

THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY

PETER CLOTHIER

My friend Marco Sassone asked me to take a look at some new watercolors. They are astonishing. And, I must add, they lead to some somber reflections about the way we see the world and our place in it; and about that ultimate and least avoidable of all realities, death.

The dark side of our human existence is a legitimate subject for the artist to address; and artists have answered that call, over the centuries. But it is also one that many of our artists in the contemporary world prefer to skirt. They consider it, perhaps, gloomy. Or, in the clamor for popularity and commercial success, a risky enterprise. It takes some courage to look into the face of darkness without blinking, and our culture has preferred, generally, avoidance.

How strange and interesting, then, that Sassone chooses the transparent medium of watercolor to gaze into this fearsome opacity! I for one tend to



Marco Sassone, Bloor Street Night, 2011, Watercolor on paper, 21 x 29 inches.



Marco Sassone, Moment, 2011, Watercolor on paper, 30.5 x 22 inches.

associate watercolor with friendly landscapes. My English compatriots, used to cloudy skies, have admittedly been experts in the medium, but their clouds--at least in the way my fantasy evokes the English watercolor--are somehow fluffy, airy, filled with the promise of light, life-giving rain. Their landscapes are lovely, delicate, green...

Not so Sassone's watercolors. They are, in the first place, cityscapes. They teem with the dark energy of city life at night... the streets, the traffic, those tall business and residential structures, gleaming with electric and electronic energy, and the artificial canyons they create. People--human beings--if at all, are dimly perceived; or their presence is merely implied, in vehicles or buildings, in "the heart of darkness." Their creations, their fabrications, have taken over their lives.

There's but a fine line between the control of "civilization" and the potential for chaos that roils not far beneath its surface, and this is the same line, I'd argue, that Sassone walks in the way

he works with his medium. Watercolor, it would seem to me as a non-practitioning observer, is perpetually on the edge of disaster, of losing its clarity and turning into a sea of impenetrable mud, and this artist seems ready to risk everything in pursuit of his vision. That he ends up with glittering, rain-streaked streets, illuminations that glow with sudden clarity, gleaming reflections and unexpected points of light that contrast with the darkness--a kind of beauty, then... All this is testament to the skill with which he works.

For years, Sassone made a reputation on the basis of his sunny paintings, bringing with him to (sunny!) California from his native Italy a brilliant sense of color and a feel for the pulse of life. The passion for life that permeated those earlier works is not lost in these new, darker ones; it is simply seen in the perspective of a harsher reality, less comfortable, perhaps, and less comforting. We perceive it “through the glass, darkly.”

And, once reminded of that phrase from Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians that echoes through the centuries and into my own childhood memories, I recall that for years, too, Sassone has made a point of com-

ing to know the less fortunate denizens of our contemporary cities, the homeless. He has spent time with them, has painted their portraits and shared images of the poverty in which they are constrained to live. If they are nowhere visible, they surely haunt these paintings with their presence. Which calls to mind the point of Paul’s great exhortation: that love, or “charity” is the greatest of all values. “And now these three remain,” he concludes, resoundingly: “faith, hope and charity. But the greatest of these is charity.”

So these dark paintings are, after all, not primarily about the darkness that pervades them, but about the light that manages to shine through. And that, as I see it, is astonishing.



Marco Sassone, Nocturne 2, 2011, Watercolor on paper, 20.5 x 29 inches.