

Art Review: Vincent Desiderio's Reification

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by James Croak

Reification is the theme of Vincent Desiderio's eighth painting show at the Marlborough Gallery in New York City, taking the subtitle from a term made somewhat vague by its different uses in a host of intellectual disciplines. The clearest relevance of reification for painting stems from its use in Gestalt psychology from the Berlin school of the 19th century to describe an object having more spatial information than is actually present, an idea that translates in today's terminology to: "the sum is greater than its parts."

Desiderio does work in parts. He emerged in the early 1980s as painting suddenly became in vogue again for depicting ideas as opposed to expressing emotions, the bailiwick of the abstract expressionists of the '40s and '50s. Dark thoughts, and apparently depth of any kind, had become devalued as a serious pursuit with the onslaught of pop art in the '60s.

As painting returned in the roaring '80s, several artists constructed paintings of dissimilar imagery, vertically oriented diptychs and triptychs on a single canvas, and let the affinities among the images become the import of the painting. The much older René Magritte was the père-artist for this group and used this technique frequently, albeit not as eloquently as does Desiderio.

At the Marlborough Gallery, Desiderio is showing about a dozen of these works, with most of them constructed through the use of multiple and seemingly random imagery.

One stunner in the show is *Exodus*, a massive 12-foot-wide painting of three images. On the right hand third looms a frontal portrait of Antonio Gramsci, an Italian Communist of note—assuming one finds communists notable for anything other than being amateur economists. At the trial after Gramsci was arrested by Mussolini, his prosecutor demanded, as only an Italian prosecutor could: "For 20 years we must stop this brain from functioning." Apparently the authorities were unsuccessful, as his brain filled an additional 30 or so notebooks with commie gibberish from his prison cell.

Why Desiderio would find his mug important in 2013, the date of the painting, is a mystery, but it still draws the viewer in as its painted beautifully.



“Exodus” by Vincent Desiderio, 2013. Oil and mixed media on canvas mounted on board, 59 x 145 inches.

The center of this triad is a burning chair that is a remarkable bit of painting on its own, a searing poetic image, a haunting archetype without any apparently source linking Gramsci to the third image, on the left, of a downward view of a descending staircase. The burning chair brings to mind the seated screaming Popes of Francis Bacon and is painted as vividly.

Many stories could be made up for this painting but the important thing is one wants to; one wants to dwell in front of this crafted image and think about the affinities lingering in the images. It's the thrill of good poetry that compels the viewer to finish the piece with personal experience.

Several of the works are paintings of imagined sculpture, a curious roundabout given that it was sculpture that for so long displaced painting before its relatively recent return as a serious art form. (Actually painting has died and returned more times than that notorious “fabulous invalid,” live theater on Broadway.)

Transubstantiation is a painting of a sculpture of an orgy on the wall; it doesn't seem to have any serious meaning other than it's fun to look at. It's clearly derived from the tantric Khajuraho of India, a series of temples created between 950 and 1150 by the Chandella dynasty. Again though, why paint it as a sculpture of an orgy rather than the thing itself? The temples are raucous and outrageous even today, and so Desiderio continues the fun.



Figures at Khajuraho



"Transubstantiation" by Vincent Desiderio, 2013. Oil and mixed media on canvas mounted on board, 68 x 111 inches.

The Awful Indifference shows a crowd of early Greek sculptural figures leaning away from a potpourri of images, including an apparent mummy and a palm tree. It's an odd and less successful painting than *Exodus*, as it seems to be missing the affinity that works in this type of imagery mashup, perhaps personal to Desiderio but opaque to this viewer. *Study for Temple* is the third painting that includes depictions of sculpture and is a rougher version of the aforementioned raucous *Transubstantiation*.



"The Awful Indifference" by Vincent Desiderio, 2013. Oil and mixed media on canvas mounted on board, 60 x 144 inches.

Hitchcock's Hands, an unseen person holding a box with a glass eye in it, seems like an aside, an image painted with both the skill and blunt confrontation of Courbet. It's an image pinched from the '50s TV series "Hitchcock Presents," in which Alfred Hitchcock would use its spookiness to begin and end a show. It's an eerie piece and works well as a painting, much better than on the tube, where it's hokum.



“Hitchcock’s Hands” by Vincent Desiderio, 2012. Oil and mixed media on canvas, 64 x 66 inches.

Vincent Desiderio is an accomplished and important painter at the height of his powers; put this show high on your list.

BASIC FACTS: “VINCENT DESIDERIO” remains on view through Feb. 8 at Marlborough Gallery, 40 West 57th Street, New York, NY 10019. www.marlboroughgallery.com.