

EVA BOVENZI'S MESSENGERS

Peter Selz

In 1992, traveling in northern Italy, Eva Bovenzi was engrossed by the abundance of sunflowers growing in the large fields along the roads. She became aware that each individual flower with its cyclopean head appeared not only as an emblem of the sun, but that inside the halo was a huge black center, "a heart of darkness." In a statement for the catalogue *Elusive Nature* for the Cuenca Biennial of Painting in 1996 she wrote that her paintings of sunflowers "have allowed me to deal more directly with the themes around which my work has always circled: the dualities of matter and spirit, and time and transcendence."

This, in effect, is a fine description of the *Messenger* series which she produced in 2006. There the impact of the Italian trip is even more apparent. She was deeply affected by trecento and quattrocento painting by Giotto, Simone Martini, Fra Angelico and Piero della Francesca, the experience of which left an indelible mark on her work as it developed to its present phase. Unlike many artists who, at this time, do work which is disconnected from tradition, Bovenzi has been able to create authentic painting precisely because she is aware of her patrimony (if this word is permissible for an artist who has been active in the feminist movement since the 1970s). She also speaks with admiration of 20th century artists such as Max Beckmann, Marsden Hartley, Giorgio Morandi, Philip Guston, Alice Neel and Eva Hesse. Hesse's dangling expandable hangings, fragile in structure, abstract, and allusive at the same time, find an echo in Bovenzi's paintings, although they share no similarity in appearance.

Bovenzi, who had painted personal visions of the California landscape earlier, was represented by the picture *Tassajara* (1994) in the Cuenca exhibition. Recalling her visit to the Zen retreat near Carmel, she fused a realistic rendering of tree trunks with a lyrical nighttime vision of the forest, "equating nature with spirituality and human emotions," as David Rubin observed in the show's catalog. (1)

In 2002, Bovenzi had an exhibition of paintings of flowers, leaves, tree branches and tangles which was entitled *Silence Matters*. Indeed, it was the space between the objects--what Zen calls "MA"--which was the motif. The artist refers to Morandi in his irregular edges of jugs and bottles, but also to the quiet intervals which give such serenity to his work and the mystery of his *natura mortis*. We think of the meaningful pauses in Mozart's compositions, to say nothing of John Cage's "silences". In his essay "Art as Form and Reality," Herbert Marcuse asserts that "the way in which a story is told, the structure and selectiveness of verse and prose, that which is NOT said or NOT represented, and yet is present ...these are some aspects of Form which remove, dissociate, alienate the oeuvre from reality and make its own reality." (2)

Bovenzi's *Messenger* paintings are diptychs consisting of two rectangular canvases which are connected to form an irregular perpendicular composition in three quarters.

The absence of the fourth makes for the vitality of the distinct structure. The viewer is acutely aware of this incompleteness, which is essential to the configuration, as Rodin's "Walking Man" (1905), headless and armless, is all the more powerful for its fragmentary structure, conveying the sheer force of movement and the high drama of the act of walking.

Bovenzi's messengers do not come with such drama. Her Annunciating Angel is not like Tintoretto's who sweeps into the Virgin's shelter with rattling wings. It is, rather, the silent angel appearing to Mary in Simone Martini's *Annunciation* of the 1330's, which Bovenzi would have seen in the Uffizi. Gabriel's wings, resembling the colors of pheasant wings, become manifest to the Virgin who seems to recoil when receiving the Word. There is, above all, Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the convent of San Marco in Florence with Gabriel's multi-colored wings as he salutes Mary who is posed in a receptive attitude in this fresco. Bovenzi may have had the garden of this painting in mind when making her floral pieces. Among the early Italian paintings that also come to mind is Giovanni di Paolo's *Expulsion from Paradise*, in which God the Father rolls the great multi-colored celestial wheel which expels Adam and Eve, as described by Dante.

Above all, there is the world of nature, which has always been central to this painter's world. The wings in the series under discussion suggest not only angels, but also large birds and bats. In fact, Bovenzi said that the *Seventh Messenger* in which blacks are dominant, can be seen as an homage to the bat. She also relates that she went to a butterfly farm in Ecuador in 1997 and was delighted when seeing the tremendous variety of colors not only in the grown lepidoptera, but also in the metallic gold of the cocoons. Many colors of the rainbow are present in these pictures. In some, such as *Fourth Messenger*, blue is dominant with orange lines intersecting the wing. In others, a pale sandy beige is the keynote, as in the *Sixth Messenger* whose colors seem to merge as the viewer observes the circular movement.

The background of the whole series is monochrome, suggesting indeterminate space. In the *First Messenger*, the image seems to merge with this putty-like greyish ground. By contrast, the wings of the *Ninth Messenger* are separated sharply from the ground as in Byzantine icons, works which were also an inspiration to the painter. And, with all the circles, straight directional lines and ellipses, the *Messengers* also evoke old navigational and celestial maps, which charted the known as well as the unknown and yet-to-be discovered places, just as the making of art itself is exploratory.

The theme of angels also occupied Paul Klee during the last years of his life. Klee always thought of art as the metaphor for Creation and angels for him denoted the intersection of life and death. In Bovenzi's statement for her 2007 exhibition at Toomey Tourell Fine Art in San Francisco she writes: "Conceptually (these paintings) were born of my fascination with humanity's need to create a narrative that explains our presence in this unexplainable universe. 'Who are we? Where do we come from? Where are we going?' are questions that can never be fully answered, yet we fight to the death over our constructions. Human beings insist upon meaning, and the stories we've told ourselves are both dazzling and poignant." These words reflect thoughts about ultimate

reality in a way which is similar to Klee's vision. In 1920 Paul Klee met Rainier Maria Rilke in Munich. Rilke's poetry is comparable to Klee's painting. And, as in Klee's pictures, angels appear frequently in Rilke's poetry.

The Angels

They all have tired mouths
and bright souls without seam
and a great yearning (as for sin)
sometimes haunts their dream.

They are nearly all alike;
in God's garden they keep still
like many intervals
in His might and melody.

Only when they spread their wings,
are they wakers as in God's broad
sculptor-hands leaved through the pages
of the dark Book of the Beginning.

(translation, Peter Selz)

Notes:

1. David S. Rubin, *Elusive Nature* (Phoenix, Arizona. Phoenix Museum of Art, 1996) n.p.
2. Herbert Marcuse, "Art and Form and Reality", in *On the Future of Art* (New York, Viking Press, 1970), page 126.

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