

Ana Luisa Rébora's Transfiguration of Figures

The sense creates the pose.
In this it moves and speaks.
This is the figure and not
An evading metaphor.

—Wallace Stevens, “Add This to Rhetoric”

Stevens argued in the essays in *The Necessary Angel* that art must give way to the pressure of the real, or otherwise be “gorgeous nonsense.” Art cannot submit to something we can no longer believe in, like Phoebus or faeries. The “Necessary Angel” is that art which can strip away worn-out images and let us see the world anew, however momentarily. Yet this new vision is not some reality truly beyond ourselves, but the Supreme Fiction recast by the imagination, through art: “A poet’s words are of things that do not exist without the words.” And a painter’s works are of things that don’t exist without the painting.

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Rébora’s paintings at first glance appear not of our time, not of the time of technology, of information acquisition and exchange, of iPods, of YouTube, of SUVs, of our wars. Further, there appears to be no pressure of the real, of city, of the urban, or the industrial; there is no society or social at all. And this is not the time of postmodern parody, or pastiche, or irony. We are in some kind of pure painterly landscape. And there are figures.

This landscape is more or less blue, or green, or red, or white or gray; this is a landscape of color. The figures more or less female, more or less male, or more or less human; these are figures of paint.

And there’s an angel.

Unlike Klee’s “Angelus Novus,” which is looking at us, or at the catastrophe which separates us from the angelic order, Rébora’s “ángel” (2007) has her back towards us, her body nervously defined by line and barely fleshed out with paint. This is not Benjamin’s “Angel of History” stepping backwards into the future, but a figure fleeing the scene. We are more likely witnessing Mallarmé’s death of man in “Les fenêtres” who, looking at the windows of his hospital room, turns his back on life, and is beatified:

I amaze myself, and appear an angel! And I die, and love

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In fact, all of Rébora's figures are turning their backs on us—this is their pose and their sense. All of her figures are leaving. A diaspora of figures—where are they going? Even the figure in “haze” (2007) with its face apparently turned towards us is, borne on the back of another, being carried away, into the blue. And in “lenguaje de fragancia” (2007), one ghost of a figure apparently turning back towards us with a face of grimacing lines—a warning?—is receding transparently into the white ground.

Whether this is an escape, or a release, there are at times traces of something holding back in her paintings, traces of a tie or bind, or bond. In “hilo verde” (2006), a broken stroke of paint trails the black figure, dragged along the ground, to the bottom edge of the canvas. In “hvaler” (2007), a figure is tied to a boat by a black thread, itself moored to the pictorial edge. In “secret angel” (2007), the central figure, moving into her own shade, appears to be bound by fine lines drawn by two figures leading her—captors? guides?—into the indefinite depths of the canvas.

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Where are the figures going? To view these paintings as expressionistic, or symbolic, would be to miss what's going on here, in the paintings—make of it what you will, but the figures are being transfigured into paint. This is the mystery of these paintings, the indefinite resolution, the oscillation between sign and significance—there is rarely a real trace of the painter's hand in the brushstroke, rarely is there distinction between line and color. The hidden and the revealed are in a continual process of exchange. Light and shadow resolve into one another. Expression is being brushed out, the symbols are dissolving into paint.

In “el secreto del ángel azul” (2007), there are two figures, the one on the left molting blue wings, the one on the right a female figure with a slight aura of blue. The secret is that the female figure needs just a little blue, here, to become an angel, or that the angel can become human again by disrobing her blueness—that one is transformed into the other by color, by the materiality of the painter's art.

In experiencing her painting one may feel simultaneously loss and transcendence. Rébora's painting is a lament on the loss of figuration—not in the sense of “figurative painting,” but in the sense of figure or trope, the abandonment of the figure as the meaningful

transformation of language, the vortex of sign and significance. This is the loss of the ability to believe in transcendent symbols or another order more real than the one of our perceptions. Here, for the angels, for all figures, the only transcendence is paint.

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Where are the figures going? To where they came from. And this is the Supreme Fiction, the Necessary Angel, which is art.

Rilke began his Duino Elegies,

Who, if I cried, would hear me in those angelic
orders? Even if one of them suddenly held me
to his heart: I'd vanish from his overwhelming
presence. For beauty is nothing
but the start of terror we can hardly bear

Cry all you want. Do these paintings answer you?

Garrett Kalleberg