

AFTERGLOW

LUCAS REINER 2009

By Rosanna Albertini

What we call spiritual and intellectual being finds itself continuously in a process of expansion and contraction. Art, in it, has the task of reforming and renewing the image of the world and of our behavior in it.

Robert Musil, *Toward a New Aesthetic*
1918-1933

Nothing shines on the surface; opacity is friendly, and absorbent. The thin layers of colors spread on the canvas seem to struggle to stabilize one over the other like leaves after the rain, as if negotiating the speed of their passage. During the last three years Lucas Reiner's paintings have been filled with the afterglow of fireworks, and "the sadness coming up after the explosion has died out" – his words. The trees he has painted for ten years still haunt his mind: they are living, aerial bodies with branches and foliage on a field of colors; forms appropriate to create a new matter. They definitely left the ground, or got rid of it. Please see the mind of the painter there, not the leaves touched by the wind.

The artist brings to the act of painting, and mysteriously places on canvas, what remains of sensations coming from the repetitive and familiar feelings of every day. Painted, they mutate into disquiet visions of a space where images seem to come, move away, and perhaps disappear. Lucas Reiner could say, with Merleau-Ponti, "The world is not what I think, but what I live through. I am open to the world, I have no doubt that I am in communication with it, but I do not possess it; it is inexhaustible." The world as a fact assures him that the world exists, and the fact of painting assures him of his own existence.

Painted skies forced into the frame, contained between angles, lose their lack of edges, and bring about a feeling of infinity, for they get away from birds or

flying objects, except the luminous eyes left open by the fireworks. Maybe for a little while they are twinkling imitations of stars. Each painting is a portion of a universe that has been disturbed by artificial explosions, and slowly goes back to its previous flows of air and condensed vapors, to its own language: a layer of whites veils the luminous event; a blooming of figures seems to multiply forever. Each new vision escapes the formula of the previous configuration, keeping us linked to the idea of a sky redesigned by human power. At the same time, every painting leads to a different psychological space. We could call it a morphologic individual, if words weren't once more a dangerous distraction. If you take the words away, our certainty goes away with them, and the soul is free to join the pictured, new world, and dance in it.

Lucas Reiner grabs the feelings appearing before him as external reflections of inner motions. At times they are funny: "A weeping willow can make me laugh if I am in a good mood." Other times he feels butchered like a tree trunk. Does he share the same destiny of the trees he sees mutilated around him in Los Angeles, or shaped in ridiculous forms of cylinders and cubes? Living bodies of trees are hit and cut by gardeners just as the human bodies caught like fish in the benevolent net of our society, a world infected with the belief that appropriation is a natural instinct, and manipulation a duty. Nothing that an artist would have the power to change. But this artist does not do art for the art's sake. The simple fact that he feels threatened by contemporary life gives him the strength of reacting. Paintings are his battlefield, perhaps trees are the way he disguises himself, becoming a different character at each tree, like Fernando Pessoa in his books. The blood is hidden, or transpires through atmospheric surfaces.

Trees, once painted, have definitely lost their floor. Their images merge into a visual language where brush strokes speak to other brush strokes. The artist follows their dialogue with no intrusion. Although he wonders, asks for meaning, in the end the painting will tell, with no words.

I do not want to strangle such a free proliferation of emotional fields by seizing them by the collar of realism, abstraction, surrealism, phenomenological positivism (which in this case I like), post modernism, impressionism. So, what's Lucas Reiner's artwork in 2009 Los Angeles? Genetically, his imaginary skies are a derivative of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire: Lucas' ancestors came from Germany, Romania, and Poland. One of his grandfathers was German speaking. But historically, they are American.

On March 19th, toward the end of the morning, Venice beach was submerged in fog, gray and flat clouds hovering overhead. Walking in an alley parallel to Venice beach between swollen, crumbling white walls, Lucas Reiner was in his favorite atmosphere. The very private aura he constantly wears was slightly softened, his voice surfing his mind: "You look at something so long, like Giorgio Morandi did, and you become so familiar with that object, it could be a cup, a bottle, or a tree, that you go to the point of forgetting what it is. One becomes naïve again, and poetic."

"There is no way to control the process. Since I can name it, can I control it? Painting is so much about surrender. I distrust the ego. I like the daily discipline, alone in the studio, trying to see who I am that day."

" Jack Goldstein, an LA painter, made a comment about the sky becoming in the 20th century what the land had been in the 19th century. In my *Afterglow* paintings there is only sky: sky in the afterglow of my relationship to my mother and her death, to freeze some kind of light. In some of them there is an attempt at holding on to the light, maybe to hold on to her. Light is the subject, but what kind? Light has no form, it usually affects objects. Robert Irwin made it the center of his work. I wanted to struggle more. Robert Irwin resolved his effort. Maybe I am failing; but to me, failure in painting is as interesting as success. It is a mad goal to try to paint something that does not exist, the passing space between life and death. The ineffable. Remember Beckett? If you are not failing, you are not trying hard enough. But the fireworks were real, I am reporting them, I want them real, as real as the material world. A void." Time to fill the void; we eat an abundant Middle Eastern lunch.

Lucas Reiner seems attracted by a sort of ethic respect for things that are objective and impersonal, along with a search for feelings to pierce directly the thickness of reality, with no distortions. Moral imperatives in human fragility dwell in his mind, turning on his imaginative pulse, where no one could separate emotions from intelligence. We find the same, awkward predicament, in Robert Musil: “A person is not only intellect, but also will, feeling, lack of awareness, and often mere actuality, like the drifting of clouds in the sky.”

Reiner the painter brought some photographic and video images of fireworks to his Los Angeles studio on Washington Boulevard, from the night of Redentore, in Venice, Italy. He collected other images of fireworks from Angelino festivities. But strangely, my brain sees *Redentore* 2009 as 60 x 69 ½ inches of phantom-water lilies floating over the lagoon. I know Reiner likes Cézanne better than Monet, and yet, my impression is stubborn. Impressionist’s paintings were collected in Philadelphia where they still shine on the walls of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, wonderful rivals of Parisian collections. But Lucas Reiner grew up in Los Angeles among the most renowned actors and singers in his house. Working at Larry Edmunds bookshop in Hollywood wearing a fake name when he was eighteen, he used to write to the customers descriptions of production stills from old movies. “Yes, we have Lana Turner leaning on a fence, and a Tarzan with a monkey.” In the 80’s he played in punk-rock bands. Ed Ruscha and John Baldessari were certainly in his environment more than Impressionists.

I feel like Gertrude Stein when she mistook a still life by Picasso for a portrait of her. As a matter of fact, *Redentore* is not an abstract painting. Let’s change vocabulary. (I borrow Ludwig Wittgenstein sentences, where I replace ‘proposition’ with ‘painting’.)

3.15 A painting ... does not actually contain its sense, but does contain the possibility of expressing it. ...

A painting contains the form, but not the content, of its sense.

3.142 Only facts can express a sense, a set of brush strokes cannot.

3.144 Situations can be described but not given names.

Therefore the mistake was to name the water lilies. What starts the form of the painting is an attempt at freezing the visual surprise of the afterglow, and making it durable even when time has definitely expired. (Not its sense, only the possibility of expressing it.) The limited time in which hits of lights still pinch the brain after the sparkles are burned out, rolls into the painting. (The form, not the content of its sense.) There, the painter renews the inner image of that sky and his own behavior in it. (Only facts can express a sense.)

A coalescence of debris, patches of smoke, cling to the air only as long as they resist the light, which is going to dissolve them. To perceive and give back pictorially a sense of emptiness is not an ontological procedure, only a sequence of pauses. The painting unfolds at a slow pace for both the artist and the viewer. In front of the finished work they undergo the same experience, forced to surrender to their own physical perception. The experience will never be repeated in the same way. On May 5th, at about noon, after staring at *Redentore* for a long while, atmospheric contractions and expansions started to appear in the painting, changing the initial illusion of quiet on the gray and green surface. New densities seemed to surface from inside the painting, and a diffused, pink afterglow claimed attention more than the floating clouds. The painting blushed.

Many reasons might cause a painting to exist. Aesthetic goals or ideological frames have in the past and still now inject a special aura around the art works. But *Afterglow* – the body of paintings unified under this name -- does not know anything. It points at a spiritual journey, and looks for a visual search of a world that has nothing to do with “the way the earth is and looks.” (Gertrude Stein) What words can say has also little to do with paintings, unless they make a world on their own. This is what Lucas Reiner’s paintings do, a dream-like expansion of space, intense and unique in the large panorama of contemporary paintings, challenging our perception of ungraspable things, filling our eyes with enticing attraction. Please don’t ask me to write they are “beautiful.” They are, although it is not the point. I lose track of myself in those paintings.

Emmanuel Levinas (philosopher) would say that Lucas Reiner paints his existence at work, his consciousness escaping into the fullness of reality, the only place where his identity can be put to sleep, and vanish. Stories must vanish to make space for beginnings.

That's why Giorgio Morandi, Philip Guston, Gerhard Richter, Piero della Francesca, the artists Lucas Reiner loves, sit in the back of his mind, pulling neurons. It is likely they hide, undercover, in some areas of Reiner's atmospheric fields. Richter because he, like Reiner, is convinced that making art one binds to the unknowable and shows the infinite variety of meanings and views. Guston because he was so brave that he could transform in paintings the idea that nothing is funnier than unhappiness. Morandi, the gentle hermit enchanted by forms, and Piero, the Francesca's son, who could feel the secret center of gravity in each figure, and give them the same gaze of detachment.

The very first canvases of Reiner's skies were woven by his memory of real places altered through emotions since the first visual encounter. And they are definitely his own America, the fantasy America that Andy Warhol revealed so well: "The fantasy corners of America seem so atmospheric because you've pieced them together from scenes in movies and music and lines from books. And you live in your dream America that you've custom made from art and schmaltz and emotions just as much as you live in your real one."

As contemporary icons, these paintings celebrate the silent space in the air before actions disclose, at the beginning of the day, and all the untold feelings that fly in it, then quickly dispersed.

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Catalogue, Galleria Gianferrari, Milano 2010 for an exhibition that never happened because Claudia Gianferrari passed away.