



Francesco Clemente, *White Rose, Red Earth*, 2010, oil on canvas, 86 5/8 x 69 3/4 inches (220 x 177.2 cm) © Francesco Clemente; Courtesy the artist and Vito Schnabel Gallery

FRANCESCO CLEMENTE
TWENTY YEARS OF PAINTING: 2001 - 2021

PRESENTED BY
VITO SCHNABEL GALLERY

NOVEMBER 5, 2021 - JANUARY 16, 2022

THE OLD SANTA MONICA POST OFFICE
1248 5TH STREET
SANTA MONICA, CA 90401

"Painting is an ideal medium to return to the sources of imagination. Imagination seen not as an arbitrary faculty, but as a way to know reality."
– Francesco Clemente

Beginning November 5, 2021, Vito Schnabel Gallery will present *Francesco Clemente: Twenty Years of Painting: 2001 - 2021* in the Old Santa Monica Post Office. The internationally acclaimed artist's first Los Angeles solo exhibition in nearly two decades, *Twenty Years of Painting* features thirty works that reveal Clemente's remarkable mastery of the many mediums that fall within the tradition of painting- from fresco on plaster panels and watercolor on paper, to oils and mixed media pigments on canvas, linen, and glass- and bring viewers along on his journey through themes both metaphysical and sensual. The exhibition includes a suite of monumental new paintings created during the course of the pandemic.

The exhibition uses as its foil the classic Art Deco features of the historic 1938 Post Office building. A striking example of the Federal New Deal era Public Works Administration (PWA) Modern architectural style that emerged in the 1930s, the site offers 15,000 square feet of exhibition space- a sprawling interior with raw industrial beams, exposed walls and original end-grain wood floors that complement and contrast with the powerful lyricism of Clemente's boldly expressive large-scale works.

Non-linear and expansive, Francesco Clemente's oeuvre has drawn influence over the past four decades from divergent geographies and cultural contexts. The New York-based, Italian-born artist first travelled to India in the 1970s and has since maintained a defining dialogue with its rituals, practices, and philosophical thought. His artistic vision and lexicon of metamorphic and symbolic imagery have been informed and shaped by a nomadic lifestyle and a deep spiritual relationship to the contemplative traditions of different cultures. Clemente's focus on figural representation and visual narrative manifests in his artistic quest to ponder the arcane, address the human condition, and explore the manifold aspects of our physical body and metaphysical existence.

Clemente's paintings are rich with mysticism and sensuality, and reflect the fluidity and fragmentation that characterize much of his oeuvre. Traversing ineffable states of consciousness and experiences of being, the artist anchors his artistic practice in an understanding of life as non-linear, and grounds his imagery in a resounding pictorial commitment to the here and now. By surveying the sweep of his work, *Francesco Clemente: Twenty Years of Painting: 2001 - 2021* reveals a cross-cultural synthesis of visualized ideas and meditations on concepts of time, identity, the sacred, and notions of the self.

The exhibition will also debut a group of four new large-scale watercolor paintings. These works, created over the course of the pandemic, embrace the theme of reconciliation. Here, Clemente considers the meeting point of a daily, mechanical life bound by time, and an experience of timelessness achieved through self-awareness. Deeply personal and vivid, the familiar and recognizable figurative language of Clemente's tableaux manifests as hallucinatory in these paintings with their dream-like apparitions. A radiating body of light surrounds a Harlequin figure in the center of one composition. Below, a child's toy train chugs across the canvas as a cloud of black steam rises from its locomotive engine. In another painting in the series, red roses fall from a cerulean blue sky, while blue roses rise from a bed of red earth. Ominous but alluring, the images rendered by Clemente's brush skirt across the vast expanse of the paper, achieving a balance between artistic control and creative renunciation.

Striking in its sheer monumentality, the three-panel fresco *Two Trees* (2001) exemplifies Clemente's uncanny ability to render tender and soulful enigmatic visions. Washed in a sensuous sun-drenched yellow, this twenty-foot painting is an evocative expression of impermanence and mortality. One tree stands fruit-bearing and fertile. White sheets of paper, prayer flags, or pieces of cloth have been tied to it, alluding to a ritual practice of spiritual offering that connects and transcends different cultures across the globe. The fatality of the second tree offers a binary perspective: a severed trunk, a fallen limb, and sentiments of hope scattered in the wind. *White Flags I* (2015) and *Gandhara Dream* (2012) similarly find poetic resonance in themes of spirituality, mysticism, and cultural exchange. In a meditation on surrender and the nature of defeat, Clemente engages the symbol of a white flag and heart, which has been pierced by a wooden stake and pecked by a flock of swallows. Influenced by ancient Tantric traditions and Buddhist practices, the artist reflects with this visual trope on the structure of human consciousness and the intimate interiority of the mind. The four colorful columns in *Gandhara Dream* (2012) manifest the diverse crossroads of artistic convention that existed in the Gandhara kingdom of ancient India. As a trade route connecting the Mediterranean, South Asia, and Northern India, influences of the Hellenistic world fused Greek and Roman art with Buddhist subject matter and symbols.

Between 2006 and 2008, Clemente created a body of paintings during several extended stays in Brazil. Executed in a seductive, visceral palette of metallic hues, crimson red, and gold, these works take as their subject the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomblé and consider ideas of cultural contamination, the clash of civilizations, and syncretism. A rough, thick-hewn rope binds the wrists of a pair of hands in *Initiation* (2006), conjuring associations of power and enslavement. A self-portrait, *Father* (2006-2007), depicts the artist in a Bishop's ceremonial headdress, a symbol borrowed from Roman Catholicism, that is ornamented with piercings of serpents and fish. In a mediation on the heritage of the esoteric rituals of Candomblé, Clemente explores how the collision of gestures and emblems can transcend cultural traditions.

Other highlights of the exhibition include *The Garland of Letters* (2017-2018), a series of small paintings on glass that take inspiration from 18th century Chinese reverse glass paintings of Hindu deities. The technique was introduced to India by the China Trade, and flourished, soon spreading through west and south India as it was adopted by Indian artists. Clemente's diagram of Sanskrit letters celebrates the feminine energy that embodies spiritual wisdom in the Tantric tradition. Two paintings from the series *Dormiveglia* (1998) explore a state of consciousness between sleep and awakening, material reality and the immaterial world. Towering canvases stand ten and a half feet high, reminiscent of tarot cards. They feature fragmented bodies of female, goddess-like figures, draped in classical robes. Washed in a soft, muted palette the mysterious aura of Clemente's rich symbolism opens his work up to the sacred and mystical, to a shifting fluidity of knowledge and emotion between the past and future.

Francesco Clemente: Twenty Years of Painting: 2001 - 2021 will also include *Summer Self II* (2011), a self-portrait of the artist, as well as some of his first large-scale oil portraits dating from 1998. Among these works are portraits of writers Toni Morrison and Fran Lebowitz, people described by Clemente as "women I admired tremendously and whom I thought expressed the great beauty of intelligence and determination."

The exhibition is presented in collaboration with Alexander Dellal.

About the Artist

Francesco Clemente was born in 1952 in Naples, Italy. He studied architecture at the Università degli Studi di Roma, La Sapienza in Rome in 1970, before turning his focus instead to art. In 2002, Clemente was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Clemente's work has been presented at numerous international institutions, including Nationalgalerie, Berlin; Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Basel; Philadelphia Museum of Art; Royal Academy of Arts, London; Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris; Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Bologna; Guggenheim Museum, New York; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; Sezon Museum of Art, Tokyo; Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Napoli; and Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. His work is featured in many prominent museum collections worldwide, including the Art Institute of Chicago; Miami Art Museum; Kunstmuseum Basel; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao and New York; The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The Museum of Modern Art, New York; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles. Clemente lives and works in New York, Chennai (formerly Madras), and Varanasi, India.

For hours and more information, please visit vitoschnabel.com

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