

Emerging Artists

VALERIO BERRUTI

Jonathan T.D. Neil
traces drawing in movement

BAROQUE. It is not the first thing that comes to mind when looking at Valerio Berruti's large-scale frescos on burlap, but bear with me. The doxa on the Baroque is that it is a style of surfaces, fundamentally scenic in character, and rich in its materials. If the Renaissance marked a return to Platonic order, the Baroque upended that order. If the former's insignias were the circle and the square, the latter's was the ellipse, and Berruti's work is nothing if not elliptical. This is not to suggest that his art is deliberately obscure, exactly the opposite in fact: it is meant as an appreciation of the work's extreme economy.

Now, the circle and the square are Vitruvian geometries for a Vitruvian body: adult, defined, outstretched and proportioned. The Berrutian body, on the other hand, is most often, and most recently, a child's. In the *Golgota* series (2005), that child's body – in this instance, a young girl's – describes an empty three-dimensional space through the delicate and double use of contour: first, that contour binds the child's body; it defines the figure and separates it from, or rather locates it within, a pictorial ground. Second, however, that contour escapes the figure; it reaches out to define the space of the image itself, to circumscribe its three-dimensional extension. This second contour defines from where one looks, and in so doing, it belongs to the viewer.

Perhaps it would be enough to say that Berruti lets his line do all the work, and to leave it at that. But we must remember that the Baroque image is fundamentally scenic. It is a theatre, and every theatre needs a screen. Berruti's screens, like his lines, are doubled. The first set of screens is constituted by the monochromatic rectangles and squares that often appear to anchor the figures in the scene. These screens – a more theatrical term would be 'backdrops', though sometimes they are not 'back' at

all – are secondary to the figures within each work's elliptical space, yet they assist in describing that space, in marking it off from the actuality of the canvas. The second set of screens is that actuality itself. For *Vocation* (2004), an installation of work at the Church of Sant'Agostino in Pietrasanta, Berruti suspended a series of frescos in midair so that, in the dim light of the choir, each work, individually lit, would appear as a diaphanous screen, their placement creating something of an alternative ambulatory for the devoted.

The figure on display in each scene was then a young boy and, walking past each canvas, the angle or 'shot', by which that figure was composed gradually shifted from high above to just in front. The boy turns in each scene as if looking for something, but the viewer's experience is fundamentally one of descent, an experience confirmed by the final fresco. That work, suspended above the door to the church, facing the altar, showed the boy in the pose of crucifixion, thereby completing not only the visual circuit – the final image is now seen from below – but also an allegorical narrative: the realization of religious calling in the search for self-sacrifice.

If *Vocation* projects moments in the assumption of a calling, one more attuned to the innocent world of the child than to the fallen one of the adult, then perhaps it is possible to read this work as a bit autobiographical. Art itself, Berruti has stated, is a vocation, 'like being a priest'. As servants of the church, priests are akin to religious conservationists; they maintain and care for the architecture of religious belief. Berruti, however, is no priest. Yet it makes sense that, like his father, he would become a conservator, a preservationist, of church architecture. Since 1995, Berruti has lived and worked in the Church of San Rocco in Verduno, a seventeenth-century edifice now refashioned into a literal *chiesa d'arte*. The





Portrait by
Max Tomasinelli

Valerio Berruti's studio
in Verduno, Italy
PHOTO: MAX TOMASINELLI



VALERIO BERRUTI

AT A GLANCE

Born 1977, Alba, Italy
Lives and works in Verduno, Italy

On art and religion

Art has always been used as a way to disseminate religion. Centuries ago, artists were believers who were able to render material their interpretations of faith. I decided to live and work in a church because I have always been fascinated by Catholicism – by the way it interweaves faith and popular beliefs. Essentially, I am agnostic, but I have my own understanding of what is 'sacred': I believe in the sacredness of memories and of the love I have for those closest to me.

On his use of fresco

The fresco technique, more than any other, requires precise timing: there's simply no room for mistakes. I enjoy the methodical repetition of the action – it allows me to get into an ideal state of mind and to elevate the act of painting into something sacred. Once I finish a fresco, it isn't really complete, for it takes on a life of its own: it can darken with humidity, be attacked by atmospheric and meteorological agents. Despite the fact I use more modern media, my frescos are ultimately the same as those found on the walls of medieval churches, part of the same age-old Italian tradition.

On those who have inspired him

I believe that Giotto is unsurpassed. His work incorporates everything: from the conceptual to the metaphysical, from the abstract to the literal, from the formal to the informal. When I stand before one of Giotto's large-scale fresco cycles, I feel the same sense of bewilderment that I do when watching a magnificent sunset or looking at the expression of wonderment on the face of a young child.

On his subjects

The subjects of my works are always people dear to me: my sister, cousins, friends. The images I draw on come from family albums. They are like fragments of a memory that, even though it doesn't belong to me directly, becomes a part of me through my paintings. However, by painting them I free them from their distinctive characteristic and I give them a universal and metaphoric value. Often I paint children, so that anyone looking at the work might recognize themselves in it and be moved by it. They are icons of the collective imagination where the protagonists are common people.

terms of occupation required that Berruti restore and maintain the building, which anchors Verduno, a small town in the Piedmont region of Italy. The area is noted for the small but exceptional wineries that make the strong Barbarescos and Barolos whose flavours echo the close-knit character of the place, its resistance to change, its enduring celebration of agrarian labour, and an unqualified love of its own. Though perhaps once sceptical of the notion of a professional artist living in its midst, Verduno has apparently embraced Berruti as its new favourite son.

Berruti's work has overtaken his church's interior, but with it, he has extended, or rather translated, this conservationist impulse into something new. As the artist explains it, his work is meant to 'give a different sensation', and to work in fresco at this moment in time is to recall the once happy marriage of image and architecture; it is a plea to the walls, ceilings and other surfaces that once defined, but also extended, our terrestrial confinement. Religion has always served as the promise of that extension; art, the means by which it could be imagined and felt. But in the present, religion's purchase on that promise has been loosened by the pervasiveness, by the sheer prevalence, of the image, whether photographic or digital, moving or still. And through a group of works made in past years, *Home Icons* (2004), *Memento* (2005) and *Primary* (2005), Berruti has sought to supply that 'different sensation' to an understanding of this image world.

With *Home Icons*, Berruti's work took the form of small drawings that 'impersonated' the photographs that

populate so many of our bookshelves and mantelpieces. As with most of his work, these drawings rely on contour alone, and here his delicate lines serve as ways of evacuating, and thereby universalizing, the notion of what is 'personal' about any photograph of intimate people and places. In *Memento* and *Primary*, however, the class picture, the family portrait, the vacation snapshot, and other genre photographs are subjected to a similar evacuation, but in these works the personal is not so much universalized as it is rendered melancholic, a reminder of how empty such 'mementos' can be.

More recently, Berruti has advanced upon what he has called 'drawing in movement'. Though the phrase stems from the artist's accomplished yet idiosyncratic use of the English language, 'drawing in movement' describes his recent turn to video as a means to animate his work.

The impulse to get things moving took its cue from New York. While a recipient of an I.S.C.P. grant, and preparing for a solo show at the Esso Gallery last year, Berruti responded to the speed of the city by multiplying his drawing output and then sequencing these works on video. *Golgota* is the result, and its imagery is remarkably akin to that of *Vocation*, only now it is utterly independent of the viewer's own mobility. Again the 'shots' begin from above, and then slowly circumnavigate the figure of a young girl as she prepares, arms outstretched, for a dive. The cruciform pose is again unmistakable, but whereas *Vocation's* images are static, a random selection of shots, *Golgota's* are fully 'in movement'.

Perhaps more than fully, 'drawing in movement' must be differentiated from 'animation'. The precedent here is William Kentridge's work. Kentridge's animations are reflexive insofar as his palimpsests are testaments to the distance and time his drawings have travelled; they are, quite literally, chrono-graphic. For Berruti, the turn to video is rather a way of drawing in movement, of hunting it, of luring it into the picture, as if 'movement' itself is always in danger of getting spooked, of disappearing into simple animation. Berruti's double screens guarantee that the entire drawing appears in motion. The rough ground and the white square, never exactly the same from one frame to the next, register both the speed of video's thirty-frames-per-second and the shifting figural space of the pictures.

Once this 'drawing in movement' has been seen, one comes to realize, as Berruti has as well, that it pervades all of his work. Even when it lies still, as it does with the photographic works, it is simply laying in wait. Movement is and has always been there; it simply had yet to be drawn in. ●

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