

Critical Essay

The work of art is, as a person both memory (the past) and activity (the past). It is, as each human being is, at each moment simultaneously complete and in the process of completion."¹

Adrienne Momi walks a fine tightrope, trips the light fantastic, kicks over the traces and goes for the gold. She is a traveler in a land of fiction and fact. Her art is trickier than it at first seems. In the under layers of her paintings and mixed media pieces including *La Piazza*, *La Condottiera*, *La Bellissima*; *I Gioielli*; and *ABCdarium*, images of street-wise women and men split their time between the Renaissance and now.

A little less than a year ago Momi took up traditional egg tempera with the objective of personalizing it by choosing to depict some of her favorite people as models based on Uccello, Filippo Lippi and Botticelli. These works are about contextualizing history, about adding adaptability and appropriation to a cast of characters drawn from her circle of family, friends and acquaintances, and re-presenting them in Renaissance settings and attire ranging from the 1400s through the early 1600s. Additionally, she includes a number of prints and montaged pieces inspired by archeological digs, ancient architecture, illuminated manuscripts and various tchotchkes drawn from her own surroundings.

In Adrienne Momi's worlds there are no absolute distinction between abstraction and realism. Imagine a continuum ranging from ancient Roman times through the twenty-first century proving once again that gone is not forgotten. Her stylish postmodern renderings are a cabinet of curiosities; a kind of wunderkind kammer more about topology than chronology.

The artist prolapses person and events assigning portraits that already exist or have existed in a past time to her current circle of friends thus intersecting the past with the present. The feeling this over painting evokes is of a rich undergrowth of scrawls, graffiti-like elements and arbitrary marks that spring up from beneath her richly embellished surfaces.

This allows imperfectly covered montages of variously colored pigment to show through creating transparencies of shapes, forms and marks that haunt these pieces. These ghostly pick-ups function as an open-ended convergence of street cultures through the ages. They are dialogues with history in a postmodern context like those of Jeff Koons, Anselm Kiefer and others.

Adrienne Momi's art creates a rich tapestry of unrelated objects and subjects; a kind of sacra conversazione that revitalizes the viewer's relationship to gender, art and history through how it charms the eye and amuses the senses. She forces her audience to think in a new context while simultaneously referring to frescoes by Masolino in the Brancacci Chapel in Florence and genres that reference the chivalric romance popularized by Miguel de Cervantes in *Don Quixote* wherein the ideals of knighthood and their incongruity with the reality of his world are explored.

Knights in shining armor may be obsolete, but they are female and vividly

alive in Momi's art. The ideals of Baldassare Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier* about chivalry, as well as codes of conduct that elite warriors swore to uphold including values of faith, loyalty courage and honor are upheld in these canvases and prints. They may even be read as a textbook of conduct for the American military at home and abroad.

Images such as these come as no surprise to those familiar with this artist and her work. She has spent many years in the cities and localitas of Tuscany immersed in the champagne colored light of that countryside. Works such as *From the Terrace* and *Toscana Campagna* reflect her naturalistic approach to painting with a simplicity that belies their complexity.

Momi's painting and mixed media pieces sparkle across the ages. Her enthusiasm is not misplaced, the Renaissance, after all, invented painting. Her child-like play with identity, gender and references to mythology and archaeology is far from empty.

Her pieces are as much about her creative practices as they are about the art she makes. It is art about asserting value by re-reading, re-appropriating and re-contextualizing as this exhibition so profoundly demonstrates. It raises interesting questions about the uses of history now; about using techniques that are considered outmoded to illuminate age-old social issues in a new context.

There is plenty here for the astute viewer who takes the time to really consider these works and more than enough to hold your attention when it comes to painting, sexual politics, poetry and everyday life. For instance, her images of Arcadia conjure up an impulse to get away from it all. Who among us has not had a fantasy of retiring from the turmoil of life that challenges us? Thus her unsettling combination of pastoral and historical references creates a space of uncertainty in a newly imagined vision of a dog eat dog world where proud plutocratic peacocks parade in as outrageous and heartless a fashion as the doggy dog world where the top dogs were the de Medici bankers and the Popes.

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1 Sherman, Susan. *The Color of the Heart: Writing from Struggle & Change* 1959-1990. Conn: Curbstone Press, 1990. 201