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Francesco Clemente Contemplates His Humanity at Vito Schnabel's New Santa Monica Outpost

by Ricky Amadour
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Installation view of Francesco Clemente, *Twenty Years of Painting: 2001 - 2021* at the Old Santa Monica Post Office. Artworks © Francesco Clemente. Photography by Elon Schoenholz.

Francesco Clemente's anthological survey show, *Twenty Years of Painting: 2001 - 2021*, cogitates on a shifting understanding of the world and human consciousness. Presented as Vito Schnabel Gallery's first exhibition at its Old Santa Monica Post Office location, Clemente's work grapples with his own mortality through a deep contemplation of physical existence. Encompassing portraiture, symbolic, landscape and figurative motifs, he ruminates on the ephemerality of life by addressing the incorruptibility of time's momentary truth.

Clemente proves to be an articulate shapeshifter, malleably moving through an impressive assortment of media including watercolor on paper, oil on canvas and pigment on linen. A clear standout is the plenteous lemon-colored fresco, *Two Trees* (2001). Depicted is a before-and-after scene of a tree standing upright that then becomes segmented and falls to the ground as paper flies into the air. In direct conversation with ancient Italian frescoes such as the garden walls discovered in Pompeii and tree of fertility in Massa Marittima, Clemente ruminates on the impermanent double standards of life and death.



Francesco Clemente, *Two Trees*, 2001. © Francesco Clemente. Courtesy of the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

Exquisitely rendered is the artist's self-portrait holding a ring of light, *Summer Self IV* (2011), which is thoughtfully installed in the gallery to catch the changing color of sunlight over the course of the day. Clemente embraces self-portraiture as memento mori to again articulate a transient nature of being. Attune to the patterns of the seasons and biological effects of light on the human body, his analysis can also be seen in *Clouds IV* (2018). Complex in its utter simplicity, the painting evokes a constant movement and the suspension between heaven and earth.

Throughout his practice, Italy-born Clemente maintains undeviating compassion for the human spirit and an explorative sense of open wonder. As revealed in this show, the motions of his creative output reflect the wisdom that results from deep consideration of a subject. For Clemente, ponderance on the fleeting nature of life has given the artist and his philosophical work a tolerance for uncertainty and a belief in epistemic humility.



Francesco Clemente, *Gandhara Dream*, 2012. © Francesco Clemente. Courtesy of the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

Since 2019, Schnabel has done just that in four solo shows with Clemente between New York and Saint Moritz, and the duo is now poised to open their most ambitious production to date: "Twenty Years of Painting: 2001-2021," on view through January 6, 2022, inside the historic Santa Monica Post Office. This show marks Clemente's first solo exhibition in L.A. in the past two decades. "I work in constellations and they become difficult to show with other constellations of works; I thought someday I can have a show where I extract one or two examples of certain ways of thinking," says Clemente, whose work includes everything from vibrant frescoes, watercolors, ink drawings, and environmental installations to portraits of himself, his wife, and his many famous friends. "If you do that, you start to see all the rhymes and the threads that come back and disappear and reappear years later. It becomes approachable."