

California Art Review

Continuity of Discontinuity: Francesco Clemente at the Old Santa Monica Post Office

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Installation view of Francesco Clemente, *Twenty Years of Painting: 2001 - 2021* at the Old Santa Monica Post Office, November 5, 2021 - January 16, 2022. Artworks © Francesco Clemente; Photo by Elon Schoenholz

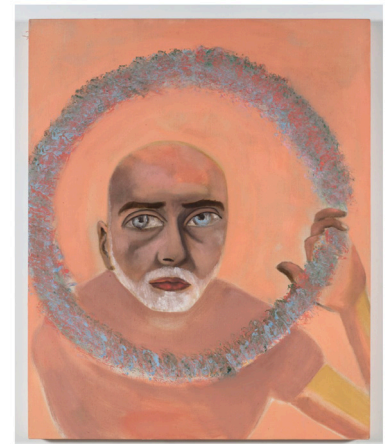
It has been almost twenty years since internationally-renowned artist Francesco Clemente exhibited his work in Los Angeles. Thanks to a collaboration between Vito Schnabel, the wunderkind international gallerist and son of artist Julian Schnabel, and British real estate developer Alexander Dellal, thirty of Clemente's paintings dating between 2001 and 2021 are now on display at the historic Old Santa Monica Post Office. The venue, built in 1938 as part of Roosevelt's New Deal project, is a historic landmark retaining its distinctive art deco exterior in contrast to the sprawling 15,000 square foot interior space it contains, which is taken down to its raw industrial bones of metal beams, exposed concrete walls and original end-grain wood flooring. Although tenuously temporary, Schnabel's one-year lease of this massive space has enabled him to exhibit Clemente's large scale works in a venue perfectly suited to the artist's storied work.

Clemente is best known for his prominent role in the Italian Transavanguardia and American Neo-expressionism movements of the late 1970's and early 1980's, however, much but not all of his work can be understood through that lens. Although inspired by the requisite nomadic embrace

of classical mythology, symbolism, and history itself, his figurative paintings exceed the rhetoric of Neo-expressionism and defy categorization.



Francesco Clemente. *Summer Self IV*, 2011. Oil on canvas. 41 3/4 x 31 1/2 inches (106 x 80 cm) © Francesco Clemente; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.



Francesco Clemente. *Summer Self V*, 2011. Oil on canvas. 40 3/8 x 32 inches (102.5 x 81.3 cm) © Francesco Clemente; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

As a 19-year-old youth still living in Italy, Clemente experienced a spontaneous moment of cosmic consciousness in which he first recognized the unified nature of the universe, the illusion of dimensional space and linear time, as well as his own immortality. His subsequent experimentation with LSD amplified his questions concerning the nature of reality and he began to travel the world to explore these concepts from different cultural perspectives. Among the most impactful and formative revelations for Clemente's art were the teachings of Krishnamurti such as the concept that "truth is only in the moment" along with the book, *Thought Forms*, written by Theosophists Annie Besant and C. W. Leadbeater. Finding and drawing from the common denominators of these diverse cultures and their religious and spiritual philosophies, his art represents ineffable moments of experience rather than any particular narrative. It is informed by his perception of consciousness as a "continuity of discontinuity of the self." Many of his paintings depict the eternal fluidity of identity flowing, not only through time, but between cultures, genders and even species. In the self-portrait *Summer Self IV*, Clemente's blue eyes challenge the viewer to define him as elk-like antlers protrude from his forehead. In a companion piece from the same series, *Summer Self V*, he portrays himself holding a large circle, a symbol of eternity reminiscent of an inverted Byzantine halo or Chinese Bi, with himself at the center, a detached, objective witness to it all.



Francesco Clemente. *Two Trees*, 2001. Fresco. 118 x 236 inches (299.7 x 599.4 cm)
© Francesco Clemente; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.

The largest of his works in this exhibition, a massive fresco from 2001 entitled *Two Trees*, seems to fulfill his ambition to portray time as nonlinear. Here, a single fresco was created using three panels representing past, present and future. Locked together in a single luminous instant, a tree forms, flowers and then dissolves, gently releasing the thoughts that created it.

5-11-2020 and *5-14-2020* are two pieces taken from a series of created during the Covid-19 lockdown in which Clemente prominently paints the date each piece was created on the surface, making it the focus of the painting itself. These

works remind us of the influence of Clemente's first mentor, conceptual artist Alighiero Boetti, and lends credibility to Clemente's claim that, although his categorization as a Neo-expressionist led to his initial prominence in the art world, his work was never a rebellion against conceptual art.

Clemente seeks to create images that are at once both memorable and transitory using various media to which he releases control. He travels, detached, through the medium as an open and relative space, expressing the present moment in the world of spirit or imagination, while accepting that it can never be tethered to the permanent world through a painting. In *Harlequin in Love*, a loose and fluid application of watercolor on paper is used to create vague images caught between form and formlessness as they exist within a field of possibilities. Within this field, an ephemeral harlequin dangles, (perhaps saved by the same love that tethers him) above a railroad track as a toy locomotive chugs on by beneath his feet, spewing a stream of darkness into the field.

According to Vito Schnabel, the works chosen for this exhibition of Clemente's works highlight "his remarkable mastery of the many mediums that fall within the tradition of painting." This curation is especially relevant in that, for Clemente, the mediums are integral to the message and include oil on canvas, fresco on plaster panels, watercolor on paper, and mixed media pigments on canvas, linen and glass. To view this exhibition is to experience, through Clemente's eyes and a variety of mediums, the transient nature of the self, the other and the universe.

Francesco Clemente, Twenty Years of Painting: 2001-2021 continues through January 16. For an appointment to view the exhibition, please visit vitoschnabel.com.



Francesco Clemente. *5-14 2020*, 2020. Pigment on canvas. 93 x 78 inches (236.2 x 198.1 cm). © Francesco Clemente; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery.