



A Repainting of Things Past

BY SKYE PRIESTLEY ON MARCH 28, 2016

As interpretations of history are always subject to revision, how to navigate historical perspectives and objects in the face of new theoretical frameworks emerge as intriguing questions. Elise Ansel—an artist based in Portland, Maine—has for some time been reinterpreting Old Master paintings from the Renaissance and Baroque periods in a brushy, abstract style. Now the exhibition *Elise Ansel: Distant Mirrors* at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art brings a collection of Ansel’s work together with the painting that served as its impetus.

While Ansel skillfully inverts the formal properties of Denys Calvaert’s *Annunciation* of 1595, the original painting she chose to reinterpret, her work’s formal and aesthetic expression seems strangely disconnected from the ethical justifications provided by the accompanying literature. This is

not to say that the exhibit cannot be understood through either of the lenses provided by its accompanying text: first, the modern reassessment of old European models of the feminine ideal; second, notions of subjectivity (or perspectivism) championed here by Friedrich Nietzsche, but common to other philosophers as well. Yet the paintings and drawings are legible first and foremost as a formal exercise. Out of context, it is possible to mistake many of the works of art on display as pure abstraction. While the show's conceptual underpinnings are not unfounded, it is easy (perhaps refreshing) to dismiss the scholarly baggage and encounter these artworks as beautiful objects.



Denys Calvert, *Annunciation*, ca. 1597, oil on copper.



Elise Ansel, *Revelations IV*, 2015, oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches

Calvaert's painting is a fairly typical late Renaissance annunciation with all of the familiar actors: Mary on the right, crossing her arms over her chest in a pose of humble acceptance; Gabriel kneeling on the left, pointing his right hand up to direct the viewer's eye; and God the Father, who breaks through the clouds in a gesture of blessing. The painting is part of Bowdoin's permanent collection, and, along with Ansel's series of drawings and paintings based on this *Annunciation*, has been hung in a small gallery. The visitor can compare Ansel's work to the original, and in doing so consider the cultural implications of the differences between the two, the evolution of painterly style, and the wide gap between the present day and late Renaissance Europe.

Ansel's exercise is a compelling one, the strength of which flows from its emphasis on formal inversion. Through a series of ten paintings, she reduces each element of the original to a simple gesture or field of color. Some compositional elements become more important while others recede or vanish. Gabriel's red sash, which Ansel transforms from a mere decoration to a point of balance, becomes the virtuoso coup de grâce of the works. Meanwhile, most decorative elements disappear entirely— notably a small vase in the foreground. With the myriad idiosyncrasies of the original painting erased, an enigmatic union of strokes and fields of color remains, traceable to its source and yet fundamentally original. Ansel's technique hinges primarily on the interaction between wet oil paints, where the unpredictable merging of pigments creates passages of dramatic action. The subtle transformation of this technique throughout the series keeps the work consistently interesting, moving from a tentative, daubing stroke in the first piece, to the consistent brushy intensity of the next six works, to both the vertical flipping of the composition and an increasing simplicity in the final three paintings. Moments when the underpainting shines through are lovely but rare, and the adherence to the colors and shapes of the original *Annunciation* don't always produce coherent abstract compositions. Still, despite the occasional misstep, these paintings are on the whole successful, dramatic works of gestural abstraction.



Elise Ansel, *Study VI for Revelations*, 2015, graphite and felt tip pen.

Distant Mirrors is, however, not exclusively about style, technique, or composition. While the emphasis of the show is on a formal transformation from naturalism to abstraction, the symbolic weight inheres from dual references to feminist reinterpretation and philosophical subjectivism. The

feminist angle is readily comprehensible. The transformation of the figure of Mary from a late Renaissance representation of feminine chastity and virtue into a fully abstract non-figure at the hands of a female artist reads as a metaphor for the recalibration of the feminine ideal from a singular and oppressive definition to a nebulous and creative model for expression of individual identity. The image of the ideal woman in society has certainly transformed since Calvaert's time, but whether that change has been entirely liberating or not may require a more thorough engagement than can be found here. In many ways, social expectations towards female comportment and appearance have become both increasingly ubiquitous and unattainable. Despite the accompanying essay's claim that the "progressive nature" of Ansel's approach is "highly striking,"^[i] the lack of any reference to contemporary issues blunts the political importance of this argument.



Elise Ansel, Revelations IX, 2015, oil on canvas.

While *Distant Mirrors* does not adroitly express the complexity of contemporary gender expectations, it does successfully represent an (arguably postmodernist) pivot away from a singular and objectivist to a pluralist system of ethics. By invoking Nietzsche, the accompanying essay by Hanétha Vété-Congolo sets up a particularly compelling parallel between older, pre-modern Abrahamic perspectives and newer secular, multicultural ones. Just as Nietzsche famously declared the death of God, Ansel literally strikes His figure from the canvas, replacing it with a mass of color. This replacement for the figure of God, a mass of paint, is not easily

interpretable. Its expression is a mix of the intentions of its viewer and its painter, a pluralistic signifier capable of adopting a wide range of potential meaning. To quote feminist scholar Professor Debra Bergoffen, this is the “destruction of the centered perspective which refuses to recognize its status as a perspective,”^[ii] and it implies both the elimination of traditional hegemonies and the democratization of the historical narrative.

The contradiction of *Distant Mirrors* lies in its simultaneous embrace and critique of the past. In reinterpreting a work from the late Renaissance, Ansel both denies the work and also relies upon the prestige that such paintings still hold in our culture (hence their ubiquitous presence in museums). Denys Calvaert may have lived in an era characterized by social injustice and the dominance of a very specific and intensely dogmatic view of the world, but it is impossible to deny the sophistication and beauty of his *Annunciation*. In its attempt to salvage the past while remaining dedicated to a pluralistic future, *Distant Mirrors* addresses, albeit in a roundabout manner, an issue that is at the center of our changing culture.

^[i] Hanétha Vété-Congolo, “Dialoguing ‘Interweavingly’ to Self-Affirmation” (Brunswick, Maine: Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 2016), 1.

^[ii] Debra B. Bergoffen, “Nietzsche’s Madman: Perspectivism without Nihilism,” in *Nietzsche as Postmodernist: Essays Pro and Contra*, ed. Clayton Koelb (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), 58.

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