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Artemisia in England: a royal rediscovery

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of sorrow (*the passionate*) (Fig.7), one of three expressionist Crucifixion paintings created in 1960–61. Boettger describes these works as a representation of Smithson's family trauma: the colour red evoking blood and the swirls and blobs that decorate Christ's body symbolising the white blood cells overproduced by Harold's leukaemia. Smithson's early paintings, of which there are many, are undoubtedly strange. They bear little relation to the Minimalist sculptures the artist made not long after, let alone his earthworks, and for a long time, the typical art-historical approach was to overlook them. However, as Boettger argues, such works account for half of Smithson's career. She boldly tackles them, making more of them than any scholar in recent years, since Eugenie Tsai curated the comprehensive, travelling Smithson retrospective in 2004.² Boettger's interpretation of the copious numerological and astrological references in these early works is remarkable, engaging with subjects that art historians normally avoid. Everything leads to, or more accurately, adds up to, Harold. This includes the iconic *Spiral jetty* (1970) in Utah, which corrals and intensifies the Great Salt Lake's curious red colour: a 'sanguinary fantasia', writes Boettger (p.2).

If death dominates the first half of the book, there is plenty of sex, too. There is an extremely odd passage in the 1967 travelogue 'The monuments of Passaic', in which the artist, touring the chaos of a New Jersey construction site, meets a pipe and a fountain spewing waste water into the local river. 'It was as though', Smithson wrote, 'the pipe was secretly sodomizing some hidden technological orifice, and causing a monstrous sexual organ (the fountain) to have an orgasm' (p.140). 'A psychoanalyst', he continued, 'might say that the landscape displayed "homosexual tendencies"' (p.140). This is somewhat unexpected in an essay that otherwise riffs amusingly on the picturesque potential of the Jersey suburbs. It makes little sense if one imagines – as until fairly recently most did – Smithson beginning his career in 1964 as a more or less fully-formed Minimalist. But as Boettger shows, it can be traced right back to a series of wildly homoerotic drawings he produced in the early 1960s.³ Moreover, there are fragmentary accounts suggesting that Smithson was probably bisexual, and struggled with it. Boettger reproduces one of Smithson's sources for his drawings, a Tom of Finland-like beefcake sketch by Dom Orejudos (known as Etienne), along with its original, hilarious,

caption that strains to describe it as an exercise in artistic composition.

Death returns late in the book in a detailed and affecting account of the making of the Texas earthwork *Amarillo ramp* (1973), during which Smithson died in a plane crash while surveying the site, aged thirty-five. There is a set of doomy premonitions from Smithson's wife, Nancy Holt – 'the night before, Bob said to me, "You know, if I die, you'll be OK"' (p.327) – their dealer friend Tony Shafrazi and Stanley Marsh, who owned the ranch where *Amarillo ramp* was constructed. Boettger also details Smithson's alarming behaviour in the light aircraft on a previous flight, as Shafrazi recalls: 'Sitting next to me, Robert was laughing. I was sickly afraid. Seeing my fear, he was courting it. There was something despicably horrible about being in that flight with Robert' (p.326). It seems, putting together Boettger's pieces, to have been a death wish. Smithson, for whatever reason, wanted to bring the plane down.

Psychobiography is as unfashionable as methods get and this book certainly can be a wild ride. The conventional documentary evidence can be superficial, and there is no living artist to interrogate. Therefore, Boettger's methods consist in stitching together fragments with some eclectic reading and bold speculation. However, if anyone has the right to speculate about Smithson, Boettger does. She has read everything, talked to everyone and seen all of his work. Whether or not one accepts the (psycho) analysis, the book has many pleasures, among them discovering just how much time and money Smithson spent at the nightclub Max's Kansas City and the politics of those raucous evenings. His eclectic library is another, which is discussed throughout and annotated as a fascinating appendix.

All of this leaves some questions about Smithson's art, which often has a rather provisional quality, resembling a set of sketches for projects that ultimately would be carried out by others. That remains the case, for this reviewer at any rate. But the human figure who emerges from this book is far more complex than we have seen or read before. Monomaniacal, religious, sexually ambivalent – he was, in the words of more than one friend, 'perverse' (pp.8, 113, 178). He was also driven, in a way that has been rarely described before. Boettger writes of his 'hyperkinetic volubility' (p.104), wearing out friends and colleagues late into the night at Max's, before disappearing into the dark. Now we have a better idea of where he was heading.

¹ For more on Smithson as a 'replacement child', see S. Boettger: 'Living extinction: Robert Smithson's dinosaurs', *Burlington Contemporary Journal* 5 (November 2021), available at contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/living-extinction-robert-smithsons-dinosaurs, accessed 5th September 2023.
² E. Tsai, C. Butler and T. Crow: exh. cat. *Robert Smithson*, Los Angeles (Museum of Contemporary Art), Dallas (Museum of Art) and New York (Whitney Museum of American Art) 2004–05.
³ See T. Hantke: 'Dialectics and transgressions: Robert Smithson's cartouche drawings', *Burlington Contemporary Journal* 8 (June 2023), available at contemporary.burlington.org.uk/journal/journal/dialectics-and-transgressions-robert-smithsons-cartouche-drawings, accessed 5th September 2023.

Short reviews

Un pittore conteso nella Napoli del Settecento: L'epistolario e gli affari di Francesco de Mura

By Francesco Lofano. 232 pp. incl. 10 col. ill. (Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici, Naples, 2022), €25. ISBN 978-88-97820-78-9.

by STEFAN ALBL

This book presents the first in-depth analysis of the correspondence of the Neapolitan painter Francesco de Mura (1696–1782), a pupil of Francesco Solimena, who produced some of the most elegant and refined history paintings of his time and to whom Antonio Roviglione dedicated an entry in his 1731 edition of Pellegrino Antonio Orlandi's *Abecedario pittorico*. The letters and documents, preserved in the Pio Monte della Misericordia Archives, allow insights into De Mura's family dynamics and reveal the wide contacts he developed with some of Europe's most prestigious cultural circles. The artist's career unfolds between private commissions from courts and highly public ecclesiastical commissions. A selection of eighty-seven of these sources has been transcribed by the author for the book's four appendices. Some letters make references to notarial acts, providing a better understanding of the painter.

The book is divided into two parts. The first is related to the artist's previously largely unpublished letters. At his death, De Mura bequeathed to the Pio Monte della Misericordia 192 of his paintings and most of his written estate. Correspondence with the courts of the Bourbons in Naples and Madrid and the Savoy in Turin play a prominent role. There are many letters to the artist and also some drafts of letters sent by De Mura. In 1741 he departed for Turin, where he stayed

until 1743; but his strong ties with the house of Savoy lasted at least until 1768, when he received his last commission. Many new elements emerge from the late documents, in particular, the fact that De Mura's *Decius Mus' devotio* (1740/41; Palazzo Reale, Genoa) was sent to Turin in advance of his arrival there, probably as proof of his skills. Two interesting letters relate to the 1768 commission. Charles Emmanuel III requested bozzetti to serve as models for tapestries depicting the stories of Dido and Aeneas that were to be made for the royal palace (of the eight commissioned sketches only six remain). The patrons, through the mediation of a trusted architect Carlo Emanuele Cavalleri di Groscavallo (1706–1787), asked the painter to execute the works according to models in the Torinese taste, such as a lost drawing by the painter Claudio Francesco Beaumont (1694–1766). That this request occurred at all is highly unusual for a painter as widely celebrated and famous as De Mura: it is evident that the court sought, at all cost, to maintain continuity with the tapestries designed by Beaumont and his school starting from 1731 until the 1760s (currently divided between Turin and Rome).

Some of the letters De Mura received reveal his interest – hitherto unknown – in the Jansenist jurist and presbyter Domenico Cavallari as well as in the Torinese ambassador to Naples, Giuseppe Vincenzo Francesco Maria Lascaris, who sent another Jansenist, Carlo Armano di Gros, to collect some sketches from the artist. It is interesting to learn of the existence of a previously unknown brother of the artist, a certain Fra' Arcangelo Maria, who thanks him for 24 ducats, perhaps lent to him, and for the gift of a 'little chocolate' (p.132). The second part of the volume presents a systematic analysis of almost forty notarial deeds, which reveal the artist's role as a businessman and money lender. This helps to explain the great wealth and the social prestige De Mura acquired, which led him, in 1776, to purchase the patronage of the chapel of St Liborius in the church of S. Nicola alla Carità, Naples, in which works by him are preserved.

Lofano's book is aimed at readers already familiar with the art, diplomacy and self-fashioning of an artist in eighteenth-century Naples and Europe. He has undertaken the difficult task of reading and making sense of a great volume of letters and has selected for publication those that allow new, hitherto unknown aspects of his work and personality to emerge.

Abstract Expressionists: The Women

By Ellen G. Landau and Joan M. Marter. 256 pp. incl. 170 col. ills. (Merrell, London and New York, 2023), £45. ISBN 978-1-85894-703-7.

by CORA CHALABY

It is striking that it was only seven years ago that *Women of Abstract Expressionism* opened at the Denver Art Museum, one of the first surveys of its kind. Focusing on twelve artists from the East Coast and the San Francisco Bay Area, the groundbreaking exhibition provided 'an essential correction to what is by any measure an unequal accounting of women's contributions' to the movement.¹ Since 2016 the visibility of women artists of the era has advanced considerably. Building on the vital work of feminist art histories, the heroising canon of Abstract Expressionism has been expanded by museums, the art market and scholarship – to which this publication offers a significant contribution. It presents work by thirty-five artists from the Levett Collection, Florence, and its release coincides with the touring exhibition *Action, Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940–70*, which includes forty-one paintings from the Levett Collection.² *Action, Gesture, Paint* opened at Whitechapel Gallery, London, in February 2023, and although it was criticised for lacking depth and its evacuation of history, these concerns do not apply to Landau's and Marter's densely researched publication.³

Central to the book is a section titled 'The Women', which offers full-page colour illustrations of each work accompanied by expertly chosen quotations. Such acclaimed figures as Helen Frankenthaler (1928–2011) are included alongside lesser-known artists, for example the Chinese American Bernice Bing (1936–98), whose painting *Big Sur* (1967) is complemented by her observation that 'all nature is pure, and purely abstracted' (p.66). Moving beyond the straightforward recording of major events, the book's 'Chronology' maps an expanded history, replete with archival photographs. The authors detail interactions between artists and stylistic shifts alongside social context. For example, the entry for 1936–37 notes the meeting of Mercedes Carles Matter (1913–2001) and Lee Krasner (1908–84) in jail after being arrested for protesting about the policies of the Works Progress Administration, which provided jobs for the unemployed. This entry also mentions the immigration of Sonja Sekula (1918–63)

to the United States following the rise of Nazism in Europe. Significantly, this section illuminates obstacles faced by women artists at the time, and exposes some of the prejudiced remarks made by their male contemporaries, such as Hans Hofmann's 'back-handed compliment' regarding a drawing by Krasner: 'this is so good you would not believe it was done by a woman' (p.192). The combined effect is a polyphonic narrative that reframes a familiar history from the perspective of women artists.

In her essay 'Working "in a different way"' Landau explores the distinctive factions of women artists working within an Abstract Expressionist framework, including Audrey Flack (b.1931) and Miriam Schapiro (1923–2015), whose early abstractions developed in a 'very different, more feminist direction' (p.11). Emphasising the contexts of Paris and New York, Landau intriguingly proposes that between the end of the First World War and the 1960s, Paris offered a 'small but meaningful number of American women abstractionists [. . .] greater freedom to develop their creative talents' (p.26). In 'Abstract Expressionist women in the third dimension' Marter analyses work by women sculptors, such as Claire Falkenstein (1908–97) and Dorothy Dehner (1901–94), 'who have received virtually no attention until recent years' (p.39). Marter convincingly argues for their innovative approach to materials, techniques and forms. This essay resonates with Marter's contribution to the exhibition catalogue for *Action, Gesture, Paint*, in which she examines associations with performance in the work of women abstractionists.⁴ In both instances, Marter challenges gendered material boundaries of Abstract Expressionism. Offering an intermedial and transnational narrative underpinned by primary research, Landau's and Marter's book intervenes in an expanding discourse, destabilising linear narratives of post-war American painting.

1 G.F. Chanzit: 'Introduction', in J. Marter, ed.: exh. cat. *Women of Abstract Expressionism*, Colorado (Denver Art Museum), Palm Springs (Art Museum) and London (Whitechapel Gallery) 2016–17, pp.10–17, at p.10. The exhibition in Denver was reviewed by David Anfam in this Magazine, 158 (2016), pp.851–53.

2 L. Smith, ed.: exh. cat. *Action Gesture, Paint: Women Artists and Global Abstraction 1940–70*, London (Whitechapel Gallery), Arles (Fondation Vincent Van Gogh) and Bielefeld (Kunsthalle) 2023–24.

3 See G. Nugent: 'Celebrating women artists and forgetting feminist art histories', *Burlington Contemporary* (23rd March 2023), available at contemporary.burlington.org.uk/articles/articles/celebrating-women-artists-and-forgetting-feminist-art-histories, accessed 5th September 2023.

4 J.M. Marter: 'Performance, gesture, rhythm', in Smith, *op. cit.* (note 2), pp.161–68.