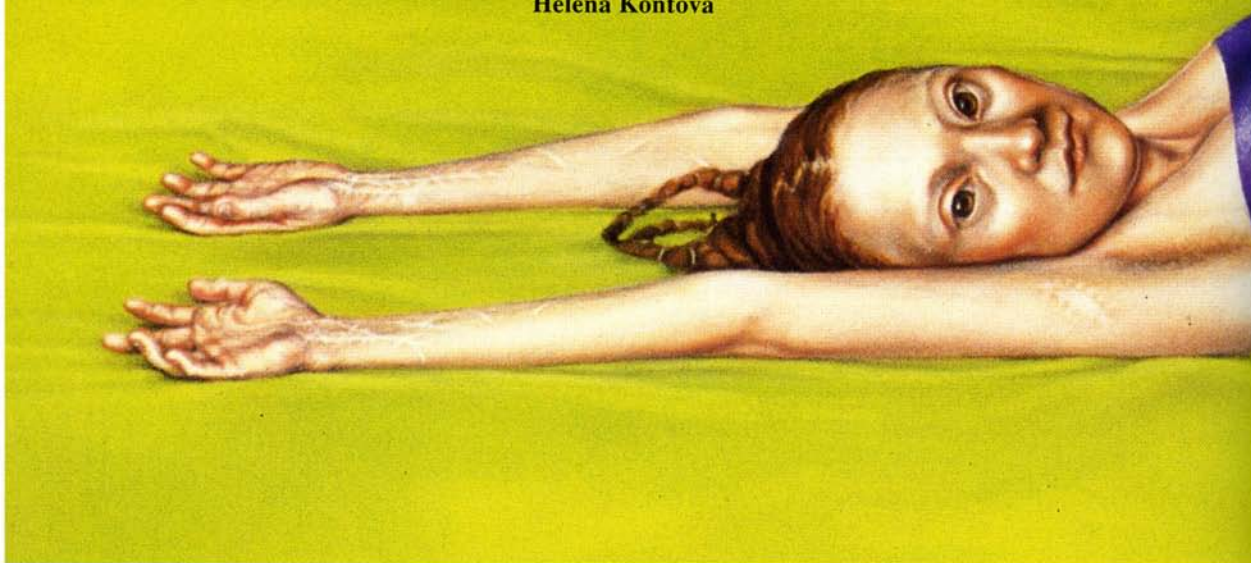


MARGHERITA MANZELLI

GIVING SENSE TO THE SENSELESS

Helena Kontova



HK: PAINTING HAS traditionally enjoyed the privilege of being identified with what is commonly held to be art. What does painting mean to you today?

MM: It has the same meaning as doing video installation. What is important in a work of art is its capacity to affect the lives of those who look at it. Frequently, between one means of expression and another there is only a difference in the time they each take to come to fruition. We can glance at a painting very quickly while a video may demand a longer attention span.

HK: How long do you take to complete a painting?

MM: I'm very slow. I might take a month or even more. I always start out with a well defined idea and try to remain faithful to it.

HK: One of your most recent works is titled *Definitivamente Entrata. Corpo Celeste*. To what is it alluding?

MM: It's inspired by *Corpo Celeste* by Anna Maria Ortese in which a number of considerations are expressed regarding the fatigue of writing and being a writer. The subject of the painting is an astronaut who is about to lift off, while the couch with its soft padding in which he is sinking is a kind of cosmos.

HK: The painted figure is pale and emaciated. It almost resembles an embalmed mummy.

MM: I'm always surprised to see how certain subjects that I paint give a contrasting effect to that which I had intended. I like to think that in this way the work is poking fun at me. With regards the painting you mean, I had intended a certain dynamism.

HK: In any case your figures seem always to smack of something altered.

MM: Unfortunately a self-referential element always emerges in my figures. It's my hypochondria; and yet, when I paint, I would like to create, healthy, vital people. It's frequently been pointed out to me that in the figures I paint the head does not appear to belong to the body, as if it had been detached from the rest of the figure. I don't think so, but in this case too the paintings don't give the impression I intended.

HK: I notice a vague similarity between you and the girls you paint in your pictures.

MM: This is rather interesting too, because I know what I'm not trying to make, and that's a self-portrait. I don't work from photos and I don't use models; my subjects are invented and I would like them to be



T.S.S., 1999. Oil on linen, 90 x 212 cm.

different to me. And yet I realise that this very desire is symptomatic of the fact that something of myself remains in them.

HK: *Do the environments in which you portray them have any specific reference?*

MM: They are simply the habitats of my characters. I'm often worried that my pictures are too realistic, but at the same time I want to carry on painting human subjects. I intervene on details such as the couch or the walls, trying not to consider them simply as decorative elements in a domestic environment, and I've created hybrid environments as in *The City Loves You* where the darkness of the room combines with something that is perhaps simply thought.

HK: *I'm reminded of your early works, when you were physically attached to the paintings and you forced your body to re-*

main immobile to the point of true suffering.

MM: Still today I feed my imagination with hypothetical actions to be completed during the openings of my exhibitions. At the Istanbul Biennial, for example, I wore a webbed glove that forced me to keep my left hand open. There was an interpreter with me and each time I had to speak to someone I covered my mouth with my hand and whispered the words in his ear which he then pronounced in my place. I used this person to reply to the questions I was asked but also to hear my own words translated into Turkish, a language I really like. With these actions I try to give sense to that which frequently is senseless, like attending an opening. It's a way of avoiding but at the same time being present at an event.

HK: *Do you think that the fact you paint in Italy puts you in a different position*

with respects to your colleagues working in London or New York?

MM: Up until a few years ago, and perhaps still today, painting in Italy was a form of perversion: the machismo of the Transavanguardia had made an indelible mark on art, obliging you to come to terms with such a phenomenon and leading you to take tortuous routes that were less free from conditioning than in other countries. However, more or less everywhere, I can see painting taking up a defensive position as if it had a territory to protect. This is an attitude I've also encountered in New York and that I find pathetic in that it's conservative, not only with respects to art, but more generally with respects to life. ■

(Translated from Italian by Neil Davenport)
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Margherita Manzelli was born in Ravenna in 1968. She lives and works in Milan.