

A Renaissance renaissance: Elise Ansel reinterprets the masters



Elise Ansel: *Feast of the Gods*, 2013, oil on canvas

By Michael Abatemarco

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Classic European paintings — Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo, with images of bacchanals, figures in the landscape, characters from myth, and scenes from Christian allegories — provide source material for Elise Ansel's contemporary abstractions. Her reinterpretations of the original paintings simultaneously obscure them and provide a new way of seeing them. "I've always really loved Renaissance and early Renaissance masterpieces," Ansel told *Pasatiempo*. "For a long time I had trouble finding a way to bridge this work with my practice as a contemporary artist. It was something I always wanted to do and finally came to a point where I thought OK, I'm going to take on these paintings. My approach was to focus on color, shape, and composition — that was the project I outlined for myself — but also to interpret them through gestural abstraction." *The Invisible Thread*, an exhibition of Ansel's paintings, is on view at Ellsworth Gallery.

Ansel's works evoke the feelings and emotional content of the original paintings but without detailed renderings of figures. Some, such as *Feast of the Gods*, based on a 16th-century composition by Giovanni Bellini with additions by Titian, are clearly figures in a landscape. Others, such as *Consecration*, inspired by Renaissance painter Paolo Veronese's *The Consecration of Saint Nicholas*, also present figures but

appear more like purely Abstract Expressionist canvases. “I’ve been an abstract painter for a long time, using both objective and nonobjective subject matter. As I began to work on them, the rich, beautiful stories embedded in them started to come through in my paintings. I also do several iterations of the same source material. So my first one would be tighter and would have bigger figurative elements. I sort of realized that within myself was this prejudice — and it’s a very contemporary prejudice — that they’re better if they’re more abstract and they’re better if they don’t have figurative elements. As I worked, that goal began to reform itself. I realized that figurative elements were important.”

In Ansel’s work, the human form is sometimes reduced to no more than a mere brushstroke, abstracted as much as possible while still retaining the integrity of the original image. Hence even a brushstroke reads as figurative. Renaissance painters often condensed narratives into a single composition so that the story could be read in the painting. “I think there’s something very cinematic about the original Renaissance paintings. Right now in contemporary art, story and narrative are important, but when I went to school they were less important than the formal elements.”

The work of Titian, Giorgione, and Poussin, as well as Ansel’s other influences, is not in any immediate danger of fading from memory. Ansel’s approach is a fresh consideration of the material. “Part of how I see is by painting. I see things much more deeply and clearly when I try to work from these paintings. I have a feeling that other people would have that experience too. The process of working from it makes you see many, many more things in it. I had an interesting experience in the Accademia in Venice. There’s a Titian painting there, a Pietà. He did it close to when he died. His work became more abstract as he got older. It became more loose, more gestural. In this painting there’s a little glop of white paint that represents the eye of the dying Christ. It’s clearly just a little glop of paint, but it flickered and came alive for me. That was my first experience with something that can be as alive and vital as a traditionally rendered, academic, figurative element can be.”

The show’s title, *The Invisible Thread*, suggests a lineage from past to present. “The title refers to the unconscious dialogue that painters have with other painters living and dead. It really refers to the incredible influence these paintings continue to exert upon me and everybody else. I’m in the process of making that thread more visible.”

In their execution, Ansel’s reinterpretations are as much an homage to modernist painting as to the distant past. “This idea by Paul Cézanne — he called it *la petite sensation*, where each mark is both optical and emotional — I’m influenced by that. That idea was taken up by Francis Bacon, who talked a lot about sensation or feeling as opposed to illustration. My method of working focuses on the shape, the color, but also the feeling and the texture of each mark. In my mind, Matisse, Picasso, and de Kooning are the three real luminaries of the 20th century, and those three painters have an influence on this work, particularly Matisse, who worked with color and figure. There’s sort of this idea about Matisse that he was a brilliant colorist and pushed his work just to the brink of abstraction but kept the figurative element. That idea is really influencing the work I’m doing now.”

Ansel offers a refreshing take on the religious imagery that dominated much of Renaissance painting. Less didactic than their historical predecessors, the paintings in *The Invisible Thread* call on us to reconsider the source material in more painterly terms. The forested landscapes, skies, angels, saints, and gods of myth and legend depend less on the artist’s ability to capture fine details than on the viewer’s ability to provide missing information or to simply look at them in a more basic way. Ansel’s forms are reductive, but the essential shapes and colors are there in the originals. “Part of what’s important is that we continue to look at these paintings, that they don’t just turn into dust. Somehow, I think, to our contemporary eye, the abstraction brings them back into the forefront.” ◀

details

▼ Elise Ansel: *The Invisible Thread*

▼ Opening reception 5 p.m. Friday, Aug. 23 (artist talk 3 p.m.); through Oct. 26

▼ Ellsworth Gallery, 215 E. Palace Ave., 989-7900