

Sughi's latest work, the 'Stabat Mater' triptych (Sughi Studios)

A write-up for TRF of Alberto Sughi's exhibition at the Vittoriano last year prompted an exchange between the artist and writer Michael Monkhouse and resulted in this fascinating interview.

by Michael Monkhouse

Interview With An Artist

Alberto Sughi

Rome, 6 February 2008

It's rare indeed that the modern world – a world of industrialism, the internet and mobile phone messages – cedes an artist like Sughi. It's even rarer that the artist chooses to share his vision – a vision of incommunicability, sadness and a society that refuses to love – with the paying public. And yet rarer that after one exhibition – Complesso del Vittoriano, Roma, July to September 2007 – I write a review which by fluke of the aforementioned internet falls into the hands of the man himself. And urges him to contact me for an interview.

So it's with some trepidation that I arrive at Sughi's studio on a cool February morning, shake hands with his secretary, pass another disturbing image of modern alienation – 1981's 'The Dinner' – and nervously proffer my hand. And sit down. And let him talk.

And listen to one of the greatest living artists in Italy – no, Europe – no the world.

SUGHI THE MAN

But Sughi is a quiet, unassuming man in a suit and tie. He says he enjoyed my article and encourages me to write more. He says he's currently working on a new cycle, 'Going Away', for the simple reason that nothing he's ever done before has been able to satisfy himself fully:

"It's all about getting to know oneself," he insists. "When you're young you think you know everything – you've created a final work of art and you let it stand as it is – but as you get older you realise how little you actually do know and you accept each painting for what it is. Just another step on the route to self-knowledge." It's an idea he enlarges upon as he shows me his latest work, a rather disquieting take on the 'Stabat Mater': "It's a question of freedom... Ignoring everyone else and finding your own freedom to know yourself better so you can express it." I'm reminded of Ingmar Bergman – the first artist Alberto cites when I ask after his influences, the first artist I myself cited in my article – saying the artist is nothing more than an individual trying to understand himself better. And to share that process with anyone who'll participate.



DISLOCATION FROM THE WORLD

But 'Stabat Mater' is a characteristically individualistic work, a work that bears the hallmark of classic Sughi. "I'm always fascinated by the same thing," he tells me, "By our sense of dislocation from the world. But it'd be boring to keep saying the same thing in the same way – I try to express the same sense of horror but *mettendomi in gioco*."

'Mettendosi in gioco' – it's a wonderfully Italian expression [meaning 'to bring oneself into play' – *Ed.*], and a wonderfully Italian idea. It explains how Sughi's 'Stabat Mater' – a triptych of women weeping – evolved from a standard painting of two women and a pianist in a bar. Sughi settles down at his computer and shows me how the evolution occurs: The figures were too inexpressive, so he made the women cry... The image was too static, so he made it more mellifluous (Munchian streaks, Monetian mirages)... The theme was too objective, so he cut the pianist... But the artist isn't a story-teller, he's a displayer. And a painting isn't a film still, it's an image sufficient in itself. Hence the close-up of the women weeping – no *one* woman weeping – not the *same* woman weeping, in triptych form.

And so we return to 'Stabat Mater'.

PATH TO REDUCTION

And to Sughi, using and abusing classical imagery. But only in order to make it relevant to today's society... I'm reminded of 1959's 'Crucifix in a City', where a crucifix hangs over the entire polis. And I'm fascinated to hear Sughi agree with me when I say political, sociological, allegorical interpretations of his work are reductive. This is his own image of life and it extends to us all... Even when he fled the city for the country and three years in an idyllic villa, he felt nature was no more conducive to the individual's needs than the city itself: it is, if anything, even more mysterious and unknown and unknowable. I'm tempted to quote Sylvia Plath's ambivalence towards the sea: "It could court, it could kill." And I'm further tempted to revisit Sughi's own 'Green Cycle' of the early 70s, a period he recounts to me in this regard:

"I spent six years in the countryside in the hope I'd feel more integrated. But I wasn't. You've seen the paintings."

ENDS AND BEGINNINGS

So, to quote Plath again, is there any way out of the mind? Sughi feels there is. It's why he followed his 'To Go - Where?' cycle with his new cycle, 'To Go - Away'. And it's an image of a man leaving a woman. Sad, they're both sad. But just as the last series was an end more than a beginning, this is a beginning more than an end. And Sughi tells me if there's a smile behind every tear, there's a tear behind every smile. For when I try to compare his latest works to Renaissance Italy he concedes I'm right, but he isn't looking back. He's still trying to find himself. To find the perfect work of art. And as long as he keeps searching, he'll keep painting.

So just before I leave, he hands me a catalogue of the exhibition, signs it and reads:

"Beyond any philologism, just to help those asking how to see my work... Have the same patience and expectation as when you enter a cinema after the film's started: watch the first, new scenes; try to understand the setting or characters without knowing if they're main or secondary; don't know if we're at the start or the end... So in life, we enter after the show's started. No hurry, in the time left, we'll end up knowing where we are."

Because the show goes on. And so do we. With Sughi, I hope. ■

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