

PENDULUM PENDULA - COLLABORATIVE SYNTHESIS

Examples of creative collaboration, of the kind in which two or more people work together to create a single work, are neither new nor are they rare, at least as far as certain creative practices are concerned. The tradition of the movie, for example, is grounded in the creative orchestrated direction of the script or book on which the film may be based; with the actors engaged to portray the characters, lighting specialists, musicians, composers, cinematographers, special effects experts, to name just a few of those who inevitably contribute their craft and their creative imagination to what in the end becomes a single creative synthesis. Likewise the live performing arts of drama, music, and dance involve a similar range of creative practitioners working in collaboration with each other.

Outside of the dramatic and performing arts the production of the written word as an art has, on the other hand, a rather different history; poetry and the novel are steeped in the expression of the individual voice, whose authors work in creative isolation. As for painting, its history is marked by a diversity of processes. However, for much of the history of western art since the Renaissance, the predominating paradigm of painting has appeared to be one representing the singular creative individual, whose personal vision of the world and individual expression has defined the nature of painting's activity for the last several hundred years. But while as a generalization this characteristic holds to be generally true of that history, often behind the scenes the process of actually creating the work reveals a rather different reality.

The painters of the Italian Renaissance, whose frescos adorn the walls of the churches, monasteries and secular buildings of the time, employed a number of different people with a whole range of different skills to bring the work into being. Certainly the final work often bears the unmistakable imprint of "the master" in the same way that the great film directors impose their defining presence on the films they have directed. Yet, behind the imprint lies the engagement of numbers of craftsmen and other artists, whose contributions and work are as much part of the end result as the defining stamp of the person directing the creative process. Modern scholarship, for example, acknowledges that in some instances it is not always possible to determine in Michelangelo's work in the Sistine Chapel, whether some of the drawing is the work of Michelangelo or his assistants'. Indeed it is commonly understood that in the art of fresco painting, aspects of the process, the under drawing, and the under painting, for instance, were very often "delegated" to artists assisting the master. And in the case of large active studios of the 17th century, it is widely known that studio artists working for Rubens, to name one artist of the time, were often responsible for significant amounts of the finished work, albeit that they were working under his guidance and direction. But these examples of creative work engaging the skills of a range of individuals are ones determined as much by practical necessity as anything else: it simply was not possible to either undertake some projects literally single-handedly; and in others, such as in the case of Rubens, the sheer demand for his work required a rate of production far in excess of what he could provide working entirely on his own.

But historical examples of collaborative creative production have not always been influenced exclusively by the imperatives of practical necessity. The sociology of historical epochs and cultures has often been a major determinant of the extent, or in some cases lack of association of a work with a particular artist. In large measure this was because the sociology of such societies, or the specific context in which the work was created, did not privilege the notion of the supremacy of creative individualism, which has been so much the hall-mark of western visual culture for the last several hundred years. The medieval cathedrals of Europe are adorned with vast numbers of carvings and sculptures created by a wide assortment of various sculptors, stone masons and craftsmen. And although on occasions the ravages of religious despotism and time itself have obliterated the evidence of the contribution of colour, decoration and the craft of the painter from these buildings; nevertheless, over the time in which these great buildings were created, artists and craftsmen of every skill worked toward a common goal within the framework of the building itself, creating great works of aesthetic synthesis. Such is also true in the cultures of Islam, and in the Mayan, Aztec and Inca cultures of the Americas, where great temples were created through the work of hundreds of different artists and craftsmen. Yet in these cases as well as those of medieval Europe, the individual identities and creative contribution to the end result of the individual artists involved, except in the most rare of cases, we cannot identify and are unknown to us. It is not hard to see why; nor is it necessary to lament the lack of individual creative identity. In these cases artists created to creeds or widespread beliefs held in common by the societies and cultures in which they lived, or, at the very least, by significant sections of those societies; a fact which necessarily did not require and therefore submerged any tendency to "personalize" the "voice" of any one particular artist. What the whole work was created to reflect or symbolize was more important than the expression of the mere individual creative persona of the artist.

In our own modern 20th/21st century societies the idea of a work of visual art being imbued with the personal voice, imposing on it at its final aesthetic completion the distinctive imprint of the artist who created it, is so ingrained in our expectations that it is in some ways almost shocking, when one is confronted with its very opposite in contemporary visual art practice. Certainly there are past examples, as well as current ones, where visual artists in our own societies have collaborated to produce single works. The art of the public mural over the last 35 years, for example, a movement that grew up in the social activist era of the civil rights movement and the aftermath of the Vietnam war in the large cities of the United States, and which also spread to major cities in Europe, Latin America and Australia, is a case in point. In these both the narrative concept as well as the visual conceptual development of the work engaged sometimes many people - artists, community activists, minorities - in a collaborative creative endeavour. The single voice of an individual artist being replaced by a collective voice. Similarly, other art practices, such as performance art and installation, often develop art works, both for practical as well as aesthetic, ideological and social reasons, that are not dependant on and may even eschew the very idea of privileging any single artist's personal expression.

In the tradition of the easel painting however, that quintessential vehicle in the history of western art of personal expression and the voice of the individual artist, examples of collaborative engagement by two or more artists working together as equals in the creation of a single painting or group of paintings, while maybe not unheard of, is of such rarity that when one is confronted by an example of it one cannot but take notice.

It is for this reason alone that the series of works entitled **Pendulum Pendula** by Alexandra Haeseker and John Hall demand critical attention. The **Pendulum Pendula** paintings, twelve in all, were painted between 1992 and 1998, and are in every sense a collaborative production - at the intellectual level in that the creative collaboration is in part underpinned by a preceding dialogue carried out between the two artists through letters written to each other; as well as at the source content, conceptual and process levels. Almost uniquely, each artist contributed equally to the painting of the work in that both shared the task and challenges of the actual process of the painting of each canvas. Strangely for an enterprise of the creative imagination, their approach to process is at first glance a combination of being both dryly contractual while at the same time being engagingly inquisitive of each other's thoughts. In a letter to John Hall written in April 1994 Alexandra Haeseker wrote: **"Dear John. Here is my plan for four of our next collaborative paintings. The old rules still apply – that we both work on each canvas, each of us being responsible for painting 50% of the surface.**

**...this time I would like to introduce wrapped portrait heads (yours and mine)
...Two of the paintings would include you, the other two me.**

...The works should be on canvas, I think, at least 30" x 40" or larger. We would have to set up some photo shoots to get the resource photographs. I would need to alter and disguise you. You can do the same for the ones of me.

No doubt the compositions will be filled with *las otras cosas* (other things). We have the choice of setting up the whole scene and putting ourselves into the real tableau. Or we will have to interact with a mystery setting of your choice. Qué piensas tú? (What do you think?)"

But beyond this initial written declaration on the process to be used, the practical challenge of bringing each canvas to synthesis involved, as indeed it would have to with any similar creative endeavour of this nature; a simultaneous degree of creative compromise, intellectual commonality, a common handling or technique in the use of the medium, and a commonality in their aesthetic dispositions towards the pictorial deployment of form and content within the area of the canvas.

At the beginning, however, it is their response to the challenge of content, be it of subject or expression, that determines from where these paintings started. Painters deal with and develop subject content in a diversity of ways. Some approach it with all the preconceived plans of a campaign, where the issue is not the struggle of what subject to paint, but rather what to say about it or even how to describe it. On the other

hand, subject content is often generated or developed both conceptually and descriptively through the auto-suggestions that so often occur when gestures, marks, colour etc reveal themselves in that half-conscious state that many artists experience during the process of creating a work.

In the case of Haeseker and Hall, the setting up of the photo shoot, whereby material is assembled and collected by each artist and then set out in a 'tableau' to be photographed, provides the venue in which the pictorial engagement with what to paint is first played out, and the character of the eventual pictorial outcome first indicated. Objects and images are juxtaposed, montaged over one another. Some are chosen not for what they might imply or mean but for their visual characteristics, their colour, texture, and materiality. But just as equally others appear resonant with meaning or symbol, underlined sometimes by their colour or patterning. But whatever the variety of what the two painters assembled in this initial part of the process, their choices do not and did not exist in an experiential or cultural vacuum; for what they assembled reveals a critical commonality of experience that both painters share, namely that of Mexico.

During the years of collaboration both artists spent half each year engaged in painting and teaching in Canada, the other half living and working in Mexico, at San Miguel de Allende in the State of Guanajuato. The latter is a critical, but by no means an exclusive element of the subject content of their jointly created paintings. Nevertheless, Mexico has provided them with a commonality of intellectual and aesthetic experiences from which the influence of the rich texture of its culture is often revealed in their use of hot redolent colour and imagery. Some of their images are drawn from the diverse and intricate intertwining patterns of the country's ancient Pre-Columbian cultures and their fusion with Hispanic European Catholic colonialism; others reflect the country's legendary rich tapestry of popular cultural imagery, that in large measure is often a tragic comic response to the historical experiences of that forced fusion. Perhaps most interesting is the way in which both artists, in the individual choices that they made as to what objects or images they included, conjoin the distinction between imagery that is drawn from a well of personal and private vocabularies of experience, which may not relate to Mexico, and imagery that clearly does relate. In the painting *Pendulum 1* (1992), the archaeological sculpture figure of Tlazolteótl, Aztec goddess of "lust and debauchery" (or goddess of birth as she is sometimes also referred to) is depicted in the foreground. This is a reference to one of the most famous figures in Mexico's Pre-Columbian culture, and echoes in part the Mexican muralist Diego Rivera's rendition of her, in his 1955 mural on the history of medicine in Mexico, painted at the Hospital de la Raza. There, Rivera depicted the Aztec goddess seated on a swing, which in his mural is also pictured suspended from the branch of a tree, which he had fashioned into the image of an erect phallus. In Haeseker and Hall's painting the head of a snarling dog appears right next to Tlazolteótl, a disturbing conjunction of the surreality of the unexpected with the illogical; the only thing that seems to link them is the hysteric aggression in the eyes and bared fangs of the dog, and Tlazolteótl's grimacing expression of birthing pain. Above this fearsome grimacing dualism of aggression and pain are a series of figurines and objects – a candy cane, a tomato, a small cheap plastic ostrich toy, another small plastic blue figurine, a dog's chew bone; each, like the

swing on which Tlazolteótl is seated, dangling from pieces of string or rope suspended from outside of the canvas. The effect of their unlikely presence and insistingly naïve, child-like and innocuous character, plus the unexpected arrangements, provide a further surreal disjuncture with the canine and sculptural figures just below them.

Other canvases in the series also carry predominating references to the imagery of Mexican culture. In ***Demonia y Muneca (Demon and Doll)***, painted in 1997, a large Calavera (skull) mask is featured in the centre of the painting being held up by a female figure to cover her face. The image is grotesquely humorous, macabre, befitting its association with the popular festival of **Día de Muertos** (Day of the Dead). Originally considered an Aztec ritual, the festival of **Día de Muertos** merged long ago with Catholic theology. Celebrated at the beginning of November it is a time when families honour their dead relatives. People dress up as death, wear skull masks, eat sugar skulls, and create witty installations to Death in the town squares. This mockery of death harks back to early Meso-American beliefs which considered death a continuation of life, not to be feared but to be embraced. Its reinvention in the popular culture of Mexico's more recent past has often served as a mask or pretext for biting political satire and humour, epitomized in the satirical engravings of Mexico's great print artist of the 19th and early 20th century, José Guadalupe Posada. And as if to reinforce further the connection between the image of the skull as symbol of death and the skull as a witty light-hearted image of popular satire and humour, the artists have depicted above the Calavera mask plastic figurines and trinkets, whose origins reside in the texture of cheap North American comic book, movie and Barbie doll culture, and which can be found and bought from the stalls of any market in Mexico, or are sold on the streets.

The use of the image of the mask as either a disguise, or as a recurring metaphor has deep roots in the popular and ancient rituals and celebratory customs of Mexican culture. Haeseker and Hall draw on this in their series of collaborative paintings. In ***Boca de Lobo (Pitch Black)*** an animal mask is depicted held up by a female figure, which is evidently a portrait of Haeseker. The mask image, here depicted as a dog, nevertheless reminds one of the celebratory dance rituals of the Aztecs, such as the Deer Dance, in which the dancers would don head masks of slain deer, or the custom of Aztec warriors engaging in combat wearing animal masks and costumes. In whatever guise, the use of the animal mask underlines the strong association that the prehispanic world had with the natural world, which in turn provided the basis for their beliefs, rituals, and mythologies.

The exploration of the idea of the mask is, to a greater or lesser extent, evident in most of the works of this series. In ***A Través de la Tierra Yerma (Across Waste Ground)***, as well as in ***Caos Heroico (Heroic Chaos)*** and ***Historieta Muda (Comic Strip)***, Haeseker and Hall utilize not the prehispanic ritual masks of the animal kingdom employed in ***Boca de Lobo***, but instead a modern popular Mexican cultural icon, namely the mask worn continuously as a kind of trade mark by the legendary Mexican wrestler El Santo. El Santo was never seen without his mask, which allowed him to keep his true identity and his face a mystery, creating a mystique that increased his popularity with wrestling fans across Mexico. True to his legend, when El Santo died he was buried with his mask on. The mask as an obscurer of identity, as opposed to the idea of the mask portraying an entirely different identity, is revealed in the Pendulum images' use of the El Santo mask; for the face inside the mask is not a male but a female one, thus contradicting the link with the quintessential icon of Mexican

popular machismo, with which this mask is traditionally associated. Accompanying the masked figure of the female in these paintings, which one could reasonably assume to be the figure of Alexandra Haeseker herself, are a number of other passages in which, far less obviously, one can see the partially covered face of a man. Again, not unreasonably, one could assume these to be portraits of John Hall, and again these partially covered faces serve to obscure an identity rather than reveal a completely different one.

Throughout all of the paintings in the **Pendulum Pendula** series the feeling of saturation is almost overwhelming. Seldom, if at all, is colour deployed at the low-key end of the spectrum. It is hot, high voltage, almost unremitting, its luxuriant hues splendidly mimicking the Tropicana of the flora, fauna, the trinkets and figurines of the market stall, which populate areas of these works. The reflective materials which the artists have chosen and which also frequent significant portions of the canvases, seem on occasions to remind one of the crescendo of reflective colour and the golden decoration one experiences on walking into a Mexican church, such as that of Santo Domingo in Oaxaca. Likewise anyone who has visited a Zapotec market will immediately recognize a parallel in the colour employed in Haeseker and Hall's paintings. It is a parallel with the orchestra of colour that confronts one in the plethora of weavings, the brightly coloured fruit and vegetable stalls, the baskets of endless varieties of chiles, whose rich colouration is equalled only by their pungent aromas that attack the back of the throat, and the trays and tables of brightly coloured trinkets and cheap jewellery that abound in the crowded assembly of **El Tianguis** (Market).

But whatever the impact of these paintings, one cannot escape from the extraordinary feat, which the two artists, each contributing approximately fifty percent to both the conceptual development as well as the actual painting of the surface of each work, have achieved. Every painter knows the extraordinary challenge and difficulty in bringing a work to a creative synthesis. The development of the concept, the translation of the concept into a compositional framework, the deployment of colour, the descriptions of form, the endless manipulations of the medium, the shiftings, additions and deletions of form and content that take place during the creative process are often seemingly an endless and overwhelming struggle. The incessant question "*does it work?*" is sometimes never answered in the affirmative, but when it is, a creative achievement has been arrived at. Achieving this on ones own is hard enough, but doing so in equal collaboration with another artist, whose aesthetic and intellectual sensibility is not ones own, is a different matter altogether. And successfully doing so in the context of the painter's canvas, which is inextricably identified by tradition and by culture with the singular artist giving expression to his or her personal voice, is a rare and engaging event. And to do so over the course of a series of twelve paintings is remarkable.

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