



Michael Roqué Collins - Branded by the Light
by David Olivant, Artist and Art Writer for ArtCritical

Anyone familiar with my previous reviews will know that while I take no pleasure in denigrating serious art I am rarely given to unbridled enthusiasm. Therefore it is something of a revelation to encounter hard won authenticity, (what other kind is there?) in a city where easy spirituality and over hyped pabulum are more typical, blame the tourists if you like! Collins has enjoyed significant exposure in Texas and Santa Fe but seems to have eluded the attentions of New York City galleries, which in my opinion is their loss, albeit perhaps unwitting, until now perhaps!

Entering the current arresting exhibit of large canvases by Michael Roque Collins at Lew Allen Galleries is to be violently absorbed into pulsating, luminous, densely encrusted surfaces that appear to have welled like magma from some ongoing subterranean cataclysm that threatens to further obliterate the battered forms of classical statuary, aqueducts, temples, and amphitheaters, these already encroached upon by rampant tropical vegetation reminding of Angkor Wat or Tikal. Light dazzles and then thickens, as if emanating from inside the canvas. There is no obvious light source, the intense whites, sometimes bathed in cadmium yellow glazes thrust towards the viewer from every layer of implied depth. We are almost blinded by this light suggesting that these paintings are embodied moments of extreme spiritual crisis and transfiguration. I realize many of these terms are considered passe in today's art world but the experience is undeniable, no matter which inadequate signifiers we choose to describe it. After spending a few minutes gazing at these canvas infernos they brand themselves onto our retina, from thence reemerging in some later troubled twilight of our memories.

Perhaps too much has been made in the accompanying exhibition publications of the inchoate, ambiguous, transcendent qualities of Collins' works, as if each solid were on the verge of melting into its neighbor. The predominant forms, whether classical colonnades, Nike wings, fragmented busts or aqueducts are bulky, almost cumbersome and emphatically delineated. Ambivalence and uncertainty are not directly pictorial but reside in their unique manner of signification which is indirect and symbolic so that, as in Max Beckmann or Marsden Hartley, the symbols hint at allegory only to subvert it. Any clear narrative would likely dilute immediacy and fail to directly engage our nervous systems in accord with Francis Bacon's prescription. It is the imminent sense of significance, more than any particular meaning that matters here. Collins' also shares with Beckmann and the Romanesque altarpieces which so fascinated that artist, an obsession with discovering imagery lurking in the negative spaces between the robust solid forms. In "Temple of Virtues" 2020 for instance, a closer look reveals the suggestion of heads and skulls looming between the columns and the dense foliage. In the bottom right corner this emphatic bas-relief vegetation abruptly yields giant limp hands and the sense of the uncanny is palpable. This is one of the boldest and at the same times subtlest paintings I have encountered, looming into the viewers' space to emboss a complex, animated frontal lattice of almost interwoven leaf and marble, as if the plants might themselves be sculpted. In "Venetian Flower Walls" 2020, similar interwoven floral protrusions emerge from and bedeck the massive walls that open to reveal a visionary but ailing Venetian horizon, punctuated by hemispherical petroleum refineries. Nothing very transcendent about this imagery.



Transmissions Of Light Series - Temple Of Virtues, 2020-21, oil on linen, 60" x 72"



Transmissions of Light Series - Venetian Flower Walls, 2020-21, oil on linen, 60" x 100"

Collins' work clearly achieves a sense of spiritual immediacy but the mood is surely darker than other writers have suggested. For me, the sometimes gem-like encrustations of interwoven a la prima application with a multitude of Constablesque high contrast value shifts and a dependence on chalky whites coating masterfully lustrous colored grays, evokes spiritual crisis more than transcendence. The forms are heavy, tense, almost hallucinatory with echoes of dust and ashes, more Eliot than Keats, more Pompeii than Elysium. The curved perspectives appear to bulge the entire picture surface towards the viewer or back with insistent concavity. They compound the hypnagogic resonance as if the entire picture surface is projected onto the inside of a giant eyeball.

Painters like Michael Collins, - Simon Edmondson, John Virtue, or Julie Heffernan, come to mind resist the often market- or ego- driven imperative to invent the next style or modality. Instead they mine the undepletable veins and shafts left to us by painters who took the transfiguration of their existential plight into paint to be the work of a lifetime's immersion and struggle. Mishandled, this can all too easily descend into academicism, but it is rooted in the notion that universal aspects of the human condition largely transcend historical and social progress. This is not a shallow universalism found in so much feel-good abstraction that clings hopefully to some of the gallery walls in Canyon Road, but a sense of a shared human dilemma, evoked through daily struggle with the brute particularity of colored dirts, glazes and oils. It is as if artists like Rembrandt, Turner, and Blake have accumulated a reservoir of spiritual energy that a few who share that vision, like Michael Collins, can tap into through a combination of enthusiasm and unstinting endeavor.



