

The Art of Enigma: The De Chirico Brothers & the Politics of Modernism by Keala Jewell, The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, PA., 2004, 237pp., 19 colour illus., £23.50, ISBN 0-271-02358-9 (hardback)

Giorgio de Chirico has remained a puzzling figure within the history of twentieth-century art. The Greek-born Italian artist was lauded by the French surrealists for his 'Metaphysical' paintings of 1914 - 1917, distorted scenes of deserted piazzas populated by classical statuary, faceless manikins and mundane objects. When de Chirico began to emulate neo-classical, baroque and romantic styles of painting in the 1920s, however, he was summarily expelled from the movement. Since that time, his reputation has been subject to several such shifts: once hailed as the originator of avant-garde forms of modernism, he was re-defined during the 1980s as the archetypal post-modernist. The late works in which he pastiched and copied his earlier Metaphysical paintings have starkly divided scholarly opinion, some viewing the works as a critique of modernism, others laying charges of conservatism and even fraudulence. Art historians and curators have sought to contain this multiplicity by focusing exclusively on one aspect of de Chirico's career, usually the phase prior to his expulsion from surrealism in 1926. From this perspective, the greater part of the artist's work simply disappears from view. Historical significance has been at the expense of a reduced and truncated corpus.

What would it mean to look at de Chirico differently, not to separate out the various strands of the artist's career but to understand them as part of a broader field of disparateness, one which accounted for the full range of his own production, including both art and literature, and looked further afield, beyond his individual production to that of his closest artistic ally? Keala Jewell's new book *The Art of Enigma: The De Chirico Brothers and the Politics of Modernism* provides the answer to this question by examining the work of the de Chirico brothers, Giorgio and Alberto (later known as Alberto Savinio) together. Following a model of double monographs seen in several recent art publications, including *Matisse and Picasso*, Jewell gives equal weight to both individuals, studying their artistic and literary output side by side.¹ What emerges is a new picture of the de Chiricos that refuses easy definitions and is salutary for its protean spirit of inclusiveness and heterogeneity.

The central argument of *The Art of Enigma* is that both the de Chiricos' works are characterised by qualities of multiplicity, ambiguity and mixedness. As Jewell maintains, these qualities can be interpreted as an attack on idealist concepts of unity and purity. This leads her to discuss the brothers' work as expressions of a 'postmetaphysical' outlook. At first this seems an odd choice for two artists who together developed the concept of 'Metaphysical' art. Nevertheless, it is an astute observation, in that it captures the Nietzschean element in both their work, their critique of essentialist ideas of what is natural, heroic or divine, and their positing of such ideas as



imaginative social constructions.² This perspective enables Jewell to demonstrate that impurity is central to the brothers' practice, whether in Savinio's bizarre bird-human hybrids or hermaphrodites; the blending of past and present in de Chirico's juxtapositions of classic sculpture and modern utensils, or the uncanny indeterminacy of the latter's paintings depicting piled-up gladiators. At the same time, Jewell demonstrates that such aesthetic hybridity cannot be necessarily associated with transgressive art or even progressive politics, further complicating the story. Although the brothers' hostility to unity and purity can be interpreted as an aversion to fascist politics, the de Chiricos were not simply interested in destroying values; they had strong ideas of the Italian nation which they promoted in their work. This is a strength of Jewell's account, in that she moves beyond the cliché that literary and artistic experimentation has a politically subversive intent or outcome, and examines the particular complexities of each individual's aesthetic and political position within its historical and social context, concentrating on the period framed by the advent of two world wars and the rise of fascism. As Jewell demonstrates, the peculiar strangeness and alienation at the heart of the Metaphysical project took the de Chirico brothers into terrain that was amenable to the ideologies of cultural legitimation and anti-Semitism favoured by European fascism.

With the exception of the introduction and the afterword where Giorgio and Alberto are discussed in tandem, Jewell analyses the different kinds of multiplicity and mixedness in the brothers' work separately, dealing with Giorgio de Chirico in chapters one to four, and Alberto Savinio in chapters five to seven. In the first chapter, titled 'De Chirico's Cultural Topographies,' Jewell defines the Metaphysical project, carefully distancing it from ideas of occult or superstition. As de Chirico pointed out, the Metaphysical was not some airy space beyond the earth but rather the human capacity to imagine and construct the existing world. This capacity was exemplified for de Chirico by acts of transformation brought about by particular framings, such as the multiple picture frames which cascade through the space of several of his early canvases. Among the objects framed in this way in de Chirico's work, alongside bananas, windows, curtains, T-squares and horses, are maps of terrain. Maps, like works of art, demonstrate the human ability to make sense of the world through representation. However, as Jewell points out, these maps, just like the Metaphysical pictures more broadly, are not just of any place, but of Italy.³ In other words, a specific cultural and geographic locality is at stake in these paintings. The Italian piazza is a privileged site for artistic creation due to the abundance of cultural wealth it contains, such as architecture from different eras of history, layered one upon the other, creating the possibility of a 'polymorphic' art, freed from limited or constrained viewpoints.⁴ Similarly, for de Chirico, Italy is a multiple place: as a peninsula it is both part of a larger cultural whole, yet separate from it.⁵ Jewell demonstrates that in poems and paintings de Chirico conceived of the terrain of Italy and Europe as at once the ground of identity and collectivity, while also being the strange, mysterious world of



the Metaphysical pictures, a place seen as if for the first time by foreigners.⁶ Jewell's point is more convincing when applied to the literature than to the paintings, her analysis of which, in this chapter, remains inconclusive. However, the broader argument, that de Chirico retains the idea of Italy and Europe as privileged places to the extent that they are inherently estranged, is convincing. In this way, Jewell shows that ideas of multiplicity and relativity are commensurate with ideas of national belonging in de Chirico's work.

Subsequent chapters pursue this argument further in de Chirico's writing and painting. The 1929 novel *Ebdòmero* begins in a German consulate in Melbourne, and shifts through a series of ill-defined places, which all, nevertheless, conform to an imagined concept of Italian landscape. The novel thereby defines a place of multiplicity which is, nevertheless, distinctly Italian.⁷ The text also contains a new concept of warfare, one of the most powerful mythic narratives in the history of western civilization. Jewell points out that de Chirico, because of his postmetaphysical outlook, avoids the conventional ideal of the masculine warrior and the representation of agonistic contest so dear to the propaganda machines of the totalitarian state. He prefers an image of battle without victory or defeat, without victors and vanquished, avoiding the idealizing hierarchies that are normally attached to such narratives. In place of the rigid, over-inflated warrior type which populated official visual culture in Italy in the years of Mussolini's reign, de Chirico's novel *Ebdòmero* is populated by men who rarely fight but are engaged in constant waiting and strategizing over future battles. Similarly, in his extraordinary paintings of gladiators from the late 1920s, the warring figures are flaccid, immobile, sedentary and piled-up in heaps like stacks of objects. Here Jewell's themes of multiplicity and polymorphism re-emerge. Instead of ideal warriors, strictly bound by rigid contours as in the neo-classical ideal perpetuated by Antonio Canova and Jacques-Louis David, de Chirico's warriors intermingle, blend and collapse into each other. Jewell reads this multiplicity as the basis of a different, postmetaphysical warrior, who through 'potent indetermination linked to a bountiful, diverse accumulation' possesses a new kind of heroism, a particularly Italian one, because of its affinity with a nation whose multiple cultural histories and trajectories have been piled up over centuries of diverse civilization. She reads these pictures and the related writings as 'postmodern texts' which 'might also be seen to build identities,'⁸ concluding that the hybridity and mixedness of these images and texts are forms of cultural legitimation, a source of strength rather than national debilitation.

The second half of the book is devoted to Alberto Savinio, the younger of the two brothers. In Savinio's work, Jewell finds themes of multipleness, hybridity and mixedness similar to those encountered in Giorgio's work. The dancer Isadora Duncan is the subject of one of Savinio's texts in *Narrate, uomini, la vostra storia* (1942). Duncan is presented as a grotesque, hybrid figure who runs counter to rigid gender myths. Savinio perceived the American dancer, who was famous for



her unconventional dance movements and scantily-clad, barefoot performances, as a model of an emancipated woman who is virilised, and who embodies the ideal of a mixed man/woman hybrid.⁹ She is also associated with the avian kingdom, being half-human, half bird. In this sense she embodies the concept of multiplicity and its association with the postmetaphysical. However, as Jewell points out, for Savinio she is also a representation of how the idea of multiplicity can degenerate into unity. Intoxicated with the ecstatic response of her male audience, Savinio has Duncan fantasize about being impregnated by numerous men and giving birth to a new race of children in the role of a primal mother. By attributing enormous power to herself in this way as a woman, Duncan falls into a trap of unity and singularity. Savinio's allegory punishes her for this hubris, putting the blame squarely in her lap. As Jewell observes, what appears at first to be a liberating, pro-feminist celebration of multiplicity is an oppressive thwarting of social difference and empowerment. Savinio's dream of a collective, multiple world ultimately swallows up alterity and eliminates it.¹⁰

Chapter six examines the 1944 novel *La nostra anima*, a reconfigured version of the Eros and Psyche myth. In Savinio's text, Psyche, after she is united with her lover, the god Eros, is shocked to find that he is nothing like a human in form, being a limbless phallus with wings. She subsequently falls out of love with him and breaks off the union. Psyche in this story is also a monstrous, abject creature, a woman's body with a pelican's beak, huddled in a pool of slime and excrement, preserved in a waxworks exhibit curated by a Jewish doctor named Sayas. Jewell observes that the story critiques ideas of unity, from the social mores surrounding the rituals of love and marriage, to the narrative of union that underpins the 'ontotheocratic' myth of oneness exploited by fascist dictators in the twentieth century. Importantly, she also stresses that this critique of unity is not simply an empty play with ideas, an assertion of the pointless character of culturally constructed meaning, but an earnest attempt to find the ground of a new meaning and cultural identity in a modern world where such myths have run aground. At the same time, she also points out that Savinio tends to glorify the abjectness of Psyche, because of his negative reading of feminism as preserving what he saw as a culpably idealistic dualism. Dr Sayas, on the other hand, who is presented as embodying the overly-rational and inherently deceptive world of science, is characterized as typically 'Jewish,' an anti-Semitic aspect of the text that undermines its otherwise democratic tone. In this sense, the monstrous narrative of Savinio's writing has given birth to a textual monster born of racial intolerance.

In the final chapter Jewell deals with the most hybrid of Savinio's creations, the hermaphrodite, in his 1918 prose work *Hermaphrodito*. Again the figure of the Jew looms large, a protagonist of polymorphic identity and multiplicity. Once more, Savinio's focus on the 'other' and difference serves to compound the structuring binaries of essentialism. The hermaphrodite of the title is the



Jew, celebrated for various kinds of mixedness and multiplicity, including those of gender (both male and female), temporality (both modern and ancient), cultural diversity (the setting of the Balkans) and internationalism (living in Salonika but yearning for Zion). Furthermore, at a certain point in the text, Savinio creates the figure of a double-sexed Jew, who gestates children in intestinal passages and gives birth through the anus. The outrageous biology of this figure is intended as another celebration of hybridity. Savinio makes favourable comparisons to Italian identity, celebrating both the Jew and Italy for their hybridity, a counter-example to the oppressive unity of totalitarian thinking. But what of the politics of this story? Jewell reminds us of George Mosse's important work on the historical relationship between stable gender identity and the formation of nation states.¹¹ Savinio's multiple Jewish figure seems calculated to defeat that very notion. Like Jews, the de Chiricos would be savagely attacked in the extreme right-wing of the fascist press in Italy for their statelessness. But in its extreme abjectness, Savinio's counter-example falls into the trap of exacerbating difference in a way that fails to escape the dualism of metaphysical, essentialist thinking. As Jewell reminds us, the fascists regularly conceived of Jews as inherently contradictory figures.

Jewell has asked us to look again at the de Chiricos, not either Giorgio or Alberto in isolation, but to examine their work in tandem. Through her analysis we see the unitary identity of the traditional art historical or literary monograph collapsing. We discover that the brothers closely shared certain themes and that Alberto was the originator of many ideas taken up within Giorgio's Metaphysical art. After reading this book it is more difficult to classify each individual as exclusively a painter or an artist. Jewell has also provided a key to understanding the apparently repetitious nature of Giorgio de Chirico's late work. In *The Art of Enigma* repetition is read as an accumulation of themes over space and time which embodies the value of hybridity and mixedness. Perhaps one of the most startling revelations is the re-reading of Alberto Savinio. He is assessed as an embodiment of the mixed destiny of the avant-garde project, hostile to idealism but falling repeatedly into its trap, hopeful for a polymorphic cultural future but insufficiently removed from the intolerance which underlay the fascist project. At the same time, Jewell has opened a window onto the motives behind each artist's radical experimentation, their desire to create a new, postmetaphysical terrain upon which the monstrous gods of modernity could reign.

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¹ Yve-Alain Bois, *Matisse and Picasso*, Paris 1999, and Elizabeth Cowling, John Golding et al., *Matisse Picasso*, London 2002.

² Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 30.

³ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 43.

⁴ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 51.

⁵ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 52.

⁶ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 57.

⁷ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 78.

⁸ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 107.

⁹ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 121.

¹⁰ Jewell, *The Art of Enigma*, 139.

¹¹ Mosse, *The Image of Man: The Creation of Modern Masculinity*, Oxford 1996.

