

Per scelta personale ho lasciato in originale il testo di questo mio caro amico,
che ha saputo cogliere delle profondità di cui gli sarò sempre grata.

Paola Ricci

WHIRLPOOLS — Paola Ricci's mystical presences

If we imagine looking down from the ceiling of Grand Central Station we see a hodgepodge pattern of human behavior which can be defined in scientific terms as Chaos since each speck knows where it is going and moves with deliberate intention. If, on the other hand, someone were to yell “Fire!” then each speck would lose that original intentionality and scramble around helter-skelter, which in scientific terms is Random.

Jackson Pollack died in 1956. I began art lessons in Greenwich Village, just a few blocks from his old studio in 1957. I was thirteen years old. Although driven by art throughout childhood I still understood nothing significant about its processes or motivations. Yet even that young I was able to grasp the inexplicable force that was Pollack in his era and could easily experience the hypnotic effect he had over his peers. His stigma filled the streets of the 10th Street art gallery scene in what was at that time known as The Lower East Side of New York City. It also took up all the oxygen in the tiny 10th Street Coffee House where the emerging next generation of artist gathered to discuss the demonstrably practical yet wholly abstract concept of the subject matter of new art activity. That was – and still remains – the issue of representational imagery on the one hand or the total absence of any visually recognizable forms on the other. It is often asked of that time when all the current painters ate and drank at the same watering holes – like Minetta Tavern, Cedar Tavern, Stanley's Bar, Cafe San Remo and the handful of others willing to carry a tab for any artist on the G.I. Bill as was the case for most of them – what did they argue about and why were those discussions so heated and often escalated to fisticuffs and glasses thrown across the saloon in the predawn hours of the morning?

While it is not my intention to link the drawings of Paola Ricci to those tumultuous times and bitter artist-to-artist disagreements, this artist's handiwork lives whole heartedly within this endless dialogue

which always erupted on the personal level but which was as equally debated and bandied about at the formal level of art exhibition and in particular had become embedded in art critique. This because the dogmas of which were not only under assault by art audiences and magazine editors, but the very struggle itself served as the justification for a crisis not in art alone but in critique and the nature of art criticism in its traditional framework. Art writers were under the self-same pressure as the post war creators to come up with fresh approaches, new angles, innovative vocabulary and even going as far as combative posturing in order to defend the birth of a new dimension in art's means of regenerating in a time of unbridled post war freedom and, by contrast, an unbounded furor to hold onto conservative values, a return to the old way of seeing the world and the artist's place in it.

While many decades removed from this tempestuous time in the continuum of western cultural tradition and from those decidedly macho barroom personas that inhabited it, Ricci's intense yet also quite casual impetus and breathless flowing technique provide us with both the question and the resolution in a way that makes us wonder just what all the fuss was about, so natural does this artist's production feel and so self confidently and unabashedly presented in almost humble terms; i.e., with simple (mostly) black strokes on white drawing pad paper. It feels exceptionally salient to me since this is exactly how I would imagine that Pollack himself went about a reexamination of his own output in his controversial later years at a time when he returned to representation in order to explore a possible escape hatch through what he increasingly saw as a dead end or impasse in his own creative process; a process so lionized and set ablaze by his celebrity status and worse yet, constantly revalidated by so many genuflecting peers and stellar venues for his exhibitions worldwide, that he was incapable of anything innovative or ground breaking. Absent any hope of surprise or even controversy that he had nowhere to look other than by taking a step backwards, or perhaps more generously put, a step laterally in order to explore representation. And here is the point in Ricci's creative spirit: having no baggage to carry she is able to step boldly right up to the blank page and let fly zephyrs of human endeavor the very unleashing of which in unbounded gestures and swirling, speedy motions gather and build into an eventual compilation of some figuration image that feels – no, actually is conjured rather than contrived, and a conjuring that comes from within her own psyche. What I mean by that is this coalescence does not sit outside of her in some landscape that is external to her being, but definitely resides right inside her mind taking on its shape as well as taking up a presence on the page before her

eyes and probably surprisingly so. There on the wall and I might even add as if flung there of its own momentum, a psychic automatism in the surrealist sense of that term has clearly evolved into a mysterious phantom, but one not at all from any dream space but instead a space that is the dream or the simulacrum of a dream realm. This imagery is not an interpretation of something seen but the result of something directly experienced by the hand and mind – and true as well, the whirling spirit of the artist in action.

The editor and critic Hilton Kramer deplored the intervention into abstract expressionism – or, as equally mis-termed “action painting” – the idea that this painterly activity was a “psychologically motivated” intentionality. This because it took away from this method of creating the most fundamental drive and the creating artist's task of driving toward an esthetic result; and this notion of a psychological purpose robs the artist of his or her humanity in the drama of the creative spirit at work in spontaneous revels. Let me say here that before Ricci's artful result manifests itself, that her moment of cessation of activity is clearly a moment we are able to share, that exact moment when the esthetic experience is rounded or full, when the drawing tells her and us that it is ready to present its completeness to the world which it is looking out at even as that world,. And from the outer world, that world of our own eyes, is in fact looking in at it with wonder as to its origin for being, its method of coming into existence, its purposeful or perhaps purposeless state which finds its meaning in the viewer's gaze back upon it,. It is that Lacanean quandary about symbol and sign, the mirror stage, that art assertion that both viewer and viewed identify each other, exist for each other – at least at that very moment of visual contact. Let me say it this way in order to clarify my own perception: there is no message in the image other than it's own mystic presence and for the purpose of our being able to look up on it, or more to the point in at it. The intimacy is shared between artist and viewer because the process and the concluding image are symbiotic.

It may be said that abstraction is derived by either of two means: in the first case, a process of deconstruction or subtractive reduction of something familiar; in the second case, and again conversely, a process of construction or an additive production towards the creator's point of view. If we look at de Kooning in this light , by way of an example, we see that in his portrait of Marilyn Monroe he begins with a generally iterated image of the actress probably taken from a photograph. He then, in his slow

and considered process, fragments that representational form and scatters it around the surface of the canvas dispensing in any photographic identity of the persona yet keeping only those elements that can be said to “represent” the character of the actress herself, those symbolic pieces of her easily discernible popular image. Jackson Pollack's long running debate with de Kooning on this very point once prompted a punch-out in the Cedar Tavern – that de Kooning could not abandon the European crutch of keeping something realistic to grab onto now matter how aggressively he tried to hack it apart, a comment summed up when he said of one such Marilyn painting that it was not a portrait but “an autopsy”. In other terms, this notion of adding up strokes on a white plane or within a spatial void until something esthetic takes hold and it then can be considered “art” by way of that criteria for visual resonance or sensation.

With those two processes in mind, let us look at a Ricci drawing and consider it as the latter case: a point flies around the page like a fly, seemingly random since we can but merely surmise that the fly has some logic to its movements even though we cannot grasp just what that reasoning is. Let's just say that the bug is reconnoitering. If by visualizing the trail that the insect leaves we find that in final result there appears for us some form of a creature, perhaps an elemental, or a demon or a phantom presence and at that instant we can see that by the additive process the hand of the creator has brought forth a unique being, not exactly human perhaps and certainly with no intention of an exact portrait, yet we have a result, a form generated by artistic behavior and furthermore such behavior that remains vividly in the abstract realm of a pure process. The creator's meandering hand reconnoiters the void and mysteriously perhaps, or diligently seeking out form relationships in vivo. The swirling hand of the artist is in every sense random and expressively free other than for the unexpected fact that in conclusion there is a recognizable organic form, a being to relate to, a being meant to look back at us. We might say that the image exists someplace between random and chaos, in effect, held in stasis by the viewer's appreciation of that form derived as the result of irrepressible activity.

Oddly, that is not only enough to capture our attention but likewise enough for us to judge the entire presented material as clever, skilled and wildly creative – great stuff in other words and what in psychology is termed the “Aha!” moment.

Willem de Kooning eventually had to let go of recognizable elements in his canvases since his cognitive faculties slowly began to abandon him. We can only wonder what Pollack would have thought about these works that were executed in the painter's later years of aporia, perhaps taking the larger perspective of many critics that these later canvases are in fact his best output. We too can only guess what Pollack derived from his own hairpin turn leading him back to things like portrait heads and the more commonly identifiable subjects of the artist. It has been rumored that much of this late work was destroyed or deposited in the dark recesses of an art vault by people or forces unnamed in an effort to maintain the momentum, conscientiousness and – dare I mentioned? – the market price of his drip and splatter period. But I am given to consider that last and later art work of Pollack's as less of a benchmark for a new style and merely as a process in transition for the means to open a gate in the back wall of a philosophical epiphany that had run its course and was turning up blank.

Paola Ricci whirlpools display a bright and troubling absence of inhibition – in fact she revels in those qualities. She dives without hesitation right into the deepest part of the grander pool of an art universal that spans more than a half century of debate that made and ruined many an art career. Upon consideration of Ricci's art production, this writer can only conclude that the great riddle has finally cooled its heels. ###

—Peter Barton