

Marco Sassone: A Way Back Home

Peter Clothier

No matter how far he has traveled, I suspect that Marco Sassone's heart has never been far from his homeland of Italy. In this recent body of work he takes a new and passionate look at some of the landscapes and cities that continue to haunt his imagination. To some, it will seem strange to reflect that these quintessentially Italian scenes originate in his studio in San Francisco.

Venice, Florence, the Amalfi Coast. He has returned to these places, at least in his canvases, after years spent in Laguna Beach on the brilliant Southern California coast and on the streets – quite literally – of San Francisco, where he devoted himself to the study and painting of the homeless. It has been quite a journey. And yet, to look at this current work is to get the clear sense that he has finally rediscovered a spiritual and aesthetic home that he never truly left. They have a presence of absolute and compelling authenticity which speaks at once to Sassone's maturity as a painter and the felicitous choice of subject matter rooted in his consciousness.

The scale alone makes it clear that these are studio, not plein air paintings. The latter, I take it, are a way of looking out, a means to capture and memorialize some aspect of the external world. Studio work, by contrast, is a more internal process, a place where the external world becomes transformed through the interaction of medium and imagination. Sassone insists that his work is "a way of getting into myself". While he returns from his trips back home with sketches and snapshots to which he readily refers as he works, it is inside himself that he works to find the paintings.

One of the recent Venice paintings, "Man At Work", provides us with a fascinating metaphor for the artist's process. Here, in the bottom left quadrant of the picture plane, a worker stands perched, somewhat precariously, atop a construction barge. The scaffolding he is setting up must support a structure whose base is not the terra firma of any other city, but the water on which the city of Venice itself is famously built. Here is an image of the artist, then performing the balancing feat that is so frequently the subject of his paintings: the shifting relationship between the solid structures of architecture (note that Sassone's own early studies and ambition were in this field), and the constantly changing nature of light reflected on the surface of water, the age-old struggle between the seemingly solid appearances of the "real" world outside of us and the disconcertingly ephemeral quality of our inner perception of them. For Sassone, as an artist, this manifests as the battle between the structure needed to hold the painting together and the freedom and spontaneity that he restlessly strives for in his agitated brushwork.

I'm struck by the new dominance of intense blues and greens that seem to characterize a new direction for Sassone. The reds and pinks – the flesh tones – that tended to dominate his earlier work have given way to these new tonalities that traditionally draw the mind toward the spiritual rather than the fleshly. At the same time, the representation of forms has become less substantial in these paintings: architecture is insistently deconstructed by the artist's brush strokes into flow rather than form, becoming indistinguishable from the water. Thus in "Venezia 40", for example – one of the most recent works – almost everything is liquid, not only the canal itself, but the boat, the human who propels it, even the walls that seem to squeeze it toward its vanishing joint. The occasional flecks of red and tentative appearances of pink suggest the extent to which Sassone's vision has shifted away from a picturesque representation of the external world and into

the realm of pure consciousness. This is an almost abstract painting.

Sassone speaks of how the eye follows the canals of Venice “to find the unpredictability of what’s there.” This, too, is the process of his painting: the discovery of the unpredictable. That this journey is for him, a matter of passion shows clearly in the turmoil of his painted surfaces. Their affect is a complex of the full range of human emotions: if we find in them the joy of coming home and the ecstasy of creation, we also find, if we attune ourselves with clear attention, the rage of anger and the shiver of fear which artists bring to their work when they are in touch with the fullness of their humanity. In progressing ever more deeply into his own psyche, Sassone manifests the authenticity which so many have come to realize they are missing in this new millennium, and which they so ardently pursue.

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