

INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2015 Elise Ansel, a painter based in Maine, encountered Denys Calvaert's *Annunciation*, ca. 1595, in the Bowdoin College Museum of Art galleries and decided to make this historic painting the focus of her painterly inquiry. In his *Annunciation*, the late Renaissance painter renders a familiar New Testament scene in delicate oil colors on a smooth copper ground. According to Luke, 1:26-38, the angel Gabriel visited the Virgin Mary to announce that she would give birth to Jesus, the Son of God. In Calvaert's work, which draws on a centuries-old visual tradition, the winged angel enters Mary's chamber from the left, bending in reverence and pointing upwards to announce the impending heavenly intervention. Mary acknowledges the



supernatural presence gracefully and with humility, turning towards the angel with downcast eyes and arms clasped in prayer. The balding, bearded figure of God the Father appears above the scene and fulfills with his blessing the angel's promise.

This small painting was almost certainly created as an aid to private devotion. However, the significance of Calvaert's panel goes beyond its religious iconography and function as devotional object. Conduct manuals of the early modern period encouraged unmarried women to model themselves after the chaste and pious Virgin Mary. Paintings such as Calvaert's might remind viewers of these desirable female virtues.

Attracted by the painting's brilliant coloration and dynamic composition, but wary of its underlying assumptions about gender roles,

Elise Ansel set out to respond creatively to it. In a series of preparatory drawings and oil paintings of increasing size, she painted an homage and counterpoint to Calvaert in an idiom of energetic gestural abstraction. The results of this dialogue with the *Annunciation* are presented here for the first time. They provoked poetic and philosophical reflections by Hanétha Vété-Congolo, associate professor of Romance Languages, who initiated this collaboration at Bowdoin College. The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation generously supported this publication as part of the humanities cluster *Studies in Beauty*.

JOACHIM HOMANN

Curator, Bowdoin College Museum of Art

Above: *Annunciation*, ca. 1595, oil on copper by Denys Calvaert, Flemish/Italian, ca. 1540–1619. 20 ¹³/₁₆ x 15 ⁷/₁₆ inches. Museum Purchase, Laura T. and John H. Halford, Jr. Art Acquisition Fund, Lloyd O. and Marjorie Strong Coulter Fund, and Jane H. and Charles E. Parker, Jr. Art Acquisition Fund. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I make paintings that are derived from Old Master depictions of bacchanals, interiors, and figures in the landscape. I use painterly notation and shorthand to translate historical art into a contemporary pictorial language. The idea of translation and transcription is influenced by my background in Comparative Literature. Upon reading James Joyce's *Ulysses* and reflecting on its relation to *The Odyssey*, I was inspired not only by the use of a classical text to create a contemporary response, but also by the idea of using multiple stylistic approaches within a single work. I was particularly struck by the final Penelope/Molly Bloom chapter, a single unpunctuated stream of consciousness meditation written "in a female voice." It became clear that the scope of translation and transcription could extend beyond translation between modern languages or even between ancient and contemporary languages to include translation between privileged and less privileged discourses. When I made the decision to use painting as my first order medium, I became interested in examining how these ideas could be applied to the visual arts.

Following up on Joyce's idea of writing "in a female voice," I engaged in the process of forging a visual language in a medium that has for centuries been involved in the objectification of women. My approach was to translate images from the Western canon into a personal lexicon that depicts female experience from the inside out.

My paintings are about re-creating, re-visioning, and re-presenting paintings that were created at a time when women were seen as "other." The paintings I work after are distant mirrors that I interpret through the lens of gestural abstraction. My paintings begin with a specific pictorial point of departure but then move towards abstraction as the representational content is balanced by focus upon color, composition, and the materiality of the paint. Linear, rational readings are interrupted. The historical paintings from which I work become structures on which to hang paint; the soundness of these structures supports great improvisational freedom. The real subject becomes the substance and surface



of oil paint, the variety of its applications, and the ways in which it can be used to celebrate life.

This exhibition has given me the unique opportunity to work from Denys Calvaert's *Annunciation*, a remarkable late sixteenth-century painting in the collection of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Further, it has provided the occasion to collaborate with Joachim Homann and Hanétha Vété-Congolo in contributing to Bowdoin's interdisciplinary course cluster *Studies in Beauty* and the important questions it raises: What is beauty, who defines it, and what are the toxic consequences of an uncritical ingestion of the plethora of images of "beauty" with which we are confronted on a daily basis?

ELISE ANSEL

Elise Ansel was born in New York City and lives and works in Portland, Maine. She received a BA in Comparative Literature from Brown University in 1984. While in Providence, she studied art at both Brown and the Rhode Island School of Design. She earned an MFA in Visual Art from Southern Methodist University in 1993. Ansel has exhibited at the Royal Academy, the Parrish Art Museum, and many other venues in the United States and in Europe. The Phoenix Gallery in New York, Ellsworth Gallery in Santa Fe, and Cadogan Contemporary in London currently represent her work.

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ELISE ANSEL
DISTANT MIRRORS

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DIALOGUING “INTERWEAVINGLY” TO SELF-AFFIRMATION

The conceptual framework, process of creation, and concrete rendition of Elise Ansel’s artwork compel attention. Her forceful body of work contributes to contemporary discussions about the world, its meanings, and possibilities. Ansel indeed founds her act of painting in “re-creating, re-visioning, and re-presenting paintings that were created in an era and a society when women were often seen as ‘other’” to create meaningful, self-conceived, and affirmed ontological speech and discourse. Her creation perspective is an ideation that is as generative as it is regenerative.

Ansel means to draw attention to aspects of human life that are not conventionally acknowledged or that are generally decrypted, or understood, through an established, domineering, and exclusive lens presenting itself as uniquely objective. Her paintings are the expression of a soul in dialogue with predecessors and an utterance of an intrinsic

voice and apperception. By methodically selecting “Old [male European] Masters Paintings” and, given the history of marginalization and voicelessness endured by European or Euro-descended women in the European or European-like context, Ansel enhances even more the new woman’s lens she now posits as an authoritative and viable perspective and mechanism for decryption. Relying on the symbolic, ideological, political, and philosophical, therefore, her artistic complex also stands as testimonial and akin to the European feminist tradition.

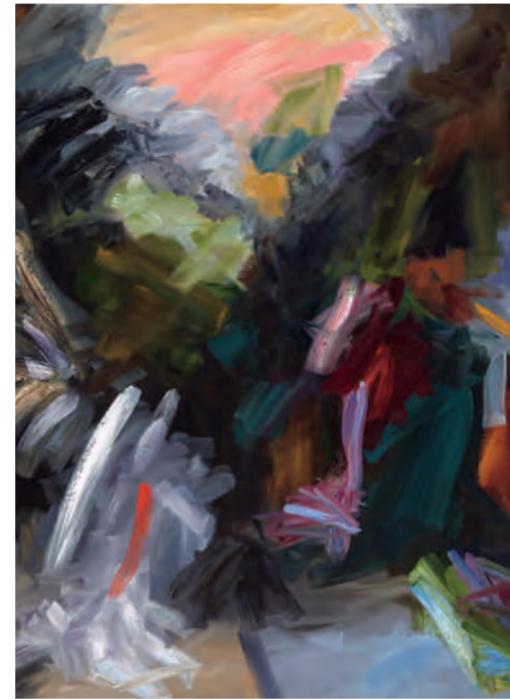
Elise Ansel’s approach—drawn from the preexistent to allow for the legitimate expression of more existences, to widen the scope and meaning of alterity, to include the unheard and the unseen—has the effect of conveying a sort of Nietzschean perspectivism and in that, its progressive nature is highly striking.



From this, she introduces the critical notion of ethics and raises the very issue of the painter’s identity as it enmeshes with the meanings and values of the work, and of the painted. What are therefore raised are questions about beauty and its definition, as well as the very process of meaning production, dissemination, and display. Similarly transpires the issue concerning the human person, for, through the inscription of women as meaning producers and (free) speech and discourse enunciators, Ansel means to say that they too are human persons.

In our current conflict-ridden world, Ansel’s thoughts, as manifested by her art production process and concrete body of painting, singularized by unpredictability and life-giving colors, are as relevant as they are revivifying.

Here, I want to underline two current critical discussions concerning the very core of humankind as on the one hand



they engage with creative expressions, identity and alterity, and on the other hand, they find echo in Ansel’s works. First, the French poststructuralist thought of intertextuality as proffered by French philosopher Julia Kristeva and second, the French-Caribbean Relation and Creolization proposition extolled by French-Caribbean philosopher Edouard Glissant.

If one adheres to Kristeva’s prism, Ansel’s creations are texts “in the space of [which] utterances, taken from other texts, intersect and neutralize one another.”¹ Given her complex dialectic, which resorts to a generous mobilization of multiple times and means, to the interlacing of personal history and collective traditions, and to different art forms, her re-painting instills not just the authoritative affirmation of a woman’s speech and discourse but also departs from a sort of Bakhtinian “dialogic imagination”² to establish continuous dialogue with the past and/in the present with the view of a possible transcended and highly productive and inclusive future.

Elise Ansel is a pictorial cannibal who does not practice simple ingurgitation but performs complex regurgitation of an incorporated product to advocate for a multiplicity of perspectives, for freedom, the right to self-definition, and even for justice and balance. The continuity transpiring through her painting is no mere continuation of a tradition but the acknowledgement, albeit not without questioning, of that which once existed and now also composes the present. Ansel does not propose the death of the painter, to paraphrase Roland Barthes. The preexisting creation becomes a base-constituent, contributing to the new and independent work of art, whether it can be clearly identified or is instead opaquely distributed underneath the new whole. Ansel creates a speech that extols inclusion and puts forth the value of the “interwoven,” “next to,” “with,” “in,” and “also” as, thanks to her re-painting, both creations are now “next to” each other, “with” each other, and one is “in” the other and “also” in existence. Her painting is defiantly surcharged, profoundly additive and expansive. Vis-à-vis the base-constituent, the new creation appearance and ultimate identity can bewilder the (profane) eye and sense for linear expectations. It is very much a composite whole.

In their complex processes, her stance and act of painting rejoin Edouard Glissant’s ideas of Creolization, Poetics of Relation, and *Tout-Monde*, all humanistic ideas that envision a world in which all differences would be firmly respected, thus offering an alternative to hegemonic, reductionist, monolithic, essentialist, and exclusionist views and acts. According to Glissant, Creolization, which is “one of the modes for intricate interweaving, is embodied only by its processes and certainly not by the ‘contents’ from which they work.”³ This complex resultant of the intricate interweaving, mode of thought, and relation constitute a Poetic of Relation as the latter is “the capacity of the imaginary to bring us to conceive the elusive totality of the extreme complexity of the world at the same time as it allows us to pinpoint some of its details and in particular, to laud our own opaque singularity.”⁴ From this ensues a totalizing *Tout-Monde*, which itself, as Glissant puts it, “is our universe as it changes and endures by exchanging and, at the same time, the ‘vision’ we have of it.”⁵ Ansel’s painting embodies a point of view that would caution us to not “make the mistake of believing that [we] are exclusively unique or that [our] fable is the best and [our] voice the highest.”⁶

Elise Ansel’s artistic œuvre is arguably an embodiment of the process of Creolization Glissant commends as the inevitable alternative to the world’s human calamities. In any case, her postmodernist creation process unmistakably relies on a subtly nuanced reflection of all of the above and her painting testifies to the broad, complex, and inclusive interrelation that brings about beauty and ethics.

HANÉTHA VÉTÉ—CONGOLO

Notes

- 1 Julia Kristeva, *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 36.
- 2 A Russian philosopher and critical theorist Mikhail Bakhtin [1895-1975] wrote *The Dialogic Imagination* in 1975. To Bakhtin, a text does not stand in isolation but is in dialogue with other texts that precede it.
- 3 Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), 103; translation by the author.
- 4 Edouard Glissant, *Traité du Tout-Monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), 22; translation by the author.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 176.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 60.



Hanétha Vété-Congolo, associate professor of Romance Languages and Literatures, is a poet, writer, and scholar of Caribbean and Francophone literature and postcolonial literary theory. She earned her doctorate in 2004 at the Université des Antilles et de la Guyane, Martinique. Her publications include *L’interoralité caribéenne: le mot conté de l’identité* (Editions Universitaires Européennes, Berlin, 2011, second edition forthcoming), *Nous sommes Martiniquaises: pawòl en bouches de femmes châtaignes* (Paris, Connaissances et Savoirs, 2016), and numerous articles. A collection of her poetry is titled *Mon parler de Guinée* (Paris, L’Harmattan, collection Poètes des cinq continents, 2015).

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Cover: *Revelations IV*, 2015, oil on linen, 40 x 30 inches.
Back cover: Elise Ansel in her studio. Photo by Winky Lewis.
Left to right: *Study II for Revelations*, 2015, graphite and felt tip pen on paper, 11 x 8 ½ inches; *Study IV for Revelations*, 2015, graphite and felt tip pen on paper, 11 x 8 ½ inches; *Revelations V*, 2015, oil on linen, 48 x 36 inches; Studio View, November 2015.