

art and cake

Francesco Clemente Presented by Vito Schnabel Gallery

by Lorraine Heitzman
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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

After Twenty Years
VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY, OLD SANTA MONICA POST
OFFICE
THROUGH JANUARY 16, 2022

With the reemergence of figurative art in New York City in the early eighties, painters like David Salle, Jean-Michael Basquiat, Julian Schnabel, and Eric Fischl were commanding attention and enormous prices with their new approach to storytelling. When Italian-born Francesco Clemente arrived on the scene, he was quickly identified as part of the Neo-Expressionists, but his paintings really stood apart for their lyrical qualities. Whereas many of his contemporaries were bombastic, Clemente explored subjects inspired by his trips to India, incorporating spiritual imagery into paintings that were full of symbolism. In the recently renovated Old Santa Monica Post Office, the quiet poignancy of Clemente's work benefits from their surroundings. Like any good stage design, the repurposed WPA-era building frames the action and sets the mood, enhancing Clemente's jewel-toned images. Nearly 30 paintings are on view, most created since the last time

he exhibited in Los Angeles almost twenty years ago. Not surprisingly he can still work his magic despite the impression that many paintings are less than magical in this uneven, though worthwhile show.

As you enter through a vestibule you are flanked by two recent watercolors on paper, *Rising* and *In The Web of Love*. They are both large, rather inelegant paintings that immerse you into the messiness of his technique before the foreground comes into focus. Seen from a greater distance or from a photograph, they congeal and reveal their imagery to greater effect. Both are wistful representations of opposites; *In the Web of Love* shows hearts of different materials set against a grid that might be a chain link fence. *Rising* depicts red roses above blue roses, though which are rising and which are falling is unclear. Heavy and light components contrast and coexist, perhaps a reflection on our politicized, polarized times.

Once inside the larger exhibition space, Clemente's oil paintings dominate and range from quiet self-portraits to captivating images that are memorable for their simplicity.

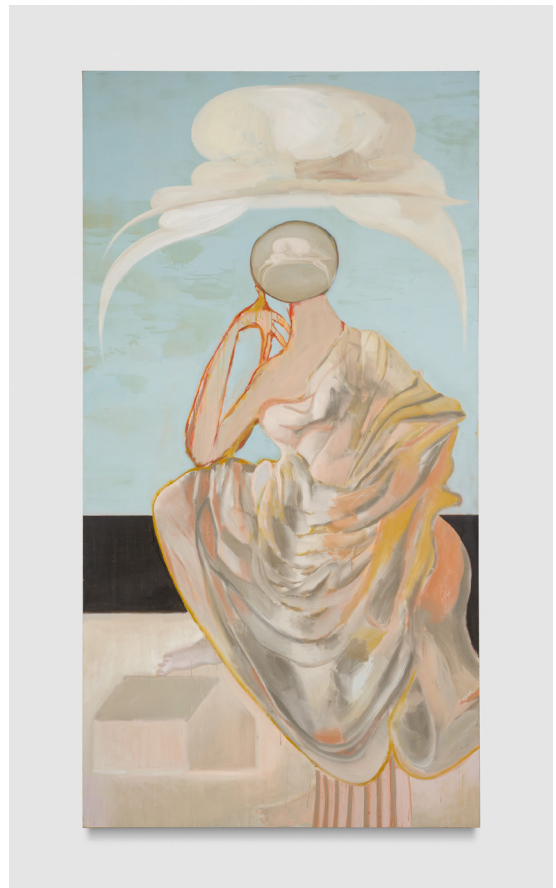
FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

The best of these read like mystical representations from a tarot deck, metaphors for states of being that provide and encourage personal interpretations. *White Rose, Red Earth*, depicts an iconic white rose growing out of the rubble. Framed within an archway that recalls Rudolph Arnheim's famous example of positive and negative shapes, you might see either water or sky, or wonder whether or not you were looking inside or out. Either way, it seems a hopeful image, a phoenix rising, with bricks rendered as affectionately as any brick by Philip Guston. The *Wedding* also features a dominant, central flower, but this time it is entwined by its own stems and surrounded by grapes and leaves. This painting isn't indicative of a struggle, though; it is a jubilant tree of life. Compared to his watercolors, the paint application is something to savor, and the richness of his palette works to their advantage.

Clemente's self-portraits, despite being amongst the most personal paintings in the show, feel as if they belong to a different exhibit entirely. In *Summer Self IV* the artist's penetrating stare is haunting, and the antlers sprouting from his head make a surreal figure. Together, the familiar and the fantastical create their own logic. Clemente is looking directly at us, and we are forced to wonder what the artist sees and feels.

Less interesting are the minimal images that lack the visual interest or complexity to warrant their size. Neither *Gandhara Dream*, *Clouds IV* nor *India 1* possess the richness or mystery that cemented Clemente's early reputation. The outliers in *Twenty Years of Painting* are the portraits *Fran Lebowitz* and *Toni Morrison*, and the small paintings on glass in the reading room. The portraits, frank and unglamorous, are lovely, but seem out of place. Even their installation high above the doors makes them feel like an afterthought. The intimate glass paintings suffer from installation problems, too, as they face a wall of windows and the reflections obscure the work, at least at certain times of the day.

The unevenness of the show is not just the result of exhibiting work made over the course of two decades. Retrospectives have to deal with that problem often, but in this case the minimalistic works suffer in proximity to the more developed paintings and it appears haphazard. Was it a question of availability that accounts for this odd selection? Whatever the reason, the strongest paintings are justification enough to see the show, and this rare opportunity to see Clemente's work is a reminder of his gifts that once mesmerized the art world during a heady time in contemporary art.



Francesco Clemente, *Dormiveglia V*, 1998, Oil on canvas
129 7/8 x 64 1/4 inches (330 x 163.2 cm) © Francesco
Clemente; Photo by Elon Schoenholz; Courtesy the artist
and Vito Schnabel Gallery