and, yes, even knowledge they could elicit.

Take, for example, this untitled 1974 drawing, which features two figures chained to one another (ill. 9; cat. no. 11). While the reclining figure with closed eyes calls to mind the state of reverie, the wide-open eyes of the standing figure see only external mimetic givens. Blatantly displaying the shackle of the chain that connects it to the figure below it, it underscores the condition of being simultaneously chained to reality and split from its other self. A key, which forms another right angle to its left arm, too suggests a desire to open the way to the world between these two selves, one that unites two types of seeing.

Dominated by a like and unlike pair, *Untitled*, 1974, is also an analogy of the relationship of Clemente's art to Boetti's. Although he admired Beuys from afar, Clemente did not meet him personally until just several weeks before his death. And though he considered Ontani important for furthering the possibilities of Pascali's use of irony and drama, Boetti was Clemente's closest mentor. As he later commented about Boetti's art: "It's all this and that, based on this halving of things. [For me,] the beginning of any contemplative endeavor is the acknowledgement of the fact that there is something to accomplish, that there's a part missing. If you don't acknowledge the missing, you can't start searching." Spending more and more time in India, Clemente increasingly explored from afar.

1.3 Emblems

Ensnared at the Theosophical Society in Madras for much of 1977, although Clemente

helped himself to its rich library of books, he “never got around” to attending any of its meetings. It was during this period that he began scrutinizing a book that would become the touchstone of much of his post-1976 work: Gregory Bateson’s *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* (1972).

Almost completely forgotten today, the British anthropologist Gregory Bateson was quite the rage in Europe during the early seventies. An anti-Darwinist at heart, Bateson opposed the scientist’s concept of random variation, arguing instead for the role that the mind plays in mankind’s survival. Building on the ideas of Norbert Wiener, whose 1948 book *Cybernetics* marked the birth of this branch of science, Bateson refined its principles with the aim of not only increasing their scientific vigor, but, more importantly for Clemente, stimulating artistic imagination. Using the principles of information theory, he questioned not only how thoughts interact, but also the operative principles behind the endurance of some ideas and the dying out of others.

Having returned to Rome in 1978, Clemente painted *Ritratto di Foucault* (Portrait of Foucault) (ill. 10; cat. no. 36). This “portrait” is both a likeness of the French philosopher as well as a kind of ironical evocation of his concern with ideologies of power and dominance of all kinds. With the publication of *Discipline and Punish* in 1975—translated into Italian the following year—Foucault had begun to argue that an idea of “man” as capable of changing his worldly situation so as to become more fundamentally himself was a mere theoretical construct. Focusing on the manipulation of man’s body and soul by the instrument of government, in this book he discussed the panopticon as the darkest of the modern era’s modes of domination.

In Clemente’s “portrait” of the philosopher, Foucault appears at the center of five collective structures that form a ring around him. Sporting a closely shaved head and the black-and white-clothes that by then had become his trademark, he wryly glances in particular at one of the landmarks of Clemente’s childhood: the Porta Capuana, Naples’s most artistically important and beautiful city gate (ill. 11). The Castel del Monte near Bari appears immediately above it (p. ##). Itself a kind of compass, the building’s geometrical arrangement fascinated the young artist, not least because it was a spectacular demonstration of the unity of sacred and secular teachings. Continuing clock-wise are two less autobiographically charged buildings: Teotihuacán in Mexico and the Mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna (ill. 12). The Pantheon in Rome completes the circle, a growing point of orientation in Clemente’s life since 1970.

Discussing these architectural structures recently, Clemente characterized them as quintessential *emblems* that advance an “archaeology of thought.” At once an allusion to

Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), this also calls to mind Bateson's ideas. Particularly his notion of the creation and interaction of ideas as exemplifying an evolutionary process seems to have more in common with the tenor of this gouache than the direction of Foucault's thought. Amusingly outfitted by the artist with an arm and a hand on which they lean, these edifices not only embody systems of thought, but appear to be thinking. Mimicking the hand-to-head gesture—long equated with reflection—and given Foucault's proximity, if they are deliberating anything at all then it would be the role they have played in shoring up ideologies of power and control.

Ritratto di Foucault discloses the ironic face of Clemente's art. Both detached and committed, it evokes at least two faces of utopian thought emergent in the seventies. Although Foucault had no concrete vision of satisfaction or freedom, he continued to contest engrained notions that manipulated social behavior, motivated by a forward-looking ideal of change. More or less simultaneously, Bateson tried to refine cybernetic ideas so as to construct a disciplinary utopia of unlimited service.

1.4. *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae*

In 1978, Clemente also produced the first environment within his oeuvre. Titled *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae* and comprised of fifteen parts, it was first exhibited at art & project in Amsterdam (cat. nos. 40–54). Made in India rather than Rome, its title, however, indicates that however far from Italy he was, he still loved its ancient poets. Clemente, who wrote poetry as a child, later studied Latin and ancient Greek while at high school. *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae* is a reformulation of lines 269–273 of “Carmina 64,” a poem by Gaius Valerius Catullus: “Hereupon, as the west wind ruffling the quiet sea with its breath at morn urges on the sloping waves [*undas*], when Dawn is rising up to the gates of the traveling Sun, the waters slowly at first, driven by gentle breeze [*clementi flamine pulsae*], stop and light sound with splash of laughter.” These deeply rhythmical lines evince what Bateson terms *creatura*: the world seen as mind rather than substance. Although Bateson's source is C. G. Jung, *creatura* is Gnostic and belongs to a period of Greco-Roman antiquity slightly later than Catullus's poem. In the realm of *creatura*, effects are brought about by difference, the recognition of which can be attained solely through thought—in cybernetic terms, the processing of information. If the fifteen works comprising *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae* have an operative principle, then it is difference. In them, drawn lines look like cracks in a porcelain teapot (cat. no. 51), apple and banana seeds recall buttons on a vest (cat. no. 48), figures hold

chess figures before a border devoid of squares (cat. no. 53), and a seemingly exact duplication of the cover of a Penguin edition of a book by Thomas De Quincey turns out to have several spelling errors (cat. no. 50). Distinctions are also evoked through discrepancies between what these objects seem to be and what they actually are. A strange Atlas-like figure is not a sculpture, but a photograph (cat. no. 40); a tray is used as the surface for a painting it also frames. Clemente even went so far as to mint a coin. Emblazoned with the words *Undae Clemente Flamina Pulsae*, its center is dominated by a cloth from whose corners protrude four hands (cat. no. 46). Here, too, difference is at work. At once an evocation of a *vera icon*, a work allegedly not made by human hands, the space in which Christ's head should appear has been left blank.

The entire grouping serves up a profusion of contradictory images aimed at provoking thinking. Playful yet serious, they invite their beholder to come on board, so to speak, so that a shipwreck with the spectator can take place.

Part 2. Passports (1980–81)

Clemente arrived in New York for the first time in late March 1981. In his suitcase he brought a series of gouaches on large sheets of paper joined with hand-woven cotton strips. Easily folded up into a compact mass, these transportable “canvases” were perfectly suited to his nomadic mode of existence. Although produced in India, sometimes in a dialogue with local billboard painters, many of these works reveal his growing attraction to rituals and signs innate to Italian culture (ills. 13 and 14; cat. nos. 56 and 71). A number of them also bring to mind that the Self he had endeavored to dash to pieces in India, so as slowly to regenerate it, felt ever freer to explore its autobiographical dimensions. Both in format and spirit, these gouaches recommend themselves as cards of identity.

Water and Wine is such a work (ill. 15; cat. no. 57). Painted in India in 1981, it is dominated by an image of a beheaded cow with a rope around its middle that recalls a piñata. Although nowadays mainly used in a children's game, the first piñatas were made for the kings of Naples and Sicily, who filled them with jewels. The gesticulating male figure to its right reminds one of the importance of hand gestures, particularly in Naples. Holding his hand to his forehead and pointing his fingers aloft, he makes the sign known as the *corona* (horns). In the other hand he carries another horned image: the animal's decapitated head replete with horns. Together, this motif and signing hand communicate

two conditions: one of being horned out—cuckolded—and another of being horny—sexually aroused. Far from resigned, this male’s smug expression and jaunty posture suggest he is an aggressor. And yet, for all his cockiness, his sex remains indeterminate: cut into two by the intersection of the torso of the cow with his lower body, his genitals remain hidden. Meanwhile, a voluptuous female sprawls indifferently between the animal’s feet, drawing life-giving milk out of its teats.

Apart from its obvious Christian overtones—water as the brethren, wine the blood of Christ—the title of this gouache also evokes the union of the sexes, essential to the engendering of life. Water, too, suggests a “rain” of semen, while wine signifies the “blood” of a fertile menstruating woman. The strange wide-open eye of the cow also evokes the Neapolitan belief in the power of the evil eye. In this context, the sign of the *corna* is used to ward off bad luck.

And yet, despite these lexical references, the painting is essentially non-mimetic. Never this thing or that, Clemente’s work summons up a number of commingled ideas, questioning the processes of seeing, naming, and assigning meaning. The fragments of language and images that make up his aesthetic have much in common with the concept of a *figura*. A term first used by ancient Roman poets and philosophers, it connotes something “living and dynamic, incomplete and playful.” Hovering somewhere between form and formlessness, the meaning of a *figura* develops as a becoming born from relational dissimilitude. Ever since dropping acid, this place, the gap between what a thing is and is not, had become for Clemente “the only space worth knowing.” Moving away from Conceptual Art and toward painting, Clemente began focusing on creating art with a new sense of space.

Part 3: Flotsam and Jetsam (1980–85)

Just north of Naples, in the area known as the Phlaeagraean Fields, the ground has been rising and falling by as much as several meters for some four thousand years. Caused by the movement of the earth’s crust, this curious phenomenon, known as Bradyseism, is particularly well-documented around Pozzuoli, an ancient Cumaen port. There, the remains of the so-called Serapeum of Pozzuoli—actually a *marcellum*, an ancient food market—bear witness to this occurrence as no other in the world (p. ##). The marble columns of its *pronaos*, dating from the first to third century AD, are particularly notable. Repeatedly submerged and then exposed by the rising and falling sea level, they are marked with holes bored by marine mussels between 3.60 and 6.30 meters from their

base. The same phenomenon affects the Neapolitan coast. Between 1982 and 1984, the area was violently struck, raising the land by as much as three meters. Most of the frightened population relocated elsewhere. During this period of time, Clemente began to mentally inch closer and closer to this area, whose landmarks had fascinated since childhood. Never mind that he was far away in America. Between 1982 and 1985, he plunged ever more frequently into the sea of memory around these shores, hauling its wreckage to the surface of his canvases.

3.1 Plunging and Emerging

Made in 1985, *Ave Ovo* (ill. 16; cat. no. 60) bears witness to this process. As is well known, *ave* means “to be greeted” in Latin and is typically associated with the iconography of the Annunciation. Dominated not by the Madonna but by a huge egg placed squarely at its center and shielded by a large fan, the work hails more than a few pre-Christian things. For one, it pays tribute to the Castel dell’Ovo in Naples, built by Cumaen settlers in the sixth century BC when they founded the original nucleus of the city (ill. 17). That castle’s name derives from a medieval legend about the classic poet Virgil. Something of a magician as well, according to the legend, he purportedly had a magic egg inserted into the foundations of the building in order to buttress them. Although it survives until this day, the Castel dell’Ovo has greatly declined in importance. The fan—long a symbol of kingship—communicates both his reverence for this structure and its legend as well as a desire to keep its memory alive.

Not far away, in the hills above Pozzuoli, a fan-like form encloses an image of Neptune and Amphitrite on the mosaiced wall of in what was once an extravagant bathhouse in Herculaneum (p. ##). An important harbor of trade between Campania and Alexandria, Pozzuoli was also a port of entry for Egyptian religion in Italy. Clemente’s reading of Lucius Apuleius’s *The Golden Ass*, a book he first took up around 1971, fanned his interest in the cult of Isis around this place. An eleven-part story of metamorphosis, it weaves together the stories of Psyche and Eros as well as Isis and Osiris. The red and blue egg in the painting then also hails the “egg-born god,” known in Orphic teachings as Eros and called Osiris by the Egyptians. It was he who reunites the severed unity of male and female. The female-like figure, chasing a male-like one near the bottom of the canvas, summons instead the Eros associated with Aphrodite. This is the Eros who holds Psyche captive in a palace until she drives him away. An archetypal symbol of the feminine, the egg connotes containment. While the red color of the lower

half of this egg calls forth the realm of the earth, the blue color of its upper half suggests the unity of the two sexes on a celestial level.

The following year, in 1986, Clemente painted a monumental fresco dominated by a fan floating above an image of a running hermaphrodite-like figure. Not this imagery, but its title, *Tutta la Vita* (All through Life), recalls the name of a collection of short stories by Alberto Savinio. By then he had been closely reading the author's work for more than a decade. Born Andrea de Chirico, the brother of Giorgio de Chirico, he adopted the pseudonym Savinio in 1914. The name was derived from that of Arthur Savine, a historical novelist and translator of Thomas De Quincey, one of the brothers' and later Clemente's favorite writers. Ever the maverick, Savinio's balancing of writing with painting as well as his advocacy of a "dilettante" disposition struck a deep chord in Clemente.

As may be recalled, he had discovered his books no later than 1974, when he saw the production of Savinio's *The Departure of the Argonaut* featuring his future wife. That year, a new edition of the *Hermaphrodito* (Hermaphrodite, 1918) also appeared. It was not until 1978 that Savinio's importance to him triggered a work of art. That year, Clemente brought to paper the first of several works bearing the title *Farsi degli amici* (Making Friends) (ill. 18). The designation references a 1940 drawing by Savinio that Clemente probably saw in Rome in 1978, when a large-scale retrospective of the elder artists' work was presented at the Palazzo delle Esposizioni (ill. 19). It was not the drawing itself but the cause of its creation—Savinio's identification with the ideas of Paracelsus, Isadora Duncan, and Nostradamus—that attracted Clemente's attention. Differently than an avant-garde predisposed to in-fighting, Savinio argued for an art that sought a productive relationship between past styles and those emergent from contemporary practice.

Clemente gave this tact a new spin in New York. Soon after his arrival, he began collaborating with artists and writers, Allen Ginsberg, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Andy Warhol chief among them. Ginsberg, whose poetry Clemente had read in translation in 1968, had helped to kindle the utopian spirit of his early art. The emphasis he placed on the importance of authentic personal experience had jived well with ideas Clemente had picked up from Gregory Bateson and R. D. Laing. Both also admired the more mellow utopian vision of William Blake. Soon, Morton Feldman began taking part in the "party of utopia" unfolding in Clemente's Broadway studio. Meanwhile, just when the so-called death of painting was being most loudly proclaimed in 1981, Clemente gave in to the urge to paint.

3.2 Releasing

In one fell swoop, Clemente went from small to big, bringing the 400-by-300-centimeter painting *My House* to canvas in 1982 (ill. 20; cat. no. 66). His largest to date, begun in Italy, it was completed in a frenzy of work in Berlin just in time for the opening of the *Zeitgeist* exhibition. Bigger than life, Clemente now tried out in paint a strategy he had first implemented in 1975: blowing up a photograph of one of his drawings beyond all conceivable proportions. Although none of the motifs in this painting belong to that period, its theme directs attention to a concern that first emerged around 1974: the exploration of the possibilities of binary pairs. As the artist recently put it: “[*My House*] is an explicit version of the very early drawings about the double.”

A patch of orange and a row of three columns leads to the portal of Clemente’s *House*. One of these pillars is capped by a crouching form that seems to support the roof of this preliminary space; the other two extend upward, disappearing into an indeterminate area. While this brown-colored zone makes discrete reference to the sixth-century cave hued out of rock at Elephanta in India, the presence of this Atlas-like figure suggests that Clemente’s *House* was also inspired by Savinio. For one, the columns have an animated quality: bathed by a light from no apparent source, they seem to be swaying. Two figurative sculptures positioned at the entrance only enhance their effect. More like props in a stage set, they imbue this “outside” area with a kind of ghostly aura. In so doing, *My House* pays subtle tribute to two pieces of writing by Savinio: the 1925 novel *La casa ispirata* and “La casa stupida,” a short story in *Tutta la Vita*. Clemente’s attention in particular to the short story is suggested by *Telamone*, the title of a monumental 1980 pastel drawing (201 by 873 centimeters!) and a series of smaller prints produced in 1981. Telamon is one of two caryatids who support the first-floor balcony of the house in Savinio’s tale. After this left structural member has ascertained that the one intelligent resident of the house has abandoned a building filled with otherwise stupid people, he decides to leave as well. The result is, of course, the crashing of the structure to pieces. Describing the story in a 1981 interview, Clemente underscored the value Savinio accorded memory, embodied in his opinion by Telemon. For Savinio, as later for Clemente, memory is much more than a form of thinking that unites the collective body with individual being. Far from protecting a “collective” past, the selective operation of memory in each human being enables a perspective on the past that is always individual. Art mediates between these two realms, ones referenced by the overlapping inside and outside areas of *My House*.

Five steps lead up to the ostensibly uninhabited structure. Comprised of draped furniture and indistinct objects, this realm is the inventive “house” of the mind. In essence a kind of vibrant, “reflective” dwelling, the painting also recalls the “thinking” buildings in Clemente’s 1978 “portrait” of Foucault. Although this interior space can clearly be made out, because its “roof” is also the floor that leads from the outside into it, it articulates a spatial realm constantly in flux. Comprised of a series of fragmented forms that propose both a coming and going, *My House* bespeaks Clemente’s wish to let go of the fragments of personal ballast so as to really sail.

Part 4. The Island (1983–85)

Several months after completing *My House*, Raymond Foye, a young editor-at-large acting on behalf of the Petersburg Press, asked Clemente to produce a series of lithographs as illustrations to a book of his choice. Clemente chose Alberto Savinio’s *The Departure of the Argonaut*. Written during Savinio’s journey to the Thessaloniki front after being stationed in Ferrara, the story had been first published in the final section of *Hermaphrodito*. About his choice of this text, Clemente commented: “There was enough distance to touch one of the great modernist writers and painters in Italy without embarrassment.”

By that time, it had been a decade since Savinio’s rediscovery in Italy, ushered in by the 1973 publication of a monograph by Ugo Piscopo. Shortly thereafter, the first large retrospectives of his work took place, first in Milan in 1976 and two years later in Rome. Scholars were even busy trying to link his writing to Surrealist concerns, a misguided trend that continued until the end of the seventies. The fact was, however, that although he shared their interest in myth, childhood, and the dream, his approach had nothing in common with their techniques. He was neither interested in the workings of the unconscious nor in *l’écriture automatique*. The same held true for Clemente.

Essentially unknown in the United States, in 1983 Savinio’s *La partenza dell’argonauta* had yet not been translated into English. His first experience with lithography, Clemente eventually filled the forty-nine double pages of the large-format book with a rich plethora of images. He worked on the project during the spring of 1983, July 1985, and January 1986. The result was “*coincidences* between word and image,” rather than illustrations of “incidents from the text.” Take, for example, the lithograph that appears at the opening of chapter three (ill. 21; cat. no. 85). This approximation of a locomotive being pelted by the rain sets off the pell-mell train of consciousness that abuts

it. There, Savinio writes: “I endure in a state somewhere between animal and human until my sensibilities start to the sudden explosion of an indescribable—what? Ears pricked, eyes peeled—like a thief *peering into the darkness*—yet I see nothing but the square shutter of the blind, where opacity struggles weakly with the terrible sun who has it in his sights, beating against it.” Square in format, Clemente’s image connotes the blind without illustrating it. Blinded by a curtain of rain rather than sunlight, Clemente’s locomotive is being washed from sight. Larger than life, the flood of raindrops gives form to the condition of breaking into a sweat, the startled apprehensive state described by the writer. Stealing through the night, this body exists merely as an interior. Its double, the long shaft of the train, exists to contain. Meanwhile, an opened umbrella floats by sideways as if it were seeking an owner.

The last page of Savinio’s story is flanked by two images (ill. 22; cat. no. 109). On the left page, the one with the text, seven colored ship’s flags spell out Savinio’s name in code. The right page is completely filled by a black-and-white picture, parts of which run over onto the sheet with the author’s text. There we read:

*The Argonaut, if he goes
tralallera tralalla
The Argonaut, if he goes
when he’ll return, nobody knows! . . .*

Night has fallen. Secure in the embrace of my newfound companion, Faith, I settle into a perfumed dream of wind and salt. As my mind drifts off, the ballad dies away.

*tralallera tralalla
when he’ll return, nobody knows . . .*

Clemente’s drawing features three doubled figures: two profile portraits, two standing men, and two half-human/half-animals (cat. nos. 110 and 111). These respond, as it were, to the three doublings Savinio advances in his text: the departure of the Argonaut, the accompanying music, and open-ended question of return. Going and coming, circling back—these movements describe Clemente’s physical relationship to Italy. The emotional tenor of his connection with his homeland, however, parallels the mood of Savinio’s book. According to Foye, “For Clemente, Savinio’s *Argonaut* is suffused with a sense of longing for the loss of Italy, as ‘a civilized place, in the sense of

a place of lightness, of femininity, and refinement.”” The idea of loss is communicated by the figure of Clemente with his back turned to the sea. Here, too, the meaning is at least twofold. As though a rock jutting out of the ocean, the self-portrait of Clemente is inseparable from his feeling that Naples is “a city that turns its back to the sea.” The silhouette of the pine tree, often depicted on old picture postcards of Naples, sprouts from Clemente’s neck as though from a stony crevice. The two Atlas-like figures standing on its branches and carrying buildings suggest themselves as versions of the Telamons in Savinio’s story.

Cradling a portrait of Clemente in its split shaft, this weighted down trunk also harks back to Savinio’s amusing definition of a tree in his *Nuova enciclopedia* (1977). There he wrote: “The tree, which carries the house of man, is nothing other than the ‘tree of Buddha’ (a *asvattha* or *ficus religiosa*) and all other cosmic trees or columns, or columns or Atlas figures, which carry the arch of heaven. Isn’t there the danger that one day the cosmic tree will give way and heaven and earth will fall?” Finally, the half-ape/half-woman recommends Clemente’s embrace of the elder Italian artists’ representation of hybrid animals. Far from caricatures of human beings, such composite things are meant to tell us something about the culture that produced them .

Savinio also championed the potential of utopian imagination. In his view, utopian vision “creates ‘practical’ men, men who look at the present.” His preoccupation with these ideas is nowhere more evident than in the forewords for Tommaso Campanella’s *La Città del Sole* (City of the Sun, 1602) and Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516). Published in the final years of World War II, in 1944 and 1945, respectively, they marked the start of the series *Collana degli Utopisti* he oversaw with Enrico Falqui for the publishing house Colombo in Rome. While Savinio admired More’s vision of utopia, he condemned Campanella’s version, arguing in his foreword for that book: “I am striving to establish the city of utopia with my whole heart, but not for me, for the others The *City of the Sun* is in reality not really a utopia. In its pages, one does not find a hint of the typical trait of utopia: aesthetic quality.” There could be no utopia for Savinio without the renouncement of all religious and political authorities; without concentration on the possibility of a better life now, rather than one consigned to the memory of a mythical past. All of this accorded well with Clemente’s notion of the mission of his art.

La partenza dell’argonauta is told in the first person. The argonaut, Jason, and even Odysseus are Savinio’s doubles. The two self-portraits of the artist in Clemente’s drawing reveal that by 1983, Clemente had come to embrace Savinio as a kind of double,

too. Facing the seven ship's flags that spell out Savinio's name, but looking away, the double self-portrayal in this tree also proposes a shared outlook as to what constitutes art: freedom from the weight of established moral convention, accepted aesthetic practice, and all enslaving belief systems. This is the shared face of their utopian imagination.

4.1. Netting

The lithographs Clemente created for *The Departure of the Argonaut* also weave together iconographical elements from several paintings made between 1982 and 1985. *Midnight Sun II* (1982) is a good case in point (ill. 23; cat. no. 74). In it, a blindfolded figure struggles with two other figures, at least one of which is clearly female. They toy not only with one another but with the tiny sailboats that encircle them. While the voluptuous female on top seems to look backwards, the head under her shoulder stares straight out at the viewer. While the blindfolded figure sees not, the hulls of the sailing vessels resemble eyes. In *Midnight Sun II*, Clemente broke with traditional iconographical schemes for the representation of past, present, and future, such as Prudentia, an image he had referenced in a 1977 drawing (cat. no. 29). Painted in Italy, this work proclaims his growing agility in melding the Greco-Roman world with contemporary aesthetic practice.

Clemente returned to this painting in an illustration for the epilogue of Savinio's book. There we encounter two brilliant red sails whose masts pierce the pupils of two floating eyes. The text on the opposite page complements the emphasis on eyeing here. There we read "I'm for the school of learning that would intensify the use of the senses." Clemente, whose art is often very erotic, is for this too. The painting also presents a kind of battle between the sexes, here suggested as triggered by the intrusion of a third. The eyes dappling the boats in water underscore such a reading, recalling those spread across the dress worn by Jealousy in Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* (1603) (ill. 24).

To top it off, the title *Midnight Sun* calls forth a passage in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. In book eleven, a litany to the Egyptian goddess Isis, the protagonist Lucius narrates: "I approached the confines of death At midnight, I saw the Sun shining in all his glory." The commingling of the figures in *Midnight Sun II* then also evokes the moment of the main character's solification—his transformation into a sun-light-god under the aegis of Isis. The port in which this "play" takes place would then be Pozzuoli rather than, say, the Bay of Naples. In all these ways, the work gives concrete form to Clemente's idea of one of the aims of his utopian art: to fuse the individual "I" with the collective "eye."

Midnight Sun II also brings to the fore an aesthetic technique central to Clemente's art: the process of giving form to things and ideas freed from a specific context so that they can metamorphose into something different but related later on. In so doing, it reveals the artist's concern with exposing the arbitrariness of our ordinary perception: we create the world we perceive through selecting and editing the reality that confronts us in order to conform it to our beliefs about its nature. At its core it advocates the necessity of seceding from all that inaugurates and defines so-called mainstream art. The assertion of such radical difference—the continued insistence on the power of the dilettante to make meaningful art—was, and remains, essentially utopian.

Part 5: Subterranean Sights (1987–97)

Naples is rife with funerary rituals and monuments to the dead. Among the most famous of these is the Tomb of Virgil. Not quite as well-known is the Tomb of the Kings in Saint Domenico (p. ##) and the Church of Maria Santissima del Carmine, the so-called church of the *capuzzelle* (the little heads) (p. ##). In the latter, the anonymous skulls of the dead, once adopted and cared for by Neapolitans who in turn “consulted” them for useful advice, are still housed in a large underground catacomb. Landmarks commemorating the world of the dead also dot many sites on the outskirts of the city. Located in the midst of the smoking Phlaeagraean Fields, Lake Averno is perhaps the best-known of these (ill. 25). In the sixth book of the *Aeneid*, Virgil described it as follows: “There was a wide-mouthed cavern, deep and vast and rugged, sheltered by a shadowed lake and darkened groves; such vapor poured from those black jaws to heaven's vault, no bird could fly above unharmed.” Even in Greek times, the lake was perceived as an entrance to the underworld. A little more than a stone's throw away, in Cuma, lies the entrance to the Grotto of the Sibyl (p. ##). To the south, in Pompeii, stands the Temple of Isis, protectress of the dead.

This rich heritage began to increase flooding into view for Clemente late in 1985. An encounter with Beuys may have served as the catalyst. That December, just two days before Clemente would meet him for the first time, saw the opening of the last environment that Beuys would make. Titled *Palazzo Regale* and exhibited in a gallery of the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples, the exhibition opened on December 23 and continued until May 31, 1986. A month later to the day, Beuys was dead. Likened by many to a Pharaoh's tomb, one visitor to the show described the effect it had on him in these words: “one suddenly found oneself in a room bathed in a golden light . . . the huge

Neapolitan School history paintings on the walls were hidden behind a series of screens This room was an inner shell, . . . a crucial factor . . . was the precious marble floor.” On December 25, Beuys unexpectedly appeared at Clemente’s door in Amalfi in the midst of a family game of tombola. Clemente remained in Italy until March, certainly visiting the installation several times. In a sense, the realm of tombola and *tomba* (Italian for tomb) began to coalesce in his head. The upshot was a trip to Egypt in December of 1986. There he spent time in the mortuary chambers in the Valley of the Kings. The following year, Clemente commenced making a cycle of some eleven large-scale canvases collectively known as the *Funerary Paintings*.

5.1 Shells

Let us turn our attention to *Tree*, a 193-by-465-centimeter canvas (ill. 26; cat. no. 114). In it, strange yellow-brown forms seem to buzz within the black caverns that contain them as if in limbo. Neither this nor that, the abstract forms in the painting suggest a condition poised between living and dying. Whereas red connotes life, black—the color of the ubiquitous lava on the outskirts of Naples—stands for death. Then, too, there is the condition of suspension proposed by the hovering yellow-brown shapes. It implies Clemente’s on-going exploration of the gap between things, where form assumes meaning. The meaning of such a site was first suggested to Clemente by a painting he espied as a youth on the inside of the coverage slab of an Etruscan sarcophagus in Paestum. Known as the Tomb of the Diver, it shows a figure about to plunge into a pool of water from a column (p. ##). At once an image of “daring, irreversibility, joy, and loss,” for Clemente it is also “the ultimate icon of the organicity between life and death.” Not incidentally, it is also the first one with which he equated his artistry and one upon which he continues to reflect.

This “tree” is more like a system than an organic thing. In it, five strangely shaped black, cavernous spaces are linked by a thin meandering line. The inexactness of their forms sharply contrasts with the strict geometric grid of the block-like shapes that surround them. Painted in hues of red, although these seem to ascend, they lead nowhere. Nevertheless, they are not without reference: their forms owe something to the patterns of a mosaiced floor of the tablinum in the House of the Faun at Pompeii (ill. 27). The combination of elements from a bedrock place with dark cul-de-sac spaces compound an impression of panic. A network of dead-ends, *Tree* proposes the condition of hitting bottom. As such, the painting recommends that in 1987 Clemente reconsidered the

meaning of Bateson's "Theology of Alcoholics Anonymous" too his art. The essential principle of this "religion" is that transformation can only occur once one has hits the skids.

Tree also brings into focus Clemente's interest in the emergence of a new stage in his quest to give spatial form to the utopian impulse of his art. Elegiac in essence, such a painting is less forward-looking in spirit. Undoubtedly, the death first of Beuys and then Warhol a year later, plus the impending passing of several close artist friends who had tested positive for AIDS, dampened the optimistic tenor that had characterized his work up until 1987. The *Funerary Paintings* announce the beginning of an almost ten-year period during which Clemente increasingly came to embrace a vision of utopia more in keeping with Ernst Bloch's notion of utopia as "the future in the past" as opposed to being something imminent as proposed by Laing, Marcuse, and Bateson. Filled with a variety of signs that suggest something to come, the *Funerary Paintings* are promising if still vacant husk-like spaces.

5.2 Sunken Treasure

In 1996, in a burst of activity Clemente painted the seventeen large-scale paintings that comprise *La Stanza della Madre* (Mother's Room). Commissioned by the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao and made to fit the dimensions of a gallery there, they are the largest environment of paintings he has ever made. Incredibly long and thin, two of these seventeen panels have vertical formats, while the remainder are horizontal. Path-like, they suggest the condition of voyaging. Nevermind that he produced them at the Chelsea Hotel in New York. Their most immediate point of reference is Italy. For one, it is the exception rather than the rule within Clemente's oeuvre to encounter a work with an Italian title. Moreover, the "mother" in the title references both the archetype of the Great Mother as well as the cult of Isis in Pompeii. Sumptuously embellished with frescoes, her temple there attests to the regard in which she was held in Campani, soon coming to be seen as "Panthea, the mistress of all." In 1992, the Archeological Museum in Naples rearranged the fresco fragments from this site into what was most likely their original order. Clemente saw this installation shortly thereafter, causing him to once more reflect on the goddess, her cult in Pompeii, and the meaning of the panels. In the process of doing so, he returned once again to Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*.

It is in book eleven of that tale that the protagonist, Lucius, still imprisoned in the donkey's body, first encounters Isis. She tells him: "I come to you—I, the natural mother of all life, the mistress of the elements, the first child of time, . . . I who govern by my

nod the crests of light in the sky the purifying wafts of the ocean. . . . The Egyptians . . . call me by my true name, Queen Isis.” *Madre*, the second-to-the-last panel of the *Stanza della Madre* cycle, is bound up in part with this section of the story near the beginning of Apuleius’s book (ill. 28; cat. no. 119). In the painting, we see a figure sitting in a boat on the ocean. Holding his head in his hands, he looks within. In the story, after purifying himself in the sea, the protagonist drowns on the sand. The goddess appears to him in a place between waking and dreaming. The action of descending into the realm of the daydream is underscored by the falling stars in the black nighttime sky behind the figure. A giant female figure gently floats to the left, in the direction in which his cradled head is tipped. Meanwhile, a large blue fish swims underneath the boat away from the woman. The fish evokes another dimension of the legend of Iris: after the death of her husband, Osiris, she gathered all the pieces of his dismembered body together. The only part she could not retrieve was his penis, which had been swallowed by a fish, here swimming away out of her reach. Suspended between the top and bottom edges of this horizontal painting with a wide-open mouth, the enormous female figure simultaneously suggests the forms of a vessel, chasm, cave, and abyss. These are all images associated with the Great Mother. Moving straight toward her in the dream, the man in the boat suggests a desire for regeneration, a wish Isis fulfills for her initiates.

The title *Iniziazione* (Initiation) (ill. 29; cat. no. 121), the seventh panel of the series, suggests this scene, and yet its iconography does not correspond to any of the passages in Apuleius’s tale. Never narrative, Clemente’s art evokes relations without illustrating them. The darkly colored woman with wings on the left side of the canvas, for example, recalls Isis’s protection of the dead. Shading them in the shadow of her wings during the funeral procession, in this guise she takes on the attributes of the vulture goddess. Above her, a naughty figure seems intent on clipping one these wings. Nearby, two boats meet: one with a human the other with a bird-headed form. These two floating vessels were inspired by a fresco from the Temple of Isis in Pompeii (ill. 30). Two different kinds of crafts appear above. Filled with hearts pierced by arrows, these vases evoke the intertwining of Apuleius’s story with the myth of Psyche and Eros and its prehistory—the relationship between Eros and Aphrodite. To the left is another couple, a female and male, both of whose bodies harbor skulls. Such a pairing, too, is inherent to the symbolism of Isis and Osiris, who portend death and rebirth.

The word *Stanza* then in these paintings connotes not only the gallery for which they were destined in Bilbao, but also the gap between demise and renewal. Led out of darkness by woman and not man, they also intimate the structure of the psyche in Jungian

terms: this is “the *mother*, the matrix—the form into which all experience is poured.”

The year prior to beginning this cycle, the artist lost his own mother, an apogee in a long chain of deaths stretching back to 1986. It seems not inconsequential that it was she who first recognized her son’s artistic gift, publishing a book of his poems against his wish when he was just twelve years old. The word *Stanza* in the title of the painting of this cycle also means “poem” in several languages. As is generally known, a stanza is a group of lines arranged together in a recurring pattern. Divided into three registers, *Autunno, Caduta, Cascata*, (Autumn, Fall, Cascade), the title of the sixth panel in Clemente’s *Stanza della Madre* suggests itself as a kind of *terza rima*—a poem comprised of three lines (ill. 31; cat. no. 120). In the left register, a ship goes down surrounded by falling stars. The beginning of fall, seasonal or not, the title and image underscore Clemente’s continuing conviction to the necessity of a breaking to pieces in order to break through. Such a moment might be likened to the protagonist’s transformation into an ass in Apuleius’s tale. He subsequently experiences a long odyssey of hardship, finally attaining a new level of consciousness and thereby overcoming the desires that had caused his initial metamorphosis.

Adults holding the hands of a small child appear in the lower middle part of this painted tercet. All three gaze upwards with gaping mouths at a couple copulating in its top register. Simultaneously passionate and tender, the lovers cradle one another’s heads in their hands. While the man on top is painted red, the voluptuous woman is bathed in blue. These are also the colors of the small child’s clothes, implying an engendering of form from the realm of the sensuous.

In Italian, *cascata* indicates the state of dozing just before the onset of sleep. Such a condition is radically opposed to the wide, staring eyes of all five parties. The contradiction points to the different manner in which the two groups perceive things. Gazing into one another’s eyes, the love-making couple suggests the sensuous disposition of man. It is this manner of seeing that most deeply informs Clemente’s art. The astonished expression on the faces of the family unit implies an opposite disposition: a moral one that attempts to impose its authority so as to subjugate its sensuous half. Divided into an upper and lower half, this central image summons the point at which Clemente’s art unfolds: between the sensuous and the rational impulses. Only in the zone between them—one called into existence by beauty and constrained neither physically nor morally, but dynamic in both manners—can a truly “free disposition” emerge. It is this condition of “real and active determinacy” that Friedrich Schiller terms the “aesthetic.” Aware of his *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* since at least the early

seventies, it is this condition, too, that Clemente solicits from the beholder of his art. At heart forward-looking, only the production of such an aesthetic state can suspend the destructive course of time. An attitude inherent to his first works of art, the sensuous women that dominate the *Stanza della Madre* canvases bear witness to Clemente's renewed ability to access the potential of this sunken treasure.

A billowing curtain intrudes into this space, cascading gently toward the edge of the last segment of this canvas. Held back by a braided cord, it bundles together six blossoming red roses. Here, too, Clemente plays on the meaning of words: bound up with the condition of falling, *Cascata* implies both rain and cascading. The cascading roses that appear here have multiple connotations, ranging from the Heavenly Rose of both Christian and Rosicrucian redemption to those that form Isis's crown. It is only after Lucius masticates them that he is freed from the ass's body, repossessing himself with an enhanced degree of consciousness.

All this attests to Clemente's ability to prize from archetypal symbols the promise they contain. This struggle to awaken to life, the latent potential of such ciphers, is anything but regressive. Instead, it bespeaks the rehabilitative anchor of the utopian imagination whose sinking portends ascension.

5.3 Boundaries

Painted before the *Stanza della Madre* cycle, Clemente's *Places of Power* (1989) were also inspired in part by his viewing of the burial chambers in the Valley of the Kings (cat. nos. 117 and 118). The artist later commented that the experience made the "strongest visual impact since Velázquez at the age of eight." Barren and austere, the *Places of Power* sharpen the feeling of absence that permeates the *Funerary Paintings*. Gone, however, is the contained spatial feeling of those canvases. Composed of both geometrical and ornamental elements, the *Places of Power* have a quite flat-like feel about them. In *Place of Power I*, for example, a thin but vigorous blue line near the edges of the canvas creates an inside and outside area within the picture (ill. 32; cat. no. 117). Veering off to the left and right at the painting's center, this borderline also runs beyond its upper and lower edges. In this gap, an ornament-like form arises, extending to the top.

Such maneuvers postulate a switch in relationships between the work [*ergon*] and that which embellishes it [*parergon*], something typically considered accessory. With *Place of Power I*, Clemente gave a new spin to one of his earliest aesthetic strategies: the process of centering in order to establish a territory of his own. While the drawing of such boundaries initially opened up a space, resulting in the appearance of his first works of art

fifteen years later, he was confronted with a different obstacle: how to work himself out of a seemingly endless period of personal loss. In 1989, Clemente returned to this premise, now completely screening out all references to reality. This non-place, which posits edge rather than middle, worked. The *Places of Power* made way for the emergence of the more sensuous imagery in the early nineties, a period that culminated with the *Stanza della Madre* cycle.

Like those paintings, *Place of Power I* takes as its most immediate point of reference sites in and around Naples rather than Egypt. For example, the decorative element at its midpoint alludes to one on a fresco of a candelabrum originally in the Augustan Villa of Agrippa Postumus near Boscotrecase (p. ##). An elaborate villa originally located near Pompeii, like the Temple of Isis it was destroyed by the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Recovered at the turn of the twentieth century and then auctioned off, the original fresco, which also features Egyptian-style sirens, is now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. Charred black as though by smoke and lava, *Place of Power I* suggests itself as something that persists as a remnant. Glowing with a faint yellow luminescence all around the edges of its blue border, this work subtly suggests the imminent break of dawn.

Part 6. Keys (1994–2004)

Clemente's works on paper are logbooks of ideas. At once epigrammatic and drawn out, they are keys to understanding his thought and art. In them, form coalesces into astonishing images. Whether forged out of color or lines, these works testify to a process in which there is no going back. Far from random, they know nothing of the functioning of the unconscious. Instead, they attest to a deep-rooted conviction in the birth of art from a continual processing of visual information in which some forms survive, while others die out.

Several untitled drawings from 1994/95 reveal the workings of these kinds of evolutionary processes. Let us turn to the a cycle of 108 images that make up the *Ex Libris Chenonceau* drawings (cat. nos. 122–138). The number 108 alludes to the number of beads in a *mala*, a type of rosary commonly used by Hindus and Buddhists for keeping count while, for example, chanting or meditating. The idea of such a circular chain of images that revive motifs from Clemente's art dating back to the sixties epitomizes the invention and interaction of ideas as a circular process. In so doing, such series of drawings suggest Clemente's continuing interest in balancing the collective dimensions

of cybernetic theory with daily spiritual practice in India.

Rough around the edges and swiftly made, like those that make up his “*il viaggiatore napoletano*,” these ink drawings are also notational in essence. In the forty-third image (cat. no. 130), for example, we encounter a hand holding a small pair of scissors about to snip the stem of a blossoming flower. A year later, Clemente returned to this idea in the seventh panel of the *Stanza della Madre* pictures discussed above (cat. no. 121). In 1999, the shears reappeared in the large oil painting titled *Scissors and Butterflies*.

Just a year prior to that, Clemente began work on a group of images that feature floating fish-like women (ill. 33; cat. no. 139). Titled *Desire*, these pastel drawings evoke the Siren Parthenope, whose mythology marks the beginning of Neapolitan history. Distressed at Odysseus’s ability to navigate the strait between Scylla and Charybdis, despite the bewitching music of her Siren sisters, Parthenope threw herself into the water, consequently dying. Her corpse washed ashore at Vesuvius. Soon thereafter, she began to be worshipped in the Cumaen settlement of Palaeopolis, not far from the site of her burial. By the fifth century BC, the growth of this cult site had expanded sufficiently eastward, resulting in the founding of a new city, Nea-Polis, today known as Naples.

Suspended, with her arms over her head and legs held high, the “Siren” in *Desire* seems to float about as though a kind bobbing organism. The large slits of her eyes find the equivalent in the opening of her vagina. The meaning of such a work unfolds in the border zone between the eying of an object of desire so as to possess it sensually and seeing as something visually penetrating and therefore inherently intellectual.

Heart, a 2003 pastel on paper, combines ideas that date back to the inception of Clemente’s art as well as those that first made their appearance around 1996 (cat. no. 142). Note, for example, the halves that dominate this work: two hearts, two arrows, and a pair of octagonal forms. All of these are counterpoints to their opposites. While the black heart and arrow are shadows thrown by their painted forms, the two eight-sided shapes suggest the turning of the huge, likewise octagonal form that contains them upside-down. Then, too, whereas the yellow arrow pierces the heart, the silhouette it casts runs parallel to it, remaining apart. Simultaneously above and below, outside and inside, run through and secluded, collectively, these forms are pairs as well as opposites. All these concerns lie at the core of Clemente’s aesthetic. Unlike, however, his first works on paper, *Heart* is not a merry image. Tilted up toward the viewer, this octagonal turret borders in two signs of death: a bloodbath and a black shadow that connotes passing.

Part 7. The Harbor of Homeland (2000–04).

As may be recalled, Clemente had initially sought to establish artistic identity by staking out a “non-place” in which his art could evolve, free from the sphere of politics but nonetheless shaped by its factors. In New York, his quest to access the possibilities of a utopian imagination was supplemented by his rapid embrace by a “collective” of artists, writers, and musicians. The forward-looking tone of their work harmonized very well with his own. The death of Allen Ginsberg in 1997 marked the end of this period, one with all the characteristics of a Golden Age. Shortly thereafter, Clemente began to stake out a new territory from which his work could develop. This one initially took the form of his construction of a kind of atoll, first in his imagination and then in Brooklyn, where in 2004 he began to outfit a new studio. From this place—across the bridge, as it were—he sailed ever more increasingly toward the harbor of homeland, aiming for shipwreck anew. The motor that propelled the vessel of his art had become an unsatisfied disposition: only in his confrontation with the near impossible could he continue to generate non-defeatist forms of art. Such a predicament—one that does not transfer the split in the individual to the collective sphere—has engendered Clemente’s art since at least 2000.

7.1 Berths

Although it has by now largely been forgotten, the leap into the twenty-first century was looked upon by many with fear throughout the world. Fortunately, the end of the world predicted to take place at the turn of the millennium by individuals ranging from Helena Blavatsky to Sir Isaac Newton did not come to pass. Nor did the potentially paralyzing computer glitch Y2K so hyped by doomsayers and the media bring the planet to a calamitous standstill. The social actuality of this climate of fear as well as more private matters left their mark on several paintings Clemente produced between 2000 and 2004.

In *Five Steps* (2001), a rounded portal accessible by five steps placed at the middle of the canvas invites entry (ill. 34; cat. no. 144). Around it, a tree forms an external perimeter. This tree is divided into five parts by the entranceway: note the two divergent stumps, two huge branching arms, and a trunk resembling a neck. The number

five, long symbolic of the human being—with a body, two arms, and two legs—also connotes the external world of phenomena. The gaping opening at its center calls into view the possibility of penetrating a darker, foreboding realm. No visible door blocks entry to this space. The keys dangling from the branches provide a nice ironic touch—none of these twenty-three opening devices fit the lock; this place can only be accessed by being broken through to. Such an image suggests that Clemente’s pursuit to penetrate into the inner realm of Self now entailed a willingness to cast aside the master keys to aesthetic, philosophic, and spiritual know-how with which he had so well equipped himself. In a certain sense then, *Five Steps* can be understood as a meditation on the kind risk-taking called for to accomplish entry into this place.

Another painting from the same year, *Dialogue*, continues this dynamic if muffled pitch (cat. no. 145). In it, we see two groups of birds: ones that line the branches of a tree and are busy mindlessly pecking away, the others, presumably dead, tightly packed like goods into a crypt-like shape below them. Such an image indicates discourses on production and consumption, existing and dying, yoking and unleashing. These existential extremes suggest the growing urgency of finding a balanced state of exchange between the collective and the individual. The dark colors of these two oil paintings also indicate that on the eve of September 11, 2001, the words with which Laing had opened *The Politics of Experience* rang ever more true: “Can we describe the present in terms of its becoming what it is not-yet, a term of Ernest Block’s [*sic*], so frightening, so ominous, so cataclysmic, that it is sometimes easier to see the present already darkened by the shadow of a thermonuclear apocalypse” With these two works, Clemente seems to have answered “yes.”

7.2 Buoys

The imperiled condition of man, the fleetingness of life—such thoughts had already begun to float to the surface of Clemente’s canvases in the year 2000. *The Sky* and *Paesaggio* number among this group of works, termed “vanities” by the artist (cat. nos. 146 and 147). In *The Sky*, a delicate “dress” hangs on a clothesline; *Paesaggio* features stairs ascending into nowhere in particular. Although evocative of aspects of Neapolitan life and full of airy vistas, these frescoes are far from light-hearted. Made in Rome, their themes are just as dark as the works discussed above, painted in his New York studio, not far from what would become Ground Zero.

The September 11, 2001 attacks wrought by Islamic terrorists on the Twin Towers

in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, turned the world on its head. It was not until 2004 that a first group of images began to emerge that suggested that the anchor of homeland had become a kind of aesthetic lifeline. Among these, *Tandoori Satori #18* is perhaps the most forward-looking (ill. 35; cat. no. 149). In it, a series of brown anchors descend. Meanwhile, nearby, red balloon-like shapes rise upward in the opposite direction. The ubiquitous blue surrounding them suggests both the site of physical origin and of cerebral becoming. Together they suggest the condition of giving form to something “concrete and ongoing.”

By itself, the anchor indicates two encumbrances: the weight of the heritage of Greco-Roman antiquity and the burden of ego from which Clemente has continually tried to free himself. The balloons bespeak a willingness for risk-taking, a desire to tear loose so as to find a new middle ground. A cipher of freedom, they suggest a persistent buoying up of shards of utopian visions, particular to homeland, metamorphosing anew. It is from this anchor that Clemente continues to generate works of art capable of exposing with irony the contradictions of contemporary existence.

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All translations are the author’s own except as otherwise indicated.

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