

GHOSTS IN THE VOID (The Paintings of Lorenzo Puglisi)

The history of painting is embedded within the perceptual realities of presence and intuited absence. In both the here and the not here, in states of material substance and that which is speculatively imagined. Yet at the same time there is always a certain feeling or apparitional quality to all painting, if we mean by ‘apparition’ the idea of a remarkable or unexpected appearance of someone or previously unimagined something that suddenly comes into view. Since we know as Mallarmé long ago observed, “It is in front of his sheet of paper that the artist *creates himself*,” just as the blank canvas stands before the painter as a spatially creative void to be filled.¹ And references to the void has a particular resonance in the black paintings of the Italian painter Lorenzo Puglisi, since his use of open emptiness is punctuated in order to be filled. And at the same time the filling of the void in this instance has a particularly French resonance in the current context of Paris, where the famed Yves Klein exhibited and thereafter took his famous psychological and semi-literal ‘leap into the void’.² The void of course inevitably stands in for the greater cosmos, a place of darkness punctuated by light that was of such fascination to Blanqui and to Benjamin.³ Yet it is in the punctuated void or darkness that vision emerges. For as it is in dreams, so it remains in the creative life.⁴ And the indefinite achromatic conditions of blackness and whiteness are the underpinning stages of materiality that shape and direct the paintings of Puglisi. But as acknowledged black and white are common metaphors referring to creative clarity, and in consequence necessarily allude to human states of insight. Not surprisingly therefore for Puglisi materiality allied to the history of art stand as fundamental concerns at the centre of his painting practice. And the achromatic use of black for either night-time scenes, or, as a forms of autonomous expression, has a long history, and black, as either matter or

consciousness, as substance or metaphor, forms a continuous and thoroughly integrated psychological aspect of this Italian artist's work.⁵

Ghosts in the void

Ghosts are apparitions by another name, similarly spectres, phantoms, wraiths, spirits, presences, or visions, and there are many other popular and adaptable epithets that might also be applied. But the most important aspect is as to whether the ghosts are possessed of a psychologically revenant nature or merely those of purely fictional projection. In other words are they apparitions with resonant aspects as distinct from mere fanciful constructions. The ghostly part-figures that are seen in Puglisi's paintings are often intended to be self-revealing psychological doubles of themselves. They are spectral appearances that have a presence and historical relevance as autonomous paintings, and at the same time they are often opaque but complex metaphors to paintings of pre-existence. Hence they operate within an internalised visual sphere of simultaneous text and context—as optical projections of both things seen and things psychically imagined. As material doppelgängers the paintings generate allusions to an alternative world through the presentation of the part-object. What Jacques Lacan called the *Objet petit a* as the cause of desire, which is to say by extension the aesthetic impulse.⁶ Puglisi frequently expresses the idea of finding the sensory condition of an aesthetic presence, and the French structural-psychoanalyst stressed this impulse as the underpinning psychological structure of the gaze in daily life—as the true and determining nature of looking.⁷ If we take for example paintings like *Portrait 191115* and *Portrait 28115*, what we see is the head and the hands of a sitter apparently emerging from within the black void of what would otherwise be a monochrome painting. Yet what might initially appear simple is fraught with inferences, and putting aside for a moment the art historical references to former painter-workshop practices of head and hands painting, we find in the emaciated human

part-objects as depicted punctuated presences that question the conventional nature of portraiture itself.⁸ While on the one hand there is an absorbing sense of Baroque blackness, the artist claims ‘the stranger the head the darker the background’, there is also, perhaps, another indirect expressive allusion through the brush strokes and palette-knife thickness of paint applied to the allusive heads depicted, an associative reference to the skulls of *vanitas* imagery.⁹ Whether this is intended or not remains relevant inasmuch as it extends the spectral metaphor and materialised sense of ghostly presence.

An influence embracing the opaque qualities of pictorial *sfumato* (vague, shrouded, or blurred) from the Baroque period of art is freely acknowledged by Puglisi.¹⁰ As he has claimed “I was very touched by the matter of darkness in seventeenth century painting.”¹¹ But it is not just that darkness represents a specific art historical convention as such, so much as the aesthetic continuity it supposes for the artist. It is a sense of a continuous trace that fuses the creative application and revelation of his present images with those of the past. There is a marked difference, however, for this contemporary artist, since and whereas in the seventeenth century darkness is tied to an increasing sense of tenebrism and to narrative realism, in the case of Puglisi the black surface is punctured vigorously by forms of sometimes severely edited expressive facture. And neither does the artist follow the theatricality of many of the chosen compositional strategies common to the seventeenth century. It is not so much a contrast of light and dark, but a conversion of textured and expressive head and hands forms as against the absorbing flatness of blackness. These formal and notional contraries of the use of absorption or matt blackness and the creative textured use of the brush, ferrule, or spatula, only heighten the sense of the painting as both an autonomous entity and a residual trace, an abraded palimpsest of layered and accumulated references—a sort of reduced state of pictorial continuity. The psychological interiority of paintings like the large

and smaller versions of *Matteo e l'angelo* (Matthew and the Angel) is, perhaps, a notable case in point. While the artist obviously makes an indirect quotation of the famous Caravaggio painting (1602), he does so not simply to make a reference to the painting for its own sake, but to express at the same time the fact that famed historical paintings remain embedded within an artist's consciousness and become ghostly or perpetual ciphers of themselves.¹² They drift like strange apparitions within the human psyche of the painter, and unpredictably come to mind through the condition of involuntary memory or chance recollection.¹³ A painter spends a considerable time in his studio, a site of particular solitude and conditioned introspection, and for an Italian painter the famous paintings of the past are all but internally inscribed into their consciousness. But Puglisi's engagement with the Renaissance and Baroque past is one of both self-acknowledgement and critique, as is evident in his conjoined large five canvas work called *Il Grande Sacrificio* (literally, The Great Sacrifice), that homages Leonardo's 'The Last Supper', the famous hybrid *al secco* wall painting the Florentine master painted for the Church of Sante Maria delle Grazie, in Milan. Like the *Matteo e l'angelo*, and as in the various extracted portraits, he uses an extended array of heads and hands, though the number of hands used has been edited as regards the original painting. The painting by Leonardo is technically abraded and in part has, at various different times, been over-painted, an appropriate simile and point of reduced departure for the subject chosen and executed by Puglisi.¹⁴ Yet what really emerges is a focus on the nature of head and hands, on gestures that both heighten and change the nature of our understanding of the painting's contents. The sense of religious narrative is displaced by apparitional anthropology, and what replaces it is a sort of self-reflexive psycho-anthropological content, changes that reveal disembodied aspects of memorial recollection. For what do we remember of the past, is it not always the facial features and human gestures of those we have known and/or the recalled of images that we have seen. And so it is with

Puglisi, for in the historical image, "...the face is the most expressive part and of the deepest emotion of human nature: the hands also express a lot...the face is the part that strikes me most in a human being, the whole expression and strength...the body, well, maybe I feel I am very distant from it..."¹⁵ It is not surprising therefore that Leonardo is among the favourite artists of Puglisi, and that the great Italian master's use of gesture in works like *St John the Baptist* (1513-1516) are part of Puglisi's intimate awareness and considered knowledge. Leonardo was the artist who first allied gesture and consciousness into an integrated expression of the human spirit. And when referring to his painting of the *Last Supper*, Leonardo himself makes the meaning of depiction of his figures interactive head and hands apparent, "One who was drinking and has left his glass in its position has turned his head towards the speaker. Another twisting the fingers of his hands turns with stern brows to his companion. Another with his hands spread show the palms, and shrugs his shoulders up to his ears, making a mouth of astonishment. Another speaks into his neighbour's ear..." In each composed figure the gesticulating and emotional interplay is the master's uppermost concern.¹⁶

A pursuit of the inner nature (better called the 'psychical interiority') of human anthropology related to the depiction of head and hands is made evident in all Puglisi paintings.¹⁷ The painting *Il Grande Sacrificio* can be seen as a syncopated yet focused form of disembodied expression over five joined canvases. A reading of the painting must either be made from left to right, or from right to left, that is to say in a transverse peripatetic manner, unless viewed at greater distance where you are able to encompass the traditional landscape-type format in a single view. The intermittent and momentary *puncta* (distinct visual points) represented by red splashes as instances of arrested delineation, at the same time knowingly historicise the painting further, since it is a common enough convention of Romantic painting seen for example in expressive

painters like Delacroix—an artist who also used blurred compositional practices and developed an extended use of the *sfumare* principle. Yet the so-called portraits are different in not only that they use and emphasise the vertical format of the portrait, but can also be visualised relatively close up within a single viewpoint. And a close up view is very important to Puglisi, for like Francis Bacon's expressive heads of disjuncture, they place a premium on issues of facture and the complex layered language of paint application. Though differentiated in his use of black and white we see the same sense of a fascination with the drag of the brushstroke, the veiling or over painting of each precursive gesture, the hidden visible of weft and the warp of the canvas support, the structure of the head or skull, and the ruptured marks of arrested moments of expression. At the same time there is always in Puglisi's heads (intended or otherwise) a recollection of the death mask, since painting and death have always possessed intimate synonymous relations. To mention Bacon, an artist whose work is greatly admired by Puglisi, is to touch upon what might best be called an existential aesthetic. And one could well imagine his paintings fitting well in an exhibition alongside the reduced existential aesthetic of both Bacon and Giacometti.¹⁸ It is this tactile facture-based approach to head and hands, and its close affinity to the human—there is little by way of reference to the natural environment in his paintings—that gives significance to the relationship and juxtaposition to the black field that surrounds it. Another artist much admired and frequently referenced indirectly by Puglisi's portraits is Rembrandt, and while it also attains to expressive facture, just as important to Puglisi is the way that the heads of his sitters often appear as luminous presences that emerge from darkened backgrounds. Of course Rembrandt is famous for his self-portraits, and it could be argued that all portraits are artist self-portraits of sorts, for the sitter whether described or idealised is always subjected to an interpretation by the painter. Specific paintings called self-portraits appear from time to time in this Italian artist's paintings. However,

they can hardly serve the purpose of revealing outward appearance for the purposes of recognition, but rather at most are suggestive of abstracted psychological identity as representative states of mind. It is almost as if the expressive gestures of mark making, become differentiating keys accessing particular avenues of consciousness. It is in this sense that when Puglisi has spoken of Goya and Cezanne, it is in reference to the French and Spanish artist's abilities to create a powerfully haptic sense of visual encounter and experience. There is a uniquely palpable (if not always ghostlike) feeling of material presence that the artist Puglisi has also realised in optical terms, but one that plays with a spatial or cosmological dialectic of material allusion and immaterial absence.

It is to be noted that although I have continually used the word 'expressive' to describe the paintings of the artist there is a general avoidance of the word sensual and sensory. If the expressive head and hands of Puglisi's paintings are tactile and may be read as having palpable facture, they are not to be read as psychologically sensual. This is perhaps the most striking creative paradox that is posed by the artist, a strangely fused sensational aspect, and at the same time a detached expressive yet cerebral quality. For example in the painting entitled *Giove ed Io* (Jupiter and Io) that references Correggio's famous painting (1532-33), the obvious erotic or sensuous aspects of the famous work are completely stripped away. Of course it could be argued that it would be hard to achieve sensuousness in an achromatic black field where the events are reduced to the head, right hand, and the left foot of the nymph Io (save through the gaze and aesthetic desire of Lacan's *Objet petit a*), and the trace of an apparitional face and embracing left hand of Jupiter. In certain respects the treatment reminds a viewer of the positive-negative reversal in photography. It is to be remembered that according to Ovid's famous metamorphoses narrative Io was ravished by Jupiter in the form of a mist or cloud. But in this instance Puglisi has brought materialisation to the myth's immaterial nephology.¹⁹

The same could be applied to the painting called *Il Giudizio* (Judgment), where details of the central figure of Michelangelo's Christ from the Sistine Chapel 'Last Judgment' is similarly shown with just a head, right hand and foot, and the head and clenched right fist of the flayed St Bartholomew figure immediately below right in the finished wall composition. As already indicated recognition is not the issue, for visually most people would never connect these two paintings to their precursors except for fact that of their well known titles. Puglisi always speaks of "a vision of reality that has its own meaning," and that the meaning he seeks is found in the internality of his personal feelings and responses at work in the actual processes of his painting. As he states it, in an undoubted homage to Leonardo "...sometimes I see a stain on a wall, something that nature has built up, and yet if the spot has the shape of a head, I don't know why, but I am more interested."²⁰ This personal and historical feeling of anthropocentrism towards art and its history therefore underpins and dominates much of the artist's current work. The permeating mystery of darkness as a point of absorption is also a form of self-revealing elucidation for Puglisi. It shapes and directs the psychological impulse that drives forward the experimental contents of the present paintings produced by the artist.

The beginnings and ends of shadow lie between the light and darkness and may be infinitely diminished and infinitely increased. Shadow is the means by which bodies display their form. **Leonardo da Vinci.**

Shadows and darkness carry an obvious affinity with the void, for the word 'shades' is yet another term for apparitions, hidden visions that emerge from darkness, the continued guardians of the mythical underworld. Hence not surprisingly the history of painting is full of living ghosts and pregnant presences that inhabit daily consciousness and practice in an artist's studio. They are both cosmos and commonplace—attendant contents in the artist's daily life and the spectral possibilities of an expressive future world to come.

ENDNOTES

¹ Stéphane Mallarmé in a letter to Eugène Lefébure, in 1865, see Henri Mondor, *Eugène Lefébure. Sa vie, ses lettres à Mallarmé*, Paris, (Collection Blanche) Gallimard, 1951, as cited in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Mallarmé, Or the Poet of Nothingness*, Eng. trans., Ernest Sturm, Philadelphia and London, Pennsylvania State University Press, 1988, p. 170, n. 394 (translation based on Arlette Elkaïm-Sartre, *Mallarmé: La Lucidité et sa face d'ombre*), Paris, (Collection Arcades) Gallimard, 1986.

² Michelle White (curator) *Leaps into the Void: Documents of Nouveau Réalist Performance*, Menil Collection, Houston, and San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 2010, and Kerry Brougher, Philippe Vergne, Kaira Cabanas, Klaus Ottmann, and Andria Hickey, *Yves Klein: With the Void, Full Powers*, co-organized Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., and the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. For a complete overview of 'la vide' (the exhibition 'la vide' took place at the Iris Clert Galerie, in 1958), see Nan Rosenthal, 'La levitation assistée', *Yves Klein*, Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou (3 March – 23 May), Paris, 1983, pp. 199-232, 332-33, 358-83

³ Louis August Blanqui (1805-81) "Let us assume at this point in space, there exists nothing solid, nothing liquid, no gas, not even ether. Nothing but space void & dark. This space is not derived of a third dimension, however, and its limit, that is to say, its continuation, will lie in a new portion of space of the same nature, and thereafter, in another, then another still, and so on, indefinitely" "The Universe-The Infinite", *Eternity By The Stars: An Astronomical Hypothesis* (1872), New York, Contra Mundum Press, 2013, pp. 66-7

⁴ Walter Benjamin (1893-1940), quotes Blanqui, in his study of Paris in the "Arcades Project" where he states the cosmological role of darkness in relation to vision, and that the a priori psychological origins of photography is conceived as no more than darkness penetrated by light. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, Cambridge, Mass., and London, Harvard University Press, 1999, pp. 15, 25-26, 112-115

⁵ The use of night-time scenes are known from Early Renaissance illuminations onwards, in the Baroque period, or more recently in, perhaps the famous 'Nocturnes' by Whistler. See Robin Spencer, *Whistler: A Retrospective*, New York, Hugh Lauter Levin Associates (Fairfield), Rizzoli, 1989. While with 'black paintings' we think of Goya's famous series of black paintings, or modernism and the 'black square' of Malevich, and the chromatic black 1960s minimalism of Ad Reinhardt (1913-67), see Michael Corris, *Ad Reinhardt*, London, Reaktion Books, 2008.

⁶ Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar Book XI. The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 1964, Eng. trans., Alan Sheridan, London Hogarth Press, 1977, p. 104 (Fr. Le séminaire, Livre XI: Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse (texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller), Paris: Seuil, 1973).

⁷ The cultural, social, economic and political theorisation of 'the gaze' is central to the discursive development of many ideas from the second half of the twentieth century (see Jean-Paul Sartre, Jacques Lacan, Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan, et al). As regards the aesthetic act of looking, see Marita Sturken, and Lisa Cartwright. *Practices of Looking: an introduction to visual culture*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009.

⁸ It was a common practice in the seventeenth century for the master of a large atelier (depending on the status of his sitter) to paint only the head and hands of their portrait sitter(s), their assistants were employed as the drapery painters. This has particular resonance in Deleuze's famous text related to painting and the 'fold' (fr. *Le pli: Leibniz et le Baroque*, Paris, 1983), see Gen Doy, 'The Fold: Baroque and Postmodern Draperies', ch. 4, *Draperies: Classicism and Barbarism in Visual Culture*, London and New York I. B. Tauris Publishers, 2002, pp. 139-175. The fact that Puglisi denies any reference to clothing, draperies, and the body, would seem to deny the first principle of portraiture, which is 'to portray'.

⁹ For the traditional *vanitas* or *memento mori* in contemporary art, see John B. Ravenal, *Vanitas: Meditations on Life and Death in Contemporary Art*, Washington and London, University of Washington Press, 2000

¹⁰ The idea *sfumato* is one of the four canonical painting modes first developed in the Renaissance and Baroque periods, the others being *cangiante*, *chiaroscuro*, and *unione*, see Marcia Hall, (1994). *Color and Meaning: Practice and Theory in Renaissance Painting*, Cambridge and London, Cambridge University Press, 1994. Its greatest early exponent was Leonardo da Vinci, particularly in the Mona Lisa (c. 1503-06)

¹¹ Quoted from an interview between Bruno Corà and Lorenzo Puglisi (Milan, 2014), in *Lorenzo Puglisi*, Museo del Territorio Biellese, 2014, n.p.

¹² The paintings *Matteo e l'angelo* has two versions executed in 1602, the one referenced by the artist in this instance is that commissioned and completed for the Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi di Francesi, in Rome and survives in situ. The other version (the first executed, but rejected by the Church patrons) was destroyed in the World War II, when the Kaiser Friedrich Museum in Berlin was bombed in 1945, see Jacob Hess, 'Chronology of the Contarelli Chapel', *The Burlington Magazine* 93, no. 579 (June 1951): 186-20

¹³ Involuntary memory was first scientifically described in 1885, by the German experimental psychologist Herman Ebbinghaus (1850-1909), *Memory: A contribution to experimental psychology*, (Eng. trans. H. A. Ruger and C. E. Bussenius), Dover, New York, 1964. It is more commonly known in literature from the famous 'madeleine' incident, in Proust's eponymous novel *In Search of Lost Time* (Fr. *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 1913-27).

¹⁴ Leo Steinberg, "Leonardo's Incessant 'Last Supper'", New York, Zone Books, 2001.

¹⁵ See Bruno Corà and Lorenzo Puglisi *op cit* n.p.

¹⁶ Leonardo Da Vinci, 'Notes on the Last Supper', Ch. IV The Arts: The Artist's Course of Study, *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 180

¹⁷ Concerning visual gesture and expression (free of reference to the pseudo-science of physiognomy), see Adam Kendon, *Gesture: Visual Action as Utterance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004.

¹⁸ Matthew Gale and Chris Stephens (editors), *Francis Bacon*, London, Tate Britain, London, Tate Publishing, 2009. Bacon also had his 'ghosts in the void' of art history, see 'Film, Fantasy, History in Francis Bacon', pp, 51-63

¹⁹ The daughter of Inachus, King of Argos, the playwright Aeschylus (525-455 BC) suggested the Ionian Sea is named after her. See Ovid (43 BC-17AD), *Metamorphoses*, Book I, London, Penguin, 1982, pp. 44-48

²⁰ See Bruno Corà and Lorenzo Puglisi *op cit* n.p.