

Metamorphic “Me”

One could hardly say that Francesco Clemente is a self-effacing artist. Indeed his visage features prominently in a great many of his works – perhaps even the overall majority of them. In numerous instances it is the only image. In that regard he is similar to his friend Chuck Close, who has painted Clemente a couple of times but who has painted, or photographed, or drawn, or etched, lithographed and otherwise printed his own likeness dozens if not hundreds of times. Elsewhere I have challenged those who have criticized Close for his supposed “narcissism” to explain why the same should not be said of Rembrandt and Van Gogh – judged paragons of universal other-directed empathy by generations of humanist critics and historians despite their compulsive self-portrayal – while noting how much of the art we cherish is there for us thanks to men and women – Frida Kahlo figuring prominently among the latter – who have been mesmerized by their reflection in the mirror, if not by outward projections of their inward, self-conception.

So how can one fault Clemente for seeing himself everywhere and finding that countenance fascinating. Rather we should be grateful that he does, because the results have proved so marvelously varied. That variety, in all its occasionally grotesque dimensions, convincingly argues that one might better describe him as a self-*refacing*, even self-*defacing* artist. For his presence in the work is that of a changeling, an icon of perpetually transformational self-hood. He assumes that guise less out of vanity – although a healthy ego is hardly rare among artists while “vanitas” – which is to say a keen awareness of the ineluctable impermanence and ephemeral nature of all that we hold dear, starting with our mortal being as an explicit theme of much that he does – than out of a desire to personify the constant state of flux that is fundamental condition of being.

Moreover, such awareness permeates the hybrid cultural and artistic heritage that constitutes the principal, wondrously fecund source of his imagination. It includes classical antiquity as understood by Ovid, and syncretism as bequeathed to an otherwise, at any rate ostensibly, scientific modernity by hermetic tradition as well as by South Asian metaphysics set forth in ancient Hindu scripture and woven into daily existence in the Indian subcontinent down through the ages and up to the present. Needless to say “progressive” materialists are quick to decry the archaic “irrationality” of these two bodies of thought, viewing them as dangerous folly if not indisputable indicators of reactionary ideology.

To the extent that fascism did in fact tap into these historical substrata such apprehension is not without a measure of substance. Yet those who have carefully parsed Goya’s famous dictum “The sleep of reason produces monsters” well know that phrase is double-edged. In addition being a caution against superstition is likewise a warning against excessively “rational” obsessions. For if monsters flourish when reason sleeps – the conventional “enlightened” understanding of the adage – the second version turns the tables on logic and makes the mind wary of another, arguably more horrible, more jarring prospect, namely that monsters are produced when reason dreams. From the trenches of World War I to the slaughterhouses of World War II and the ongoing threat of global annihilation imposed on us by nuclear weaponry since the Cold War, there is ample cause to mistrust reason when it dreams big and especially when it dreams bad. Against which background renewed interest in the poetic anachronism and free associating fantasy seems comparatively benign and quite possibly redemptive.

In making this *apologia* I am temporarily slipping the bonds of my inherently secular and abidingly skeptical disposition. Extended exposure to Clemente’s work has loosened those bonds. So, if I resist the temptation to wholly immerse myself in the otherworldly as he has done it will not be without first conceding the powerful allure figments of an atemporal “elsewhere” have for a hard-nosed, here-and-now man of the twenty-first century. In that context and with such a person as your guide and interlocutor, let me turn to a selection of those works and examine their particulars while simultaneously registering and analyzing the spell they cast.

It is best to begin with *Name* (1983, cat. no. 2), an imposing, dramatic canvas in which Clemente's face appears no less than seven times; first as the overall armature of the central image, then twice as the eyes, twice in the nostrils, once in the ear exposed to the viewer (one can safely presume that another face is nested in the hidden ear should it suddenly be turned our way) and once more as the tongue of a colossal head framed by a massive (most likely Indian) column and a window giving out onto featureless blue skies. Initially the image would seem to recapitulate the traditional theme of the five senses although tactility is left out except insofar as the vigorous paint handling demonstrates how painting as a medium almost invariably conflates vision with touch, touch with vision. But the image possesses still stranger dimensions of experience, for what would it mean to see oneself through oneself, to taste oneself, hear oneself and smell oneself with one's tongue, ears and nose all at the same time?

Of course the latter happens constantly, as the perfume and deodorant industry attests. Along the way reminding the potentially omniscient, omni-auditory, omnivorous, omni-olfactory viewer, listener, licker, sniffer that Clemente is an exemplary sensualist of limitless capacities, someone able to absorb anything and everything, someone for whom discrimination among stimuli is based precisely on exposure to rather than denial of the extremes to which direct bodily experience of the world can take one.

Meanwhile, the manner in which the image is constructed suggests a bizarre *mise en abîme* in which – although it cannot be seen and would be impossible to paint in minute detail – each head replicated the others *ad infinitum* such that the intake of sensation acted like a maelstrom sucking the whole of creation into the orifices and apertures of a single, chambered being. But that hallucinatory interpretation leaves out a key element that strikes me as plainly inscribed in the image, namely the impression Clemente gives of someone inhabited by unruly, even demonic versions of himself, of a person imprisoned by or imprisoning his apparently identical yet alien alter egos, a person choking on himself, congested by himself, blinded by himself, deafened by himself, like a pagan deity at odds with his multiple aspects, like an inversion of the pan-cultural notion of Universal Oneness in the Godhead.

Have I gone too far? Was any of this Clemente's explicit intention? Was it even remotely on his mind? I know him well but am not in a position to say with certainty one way or the other. Moreover, knowing him well I could have asked him but chose not to. Was that critical cowardice on my part? I think not. Does that lapse express a lack of respect for artistic authority? Certainly not, although nowadays almost no one seems to grant much authority to artists, "genius" being a thing of past with all claims to it inciting profound mistrust regardless of the artistic period at issue. Instead, cultural critics prefer to reserve hermeneutical prerogatives for themselves thereby "privileging" the reader/spectator over the "writer/image-maker", according to academically sanctioned "post-modern" principals. So be it. My basis for following a "don't ask, do tell" policy in this regard is the conviction that essence of Clemente's aesthetic is the instability of his imagery and the polyvalence of his iconographic references. Clemente is a master of the poetics of suggestion rather than a programmatic symbolist of a kind familiar to us from conventionally esoteric or occult art of nineteenth and twentieth century. "X" in our earth-bound pictorial domain does not equal "Y" on the astral plane. Rather, the transcendence toward which Clemente aspires is metaphysical in the same sense that worldly Giorgio de Chirico's art was metaphysical. (Might we not go so far as to say that "otherworldliness" is a dialectically necessary preoccupation of those who are most worldly, with both de Chirico and Clemente being prime albeit very different exemplars of this coexistence of extremes?) When, *pace* William Wordsworth, "the world is too much with us" otherworldliness offers release from the constraints of logical certainty occasioned by encounters with the uncanny, it promises and delivers the oneiric wonder through free association, it is a transcendence of the imagination that awakens the spirit although where that spirit travels beyond this point of departure is entirely up to the viewer and is not the

concern of the artist who, while well versed in Vedic texts and adept at meditational disciplines, never teaches but is content to manifest and share the benefits of his own release, his own wonder, his own transcendence, his own self-licensing imagination.

Having dwelled at some length on this compound self-portrait, I will now turn to two others, both of which date from a couple of years before *Name*. The first, Clemente painted in 1980 when he was twenty-eight (*Selfportrait*, 1980, cat. no. 1). It features a curly haired, fresh faced version of the artist as he appears in photographs from the 1970s – the years in which he traveled like a pilgrim in Central and South Asia sometimes in the company of his mentor Alighiero Boetti – but for the pock marks or pimples that spread across his face and the lesions that erupt in the richly painted tones covering the rest of the canvas. The cause of these painterly blemishes is unspecified – might they belong to an episode from these early travels? Perhaps. In any event, they recall another image by another artist. I am thinking of landscape from 1975 by the German painter Anselm Kiefer titled *Kranke Kunst (Sick Art)* and with that they suggest a variation on the pathetic fallacy according to which nature reflects the moods of humankind. In Kiefer's work the source of painting's illness is a contagion acquired from history, specifically the plague of Nazism that infected his country during the 1930s and 1940s. No such epochal catastrophe is evoked by Clemente's image but it would seem as if a malaise has simultaneously beset both the artist and his medium, a pestilence somehow characteristic of the *Zeitgeist*, and contemporary *mal du siècle* without that distemper of the times owing to a clear epidemiological cause or having a clear prognosis. Indeed, it appears to be less threatening than humbling, like many unsightly reminders of our fleshly vulnerability. The second self-portrait of 1980 (cat. no. 5) presents us with what seems to be a reinterpretation of the David and Goliath story. In it a hand grips the hair of a decapitated head whose half-open mouth touches the tip of an erect phallus. Does that phallus belong to the victor who brandishes his trophy and pleasures himself with it? The position of the hand appears to contradict that reading, and one is left speculating on who is offering “good head” to whom, but more than that one wonders why the head is that of the artist and what prompted him to depict himself in this violently eroticized manner.

Yet again the lack of straightforward answers to such exegetical questions is the basis for the painting's power to arrest and hold our attention, a power as great in this and similar small self-portraits of this period – for example the magical, hysterically Blake-like *Inside/Outside* (1983/1984, cat. no. 6) – as that of latter, larger paintings.

Which brings us to the expansive triptych *The Battle of Paintings* (1981, cat. no. 23) in which Clemente's likeness appears in the central and right hand panels, the third panel at the left being dominated by a bifurcated rendering of a woman with an umbrella. Once more close readers of iconography will have a field day identifying sources and ascribing precise meanings. I will confine myself to a few observations. One, the multiple self-portraits in the central panel effectively constitute a single animation sequence depicting the artist gone amok. Two, disembodied heads abound and the telltale example seems to represent self-decapitation. Three, decapitation is often a psychological synonym for castration. Four, the bizarrely comic rendition of the artist “eating” the barrel of a gun while a loyal dog looks on rhymes with the open-mouthed self-portrait as a phallus-touching, -kissing? -swallowing? – Goliath but in an unmistakably comic mode.

Taking all these details as my cues, I would venture that the entire work – a vigorously anti-heroic riff on heroic figure compositions of the Renaissance and Baroque period – is a deftly self-mocking account of unhappiness in love, of an ego and libido run rampant and of the absurd and unpredictable consequences of that antic rampage. To the extent that my hunch is correct – or even if it is wrong – the ensemble shows Clemente the draftsman and painter doing what he does best: conjuring images like a magician with an infinite number of cards up his sleeve. That one self-portrait nude among the many in the

triptych's central panel recalls the posture of the Phrygian-capped revolutionary heroine of Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) as she evolved in pencil studies for that composition and another evokes myriad renditions of John the Baptist whose head came into the possession of Salome only after she demanded that it be chopped off as the price for her dance of the seven veils also demonstrates the degree to which Clemente's art is an echo chamber for the art of the past or a semiotic kitchen midden.

Works such as *Everybody's Child* (1990, cat. no. 7) and the two deep red-brown *Running Counter* (1988, cat. no. 3) and *Speak Not of Byzantium* (1988, cat. no. 4) show the yet more cryptic, more emblematic dimensions of Clemente's sensibility, with the former evoking languid sexuality, the unhurried stretch and intertwining of bodies as vividly but as mysteriously as one can imagine it being done. A similar riddling and encoding of three-dimensional or nearly three-dimensional shapes or attributes within bodily silhouettes informs Clemente's portraits of others. Whether in churches or temples, the shrines of Naples or those Madras or Benares, we know the saints by their attributes, while in oil on woods such as *Portrait of Patrick* (1985, cat. no. 13), *Portrait of Suzanne Mallouk* (1985, cat. no. 16), *Portrait of Sabrina* (1985, cat. no. 27) we see the actual visage of at least one, Clemente's friend and collaborator Allen Ginsberg (1985, cat. no. 31) in whose poetry the anonymous authors of the Vedas, William Blake and Walt Whitman meet to raise a chorus of praise and prophecy through the ventriloquist's voice of the next in line of their visionary number.

Let me end with a few more words about the five senses, or rather words about the one that is, as I wrote above, physically manifest rather than symbolically represented in *Name*: touch. That painting belongs to a considerable body of oil on canvas works from the late 1970s and early 1980s that may fairly be described as "expressionist" though the style of that now long ago period stressed both its novelty and its own explicit historicism by adopting the rubric Neo-Expressionism. Alternately luscious and grating painterliness was its hallmark. Other bodies of work highlight other material, tactile qualities. Clemente's vast array of watercolors and his large format but numerically smaller group of frescos – which are essentially watercolors on wet plaster – make the most of those mediums fluidity and near dematerialization, one in which atomized particles of pigment are floated over the surface in washes and then settle as minute but intense bursts of color and tone, with the inherent texture of the support and the aqueous wash of the pigments' vehicle taking precedence over that of the applied mark. Then, there are Clemente's pastels that range in their palpable aspects from mildly gritty to the smoothness and fluffiness of face powder, qualities that, by virtue of a dryness that contrasts vividly with the wetness of the watercolors and fresco, evoke fragility and impermanence in complementary ways. In each instance the choice of medium is correspondingly crucial to the sensuous poetics and affects of the image. There to remind us of this exceptional span of sensual effects is centered on the head of a man (*Head*, 1990, cat. no. 41) which a shaven skull set into a crescent like those that cap the staves of some Hindu sadhus or holy men, this work is as calm and uninflected as *Name* was agitated and muscular, as superficially inexpressive and remote as the other was expressionist and "in your face". What accounts for the extreme difference between two roughly similar subjects (that subject being the portrayal of the self) within one artist's *oeuvre*? Many things do, starting with the extraordinary scope of the artist's awareness of his own faculties and of the world around him that those faculties absorb and assimilate. However, the simplest explanation is that in *Head* the man in the picture has turned inward and – with his eyes closed and blindfolded, his ears and nose plugged, his mouth gagged – is cut off from outside stimuli. Indeed his head itself appears to have been severed from the rest of his body thereby eliminating touch as well. In this state of isolation from his environs we feel – with a sixth sense – another world opening up within him. There consciousness dwells, imagining and remaking its reality. There Clemente dwells when, eyes wide, ears, nose, lips and tongue alert, his hand selects a tool and begins to move in the space that only he can create.

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