

LUISA RABBIA

BEGINNING AGAIN

Mario Diacono Gallery

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A NEW BEGINNING?

FROM LASCAUX CAVES' proto-shamanic artists to Malevich and Mondrian, Pollock and Warhol, there has always been an end and a beginning in painting. *In my beginning is my end*, famously wrote T.S. Eliot in the first line of the first of his FOUR QUARTETS, "East Coker," September 1940. But for painting it's also true the opposite—in my end is my beginning. Painting's form has been ending with any major cultural shift in every advanced civilization, then constantly been reborn when a new social order demanded a different visual language. Ours is no different: the algorithm-defined social order being built by the techno-capitalist society requires a move from a physical, medium-based languages (paper, etc.) to digital ones. Yet painting is resisting, if briefly, with the remnants of a declining humanistic society and the emergence of new social subjects no longer kept out of high culture by race, class, and gender boundaries. By its very nature and history, art is created purely by human intelligence and emotion (pre-historically by a magical intent), even if the medium is not oil canvas paper stone metal but machinery. There is certainly no new beginning now, and not yet a new ending, just a necessary r'existence.

The Gods, Aftermath and *The Gods, Beginning Again*, the two works being exhibited by Luisa Rabbia (both 2024, oil on linen, 96 x 72 and 96 x 60 inches respectively), evolve the imagery present in her previous group of paintings, five precisely, created since 2023, starting with *The Gods, Conundrum*, which inscribes dominant aspects of society under the archetypes of ancient Greek mythology. The gods of Greek mythology, expressed as governing every human event and emotion in the two great poems *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, constitute in fact the very beginning of what we historically consider humanistic Western culture. The ones specifically nominated in two of the artist's paintings, Ares (the Latin Mars) and Artemis (the Latin Diana), much represented also in Renaissance

and Baroque art, evoke major themes of human anguish today, wars and the survival of the natural world.

In *Aftermath*, the gods still keep the world in a state of war. Paolo Uccello's red and brown spears from *La battaglia di San Romano* (circa 1440, Uffizi, Firenze) emerge straight and long from a crowd of humans/soldiers defined only by their heads and shoulders. The group standing upright, on the top half of canvas, denote those still alive after the battle while the heads upside down, on the canvas' lower half, indicate those who are dead or barely surviving supported by sticks. The dominant colors, red and blue, mark the factions in conflict. Rabbia's paintings are structured by a sort of visual shorthand, that lets the artist spread representational elements in a multi-space that has the flatness of abstract painting. At center, a surfacing hand indicates that, before any image is painted, the artist covers the entire canvas with her handprints, not to mimic those covering pre-historical caves but to build a texture where her body physically participates in the work's pictorial making. Along the conceptual median line dividing the representation in two adversarial colors, green fragments of a spinal column are abbreviations of the skeleton that signifies death. And at the top of the image, half of them red, the other half blue like the factions in conflict underneath, stand the heads of the gods, dotted by piercing eyes that dominate the battle's aftermath. Inside the gods' bodies, fully unified in a single circle, are crowding the fighting humans. Like in the Tibetan Wheel of Existence held by Yama, Lord of Impermanence, the soldiers gathered in the circle signify that life and death also characterize a humanity permanently at war with itself.

Beginning Again, with its predominant blue alluding to a state of peace, evolves the wheel of existence into an Edenic-like tree generated by the gods above. Inside the tree's canopy grows, along with a smaller planet, the Earth populated by the living. Below, on a *predella*, rise like roots the upturned legs of the dead, designating a subterranean realm out of which a generation of the living is born again. It's a conceptual map of the world, somewhat close to the theologized

cosmography of Jacob Böhme. Rabbia's constant juxtaposing of gods and humans, of living and dead, also recalls an archetype of early Twentieth century, Gustav Klimt's *Tod und Leben* (*Death and Life*, 1908-II, Leopold Museum, Vienna). Here Death and the Living inhabit the same space: Death as a menacing skeleton wrapped in a blueish dress covered with crosses and holding a club; the Living tightly embracing each other in fear across his phantom, forming an oval mass of women, men and children as if to reconfigure the primordial egg of creation. Precisely in an original, Orphic egg's form is also shaped the world of the Living in *Beginning Again*. Under the round, reddish gods at the top, inside the intensely blue of the oval egg, an Earth and a smaller planet have formed, teaming on their border with human heads shifting in color between red and blue, while in the center, next to a pair of arms/legs, a long spinal cord originating from the central god seems to burst out electrifying the planet.

Rabbia's painting embodies and exalts a specific visual syncretism of our time. In the years 1910-1925 advanced, radical artists, exhausted by centuries of either religious or social narrative art, excited also by the notions of velocity and simultaneity generated by the machine and the industrial modes of production, moved toward abstraction to express a new sensorial and intellectual multiplicity of emotions, sometime guided by a religiosity without Gods, churches and doctrinal dogmas. Artists today, exhausted in turn by the erasure of physicality that a technological, digital inscription of the world entails, appear to re-imagine representation as a strategy to maintain a level of humanity in the survival of art. In *The Gods. Aftermath* and *Beginning Again*, mimesis and abstraction collaborate in creating the artist's personal visual language where color, while associated with meaning, is also independent from form. The figure doesn't obey to a social or natural referencing but creates its own psycho-iconic features. Representation, abstraction, conceptualization converge in founding the 'sustainability' of painting.

— MARIO DIACONO