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« Painting (six hands) with Basquiat and Warhol was beautiful »

by Francesca di Pini
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Francesco Clemente (71), in a private photo, in India, with the Sadhu during the course of the Kumbh Mela. The artist has studied Sanskrit, Hindi, Buddhist literature and theosophy.
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Career

Biography

Francesco Clemente was born in Naples, Italy, in 1952. He completed architectural studies in Rome. In the 1980s his work was associated with the Transavanguardia movement codified by art critic Achille Bonito Oliva. His painting then evolved into Neo Expressionism. Since 1980 he has lived in New York, where he has his studio.

Current Exhibitions

Angelus Novus at Vito Schnabel gallery in New York / *Everything Only* part of *Sangam, Confluences* at the Neta Mukesh Anbani Cultural Center in Mumbai. His paintings made together with Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol are exhibited at the Fondation Vuitton in Paris in the *BasquiatxWarhol* exhibition. He is making a sculpture for a new project for the Ceretto family, in the Langhe region of Alba (where he has already executed a fresco in their Piazza Duomo restaurant)

The Photo

Two of three Polaroids Andy Warhol took of Francesco Clemente in 1981. Also in these images Clemente dresses formally, wearing his father's suit jacket. Warhol also made the Italian artist a portrait: an acrylic painting on canvas with diamond dust.



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The Interview

Around his neck, on his black sweatshirt, is a silver necklace depicting eight slender female figures, the Ashta matrika goddesses, the eight mothers. "A Sadhu gave it to me at the Kumbh Mela. In the Trika tradition of Kashmir Tantric Shaivism, the goddesses are the mothers of the letters: the vowels are the seeds that fertilize the consonants that are wombs. As in so many other contemplative traditions, the purpose is to materialize spirit and spiritualize matter," says artist Francesco Clemente, who frequently visited India since the 1970s. "Usually there are 7 goddesses on the medallions, but in this one there are 8, a number I prefer to 7. Number

of the feminine in Orissa, where there are all those temples and where Tantra began and where everything is a multiple of 8."

You have been going to India since 1971, also working with miniaturists and local artists who paint signs or souvenirs.

"But I've never made a practice of it, I don't have an academic or artistic education, and although I invented my nomadic reality I am Italian, I like freedom, elegance, a certain casual indifference: I just have to prove that something was possible to do, and then I lose interest. This makes life difficult for those who follow me. The constants are there, however, one has to look for them."

In 40 years your wife Alba has never been discouraged...

"She has a very difficult life, though. But we are over the 40 years, I would say..."

Close to the golden wedding anniversary, a very bourgeois occasion...

"Divorce is more bourgeois than marriage, oops!! For goodness sake don't write that. Alba, being a theater person, turns all the anniversaries into something special, in a ritualized way, with scenic design, so it's nothing bourgeois, it's theater."

A few days ago you were with the gallerist Bischofberger who, in 1984, had the brilliant idea of asking you, Warhol and Basquiat to paint six-handed canvases, now also shown in the BasquiatxWarhol exhibition at the Fondation Vuitton in Paris. How did that process unfold, where neither of you had to talk to each other and see what the other was doing?

"Both Basquiat and I looked a lot at Warhol, who at that time didn't have that great fame; each started the canvases in their own studio and then someone would come and pick them up and take them to the others. When I withdrew, Warhol and Basquiat went on in a more direct way, together in the studio. There was no dictation, everyone started freely and then had the surprise of seeing what the others had done. It was beautiful. Maybe I would start one painting and then finish another. We gave many of the titles of those paintings at the end, once Basquiat came over one afternoon to Rome, where I was doing a big painting. He had a more literary spirit, whereas Warhol was more indifferent to titling."

It could have been Russian roulette, did you know each other well enough?

"The legitimacy of language is the only thing that matters. There was no danger."

Warhol portrayed you in a canvas. You protecting your head with your hands, were you afraid he would steal some of your ideas?

"Nice one! Warhol was mischievous. With my image repeated three times he made an origami of me."

In a historic photo, taken in New York in 1985 at Mr.

Chow's restaurant, you are with about 20 artists, including Hockney, Schnabel, Oppenheim, Katz, Warhol, Haring, Mapplethorpe, Chia...

"An incredible picture, including so many generations of artists, so many narratives... It was organized by Eric Goode, manager of the Area nightclub. I wanted to make a picture with the names of the clubs, and with René Ricard (cursed poet, my friend, who lived in the subway) we counted more than 50..."

In many photos from that period you dress in a suit and tie, in a very unformal artistic New York....

"I imagined I was like in those early postwar photos, where my father was. In fact, many of the jackets I wore were his. An idea of dignity, proper to those years, where there was poverty, but also a style."

When the eldest son's used coat was passed on to the youngest...

"I always placed a lot of importance on dressing, my own and others'. I fantasized about being a kind of astronaut in that New York environment. Conservative, in the midst of that innovative and creative world. Like a sense of foreignness, someone dropped into something that is not their own."

So, standing out from the others...

"I see signs everywhere. It is also a form of madness, no doubt about it. But I think that one of the strategies of propaganda, domination and social control-which I disapprove of-is the one based on asserting that nothing matters, that nothing means anything, that everything is the same."



One of his most recent paintings, *Wings of Desire*, in the exhibition held at Château La Coste, Provence ©Francesco Clemente Courtesy LGDR and Chateau La Coste

In recent paintings, *Wings of Desire*, exhibited at Château La Coste, these angel-figures appear. What makes you show wings in a secular society where the sacred is rather eradicated?

"The nostalgia of the sacred is fundamental, as is its restoration. I don't think the latter will come from art, only from someone's heart. But without that there is nothing really interesting. The wings I paint? There are times when

you can touch the work you are doing, a couple of inches beyond where your hand reaches. It is like a youthful work of mine but one that I would not have been able to do when I was young. However, I have no nostalgia for the past. I consider this a work of the future, because one must always realign with one's breath."

In a pair of wings is a painted lock, but where can you find the key?

"One is for opening and the other is for closing. These things are a bit mysterious. I trust the existing symbolic repertoire. In the past, man did not live in the superfluous, the people who originated the contemplative language lived a severe and harsh reality leaving very reliable signs. And if you talk about symbolic language, it turns out that the most important things happened two thousand, two thousand five hundred years ago. And then nothing else happened. »

Back to Christ, to Buddha....

"Or even much earlier, the hand resting on the wall of a cave, red or black color in the mouth and then spat out, leaving that imprint."

It was not enough for the prehistoric man to live; he wanted to leave a mark of his passage, of his reality.

"Carlyle or Warburg or maybe both said, 'The specificity of man is to have this desire to transfer his feeling into objects.'"

More than in his fellow human beings?

"Others, in my opinion, are overrated. In an interview given to anthropologist Lévi-Strauss when he was very old, they asked him what was left of all his studies. He replied, 'Nothing, just a few objects, and these are like iridescences on an empty shell, abandoned by the creature that lived in there.' If this sentence had been said by another person it would not have the same force, but from him who studied human behavior all his life...."

In your figures, what do these big eyes want to observe that is great?

"Eternity. Said Krishnamurti, 'We are eternal, not immortal,' I like that distinction. And the archaic and then also modern meaning of the two lines of the cross: the horizontality of everyday life and the verticality of the experience of the absolute, you need to anchor yourself to that meeting point. I had a lot of trouble because of these big eyes. At my first exhibition in New York, the prestigious gallerist Ileana Sonnabend complained a lot about it, who knows why... The eyes imply a diversity, a uniqueness, a soul, a knowledge of the heart, all the things that, those overlords who govern situations, want us to abandon in order to enter the post-human. But it's just a matter of total control. »

How did you nurture your imagination as a child?

"My mother "tortured" me a little, I would have preferred to be a little more transparent, invisibility is a very good state."

When you grow up you may be able to do it, but as a child how do you do it?

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE

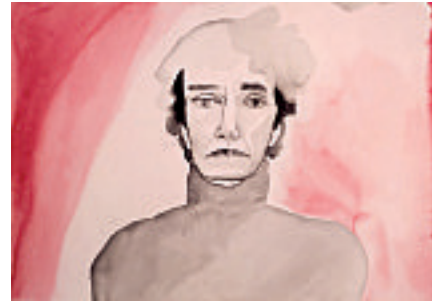
"I always created a scenario, a story bigger than myself that I was a part of. Dramatizing a bit the banality of childhood."

So, a difficult child...

"A pain in the ass, from birth. Always and always against something."

So the victim was your mother...

"No, my mother (who painted, by the way) had a keen sense and desire for beauty. And she demonstrated this with memorable episodes, like when, during the war, she traded her car tires for an 18th-century Neapolitan secrétaire. She showed her sensitivity, and also her priorities. I still have that piece of furniture. I reconstructed a room from my childhood with this famous family living room put in a container, transported to the middle of the desert in New Mexico, to my home, inside a room. Kind of doing a bit of a nod to that image in the movie *2001 A Space Odyssey*, where he ends up in that rococo room. But it's not an installation, it's my life, and I never go into that room. It scares me a little bit."



Courtesy Francesco Clemente Studio



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