

## VIGNETTE

## ○ DRAWING ON ITALIAN ART

EUAN HENG

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**Figure 1** Anthology (1999)  
Mixed media drawing. 111 x 137cm.  
Private collection  
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Entering through the Porto di Lido, the mail ship *Orsova* then made her way around the island before taking a right and sailing down the Canale della Giudecca. With the monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore to starboard, she negotiated the rush hour traffic that was criss-crossing the

Bacino di San Marco and, as I recall, parked just one or two stops up from the Arsenale. On that early August morning in 1962 I was a cabin boy on my first trip to sea, and Venice was my first foreign port. Over the next few years I would return to Italy, though not to Venice. Naples became the regular port of call to take on our ship's human cargo of immigrants bound for Australia.

By the late 1970s I was both an artist and a teacher living and working in Australia, and Italy had become a place to be experienced only through libraries and art museums. During and immediately following art school, I was well aware of painting's premature 'death' and had become intrigued by its first resurrection in the guise of New Figuration. By the 1980s, I was responding with enthusiasm to painting's brief 'return', and had developed a curiosity about contemporary Italian art and the notion of Arte Cifra with its borrowings and symbolic encoding of objects, figures and signs. Continuing at the back of my mind, however, was the ongoing question of how not only painting, but also figurative narrative traditions within painting, could continue to engage the contemporary world.

In September of 1999 I had the good fortune to return to Italy, but this time as an Australia Council artist in residence at the British School at Rome. If my intention had been to look at 'painting proper', then Madrid rather than Rome would have been a more appropriate destination; and for contemporary art, London, Düsseldorf or New York. However, my interest at that time was directed towards the Italian medieval world. I was about to become a tomb raider.

During the three month period of my residency at the British School at Rome I investigated mosaics, medieval frescoes and carvings. I inspected manuscripts and tapestries in museums, and secured invitations to accompany historians and archaeologists on their field trips; of these, it was Tarquinia's Etruscan tombs that proved the most fertile for my work. During that Roman autumn I speculated on future paintings and in my studio at the British School I began to build large mixed media drawings shaped by a variety of graphic methods and iconographic quotations – and at last, a new chorus of voices began to emerge.

Favoured sites for study have included: Rome's basilicas of San Clemente, Santa Prassede, and Santissimi Quattro Coronati and, further north, Florence's Baptistery ceiling, and the Museum of San Marco with the remarkable frescoes by Fra Angelico. The Collegiate Church of San Gimignano with its New Testament cycle of frescos by Simone Martini, and corresponding Old Testament cycle by the Siense painter Bartolo di Fredi, as well as the mad allusion to Dante in the depiction of hell by Taddeo di Bartolo, also captured my attention and imagination. I will add Fra Filippo Lippi and Agnolo Gaddi, not only because I admire their work, but because major frescoes by both artists can be seen in the Duomo of Prato, which was one street from my apartment when I lived in that town. Also, let's not forget Giotto in Padua and Assisi, Duccio in Siena and, of course, Piero della Francesca.

Many twentieth-century artists have taken a deep interest in fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Italian painting, including many of my favourites. The English visionary painter Stanley Spencer (1891–1959) translated biblical events into the everyday in endless paintings of his Hampshire village of Cookham. The influence of Giotto's frescoes for the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua is clearly evidenced in Spencer's interior design of the Sandham Memorial Chapel (c. 1927–29), in the village of Burghclere, but also in the cycle of works that he completed for the chapel. The American modernist painter Philip Guston (1913–80), one-time resident artist at the American Academy in Rome, had a lifelong attachment to Piero della Francesca; for over 25 years he kept two postcards depicting Piero's works – *The Baptism of Christ* (National Gallery,

London, c. 1452), and *The Flagellation* (Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, c. 1460) – on his kitchen wall. Guston’s text-based painting *Pantheon* (1973) is a homage to the Italians Masaccio, Piero, Giotto, Giovanni Battista Tiepolo and to the twentieth-century surrealist painter Giorgio de Chirico.

More recently the British sculptor Anthony Caro (born 1924) has been in ‘conversation’ with the late medieval Sienese painter Duccio di Buoninsegna. This encounter has led to a remarkable body of sculptural works titled *Duccio Variations*, completed between 1999 and 2000, which begins with a transcription of Duccio’s *The Annunciation* (National Gallery, London, c. 1311), a fragment from the two-sided *Maestà* altarpiece (Museo dell’Opera Metropolitana, Siena, 1308–11). Like Guston and Caro, my interest in these early Italian images is secular. I am completely taken by their directness and immediacy; by the arrangement of their precise compositions, particularly the mathematical structures of Piero della Francesca – everything has its place. Even when detail is depicted, it is never allowed to interrupt or undermine the overall design. I am also interested in the ways in which these early Italians imply depth in what appears to be a shallow pictorial field. The colour – now faded – is decorative at its best, and the sheer economy of execution can be breathtaking. For all their adherence to biblical narrative, I believe that many of these works transcend their story and retain a mystery that relates to painting itself, and not in a technical or formal sense but to the poetics of painting.

My fascination for the past that led to the Rome residency has subsequently been fuelled by annual visits to the Monash Centre in Prato, permitting me to ‘scavenge at will’. If I were to sum up my current practice as a painter I would first have to acknowledge that my work draws upon what some theorists now call ‘modernist narrativity’. However, this is imbued by a desire to retrieve the image, and to harness it with an individual vision and experience of the world, somewhere between what is seen and the imagination; to a poetic dimension, I hope. It is not my intention to express thoughts about what my paintings depict, but to incite thought by means of what and how they depict.

In these pictorial contrivances, and to accompany my cast of characters, I employ a range of iconographic motifs that may, if one wishes, be considered clues, and each motif has its role to play. They are there to intensify or deepen the riddle – and for that matter the content – but they may also play an ornamental role as ‘costume jewellery’. Therefore a parrot, a hare, a flower, or a plant may appear: at times invented, on other occasions quoted from medieval manuscripts, frescoes or even a popular cartoon that may have been the catalyst for the work. As soon as these little quotations are positioned into a new context the original meaning is altered but not necessarily lost. One could say that the resultant ‘space’ between these quotations and the new context is where the meaning is to be found or, at times, allowed to go into hiding.

For example, the snail depicted in the painting titled *Sleuth* is a quotation from the mosaic apse of the Basilica di San Clemente in Rome. Further, the colour blue in this work is there as my little homage to Piero della Francesca’s use of lapis lazuli blue.



**Figure 2** *Sleuth* (2000)  
Oil on linen. 137 x 132cm.  
Private collection  
© Euan Heng



**Figure 3** *Momento* (2005)  
Neon. 18 x 37.5cm.  
Collection of the artist  
© Euan Heng



**Figure 4** *e is for elephant* (2007)  
Neon installation, RMIT Project Space.  
Private collection  
© Euan Heng



A current project, apart from painting, is to revisit my 'Italian' wall drawings first made in Rome, and test the possibility of constructing a pleasure garden in neon light – the snail titled *Momento* and depicted here is a pilot study and was exhibited in the 2005 group exhibition *Academici* in Rome. Certain writers on my work have attempted to pick out an autobiographical presence in my paintings. I would agree that there is some similarity or facial likeness between the characters depicted in my painting and myself – possibly when I was younger, and more conceited – but the intention is to create a psychological narrative rather than an autobiographical dimension.



**Figure 5** *Magician* (2006–07)  
Oil on linen. 198.5 x 92cm.  
Private collection  
© Euan Heng



**Figure 6** *What you have found* (2004)  
Oil on linen. 214 x 61cm.  
Collection of the artist  
© Euan Heng

I have always felt a strong allegiance to and admiration for paintings with a certain stillness; in painting, I don't like noise. In your mind's eye, consider the remarkable simplicity and silence of Fra Angelico's frescoes painted in the cells of the San Marco monastery. Most recently I have been emptying out my paintings – no vulgar brush strokes and no detail to distract – just gently modulated pigment to activate flat shapes of colour. I want the visual response to my new paintings to be rapid, if possible, after which the viewer, should he or she wish, can invest further time in unpacking the content, or in discovering the paintings' secrets. By seeking this pictorial suddenness, formally speaking my aim is to avoid the 'expressionistic', and to privilege instead the flatness of the painting's surface. When I need to imply pictorial space or volume, this can be achieved by the shallow modelling of forms that in part derives from my interest in and affection for medieval fresco painting. This intent is also in keeping with contemporary painting practice; it addresses the limits and limitations of the canvas as I consciously fasten all elements of the image to the regular shape of the picture support. A reading of the resultant work functions vertically and horizontally – not 'in' or 'out' – and such a reading not only acknowledges but includes the act of painting as subject.

Cite this chapter as: Heng, Euan. 2008. 'Drawing on Italian art'. In *Australians in Italy: Contemporary Lives and Impressions*, edited by Kent, Bill; Pesman, Ros; Troup, Cynthia. Melbourne: Monash University ePress. pp. 12.1–12.7. DOI: 10.2104/ai080012.