



SIMONE FONTANA REIS THE DANCE OF THE ORCHIDS

What do a rearview mirror, a highway tunnel, a bathroom sink, a steaming teakettle, an orchid and a bidet have in common? They are all elements in the painterly vocabulary of the young Brazilian painter, Simone Fontana Reis, and together they constitute some of the substance and subject matter of her work. In fact, they are all important and distinct parts in Fontana Reis' daily life, insofar as they play various roles in an ongoing dialogue between the artist and her environment. In her paintings they anthropomorphize, perhaps as a stand-in or surrogate for the artist or for her implied presence. At other times, they are so animated that they take on a life of their own, independent of a world that can never fully appreciate their specialness. Fontana Reis is also intrigued about what happens when these different images and unruly objects (many of which she fabricates) meet in her paintings, and how they will interact. Therein lies the delightful, the mysterious aspect of her work.

Take, for example, the variety of orchids that take center stage in several of the recent paintings. These exotic flowers, which Fontana Reis actually collects and cultivates, are some of the 2,000 species of orchids from the rain forest southeast of Sao Paulo. She takes long walks through the *Mata Atlantica* (the Brazilian Atlantic forest), once a vast coastal "terrestrial paradise", now depleted to less than 10% of its original size. "We are destroying our house, without knowing what's inside it, that's my conclusion...", wrote the artist in a recent letter. At home she has created a habitat for her modest orchid collection, which she nurtures, observes and sketches.

When Fontana Reis paints them, however, they are depicted as living, breathing, resourceful entities, having discernible human qualities. Rather than inhabiting a greenhouse, these brazen *Orcidaceae Brazillenses* dwell in a furnished house, cavort and samba on the dining room table (as in *Orchids Dance*), unabashedly displaying their obvious, luxuriant charms. In *Aspiration*, the effulgent, golden petalled orchid seems to either taunt or attempt to imitate the portrait of the aristocratic gentleman on the wall (in fact the artist's

grandfather). The cookie of the table below does not in the least dissuade it's craving for the picture, suggesting that even flowering plants can have dreams of grandeur. On the other hand, in *Oral Desire*, the voracious open "mouthed" orchid (in detail, resembling female genitalia) drinks from a bidet "fountain" on the table. Everything in the painting, the chairs and table, the scratched-in roman numerals on the wall, seems alive, moving to some inner rhythm, sharing some basic energy. Sexuality and an almost insatiable thirst, a longing for physical gratification, are displayed without self-consciousness.

Another of Simone Reis' themes is present in what I would call her road pictures; the images she conjures up from her long drives south to the beach. In it's simplest form, the highway is a means to adventure, but with the added pleasure of the trip itself, as in *To The South (Music)*, where the heat of the south is anticipated by the musical lines that articulate the car's rearview mirror. This mirror becomes a "frame" in itself in *Childish Nightmare*, in which a small stuffed bear is nearly submerged in pink tendrils of paint that emanate from yet another mirror, this one "reflecting" imbedded plastic breasts that are the source of this dangerous liquid. One could venture several psychological interpretations, but Fontana Reis gives the viewer the alternative of engaging the senses in the juxtaposition of cake-decorating apparatus applied paint and these curious, intentionally provocative objects.

Forbidding, ominous tunnels also figure in Fontana Reis' road pictures, taking us from darkness to light and back, a transition suggesting both danger (in *Driver* and *Out and In Again*) and a sense of excitement and expectation (in *Turning On*). These erotic musings and inchoate fears are entwined and interchangeable, revealing themselves as transitory sensations in the process of driving from one place to another. When an giant orchid emerges from a tunnel, seen as a reflection (in *Tunnels in the Mirror*), are we inside a dream, or immersed in a subconscious fantasy that begs for but ultimately defies any simple, logical interpretation? The artist's sense of play, the ingenuous display of the *idee fixe*, makes us smile, but also feel maybe a bit uneasy, as if we were suddenly caught indulging in our own secret obsessions.

The "sink" paintings (the shape itself a variation on the rearview mirror and the bidet) are easily Fontana

Reis' most overtly eroticized images. The cleansing bath the plastic doll gets in *Venus (Monica Lewinsky)* is simultaneously a shower of vital (presidential?) fluids. In *Point of Convergence*, the porpoise and decapitated cow go "down the drain" beneath heavy droplets that fall from a phallic-shaped faucet. The roman numerals in the mirror tell us time is passing, but may also represent events that have happened or will happen. A domestic parable, in a place one would least expect it.

Fontana Reis' sculpture is an extension of her painting; sensual flowers that appear to move in slow-motion, like sea-anemones on a coral reef. The human element, as in *Mother Orchid*, is often humorously incorporated into an organic entity. And let's not overlook the miniature *Thirsty Orchid*, which in itself epitomizes what Fontana Reis keeps searching for; the moment when the mysteries of nature and human desire are one.

— Robert G. Edelman

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