

Natural History was reborn under an Italian microscope, but only with the great specimen collections of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries did it begin to take on the contours of a science. In those trays and vitrines, the world was gathered into regimental order as if on a parade ground for the empire of the eye; in those cabinets, curiosities were purged of their semantic associations with religion, with anecdote and with myth; sign and symbol were exchanged for an overarching mathesis.

How strange, then, that these spaces dedicated to a highly focused vision should have shared an historical stage with the distractions of the Baroque. Strange, too, that the art and architecture of this period, which were to provide a playground for the empirically driven eye, would do so largely under the guise of promotional material for a

church reeling from the 'heretical' challenges of Copernicus & Co. Science and religion have been on poor speaking terms ever since, and, while it would be too much to ask that Angelo Filomeno's art bring the two together amicably, the artist, who has made a name for himself by mapping the craft of embroidery onto the space of painting, has recently turned his skills toward mediating the forms of the Baroque and the matters of early modern science. An endeavour apparently governed, with a nod to Newton, by the laws of alchemy as much as gravity.

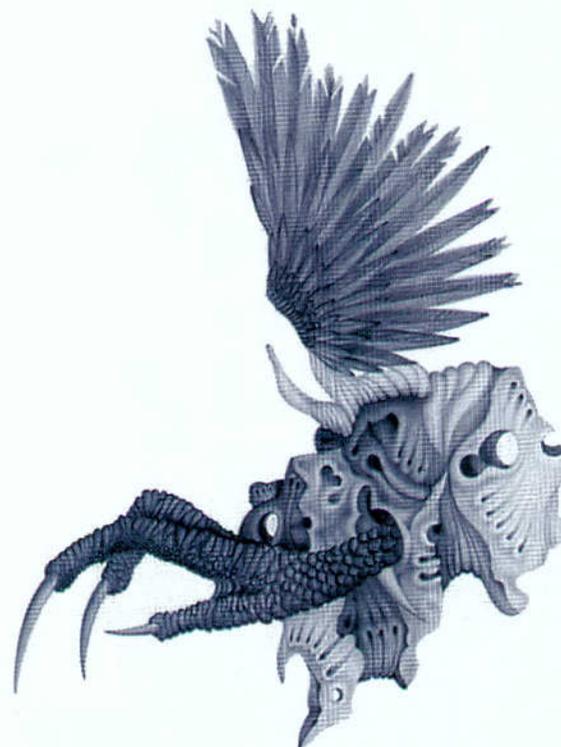
In the spirit of Audubon's birds or the Blaschkas' glass flowers, Filomeno's recent series, *Shitting Baroque* (2005), exhibits an extraordinary artistry in its representations of nature. Each shantung silk panel bears the embroidered image of one exemplary instance of the order Lepidoptera – the

butterflies and moths which captured the European imagination when ever more exotic specimens were brought to the Continent from the New World. *Diaethria Astala Asteria* (2005) reproduces a butterfly better known as the Mexican Eighty-eight, identifiable by the velvet-blue panels and distinctive white ovals of its wings. *Papilio Palamedes* (2005) shows the Central American Palamedes Swallowtail's delicate double-line of yellow blazes. And though the accuracy appears unquestionable, its purpose is somewhat belied by the fact that both specimens seem to be 'shitting' crystals. Strings of stones hang from the bugs' hind ends as if to show that, like the silk in which the artist works, nature's by-products are the only true instances of transubstantiation. Here, everything points to lower precincts. Underneath each specimen, in the black of each panel's



Emerging Artists | Epistemic Threads

Angelo Filomeno's unnatural history
by Jonathan T. D. Neil



ground, we find texture as opposed to image; a zone of limited accessibility to the eye where a pattern of elaborate and largely bisymmetrical organic motifs emerges as if from the fabric itself.

If the profusion of incident and detail in the lower design is meant to counter the eidetic clarity of the specimen pinned above, then it is in this opposition that Filomeno's medium begins to make sense. Though certainly drawing upon a craft tradition resuscitated over the years to various politico-aesthetic ends (one thinks here of Alighiero Boetti or Tracey Emin), Filomeno's practice is at once less calculated and more at home with its subject matter. For we must recognize that such a practice provides for the construction of a continuous surface, one that is marked by being folded upon itself in the production of patterned

integrities, those stitches and knots that are not *on* but *of* the work's silk matrix. In this, Filomeno's embroidered shantung becomes the formal analogue of its content, for Natural History and the Baroque are both similarly constituted by continuous surfaces: the former flat, a tabular space of comparative identities and differences; the latter folded, a calculus of organic details and ideal forms.

This is not to say that all of Filomeno's embroideries carry such continuity. The medium itself can act as a crutch, as when it facilitates the somewhat routine symbolism found in the artist's earlier works. There the high/low axis of the *Baroque* series is figured by the image of a spine, often with an animal – e.g. a rooster in *Venom* (2003); a lizard in *Hyena* (2003) – appropriately positioned at the bottom end, as if to reassure which way is

down. In these works, Filomeno's masterful draughtsmanship, readily evident in *The Accident Drawings* (2004) and a series of graphite-on-paper diptychs, *From My Terrace* (2003), is simply translated into thread. It is only with later series, such as *Excursioner Archangel* (2004), where symbols from earlier pieces – skulls, roosters, claws – begin to impinge upon the newly introduced insect specimens, that the fabric surface is raised to a higher power.

In the latest series, Filomeno's embroidered grounds mark the return of that semantic fabric that runs below Natural History's privileged objects. His art returns our attention to some of that History's earliest threads, ones far less 'Natural' in character, in so far as they threaten to unravel everything from its well-classified place.

Opposite page,
clockwise from top
Angelo Filomeno, 1998
PHOTO: MARIA BARLETTA

Incendiary Lovers,
2005, embroidery on silk
shantung stretched over
linen, 295 x 203 cm

The Accident Drawings
(wing), 2004, graphite on
paper, 43 x 36 cm

This page from left
Guilty, 2005, embroidery
on silk shantung stretched
over linen, 295 x 203 cm

Shitting Baroque
(*Papilio Palamedes*),
2005, embroidery on silk
shantung stretched over
linen with onyx, crystals
and diamonds in white
gold settings, 130 x 66 cm
ALL IMAGES COURTESY MARIANNE
BOESKY GALLERY, NEW YORK



A vertical bar on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of yellow and orange rectangular segments. A small red diamond is at the top left corner of the bar.

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