

SARA BERTRI'S: GIVING COLLAGE IT OWN SPIRIT

By: Thomas Keogh

Italian artist Sara Berti is fascinated by the geometrical decorative motifs that proliferate within the Middle and Near Eastern Islamic cultures, as she has experienced them over the last few years. Ever since her time living in Izmir, Turkey and now in UAE she has felt the need to literally go down to the bazaar and understand how this proliferation offers not a window into an unfamiliar culture but perhaps a mirror into her own relationship with harmony, geometry and the human body as art. Through this process Berti's work, using a variety of media, explores the territory between an energetic, contemporary society and the underlying aesthetic ideologies forming its most potent and immediate forms of artistic self-expression. This needs to be understood in relationship to the commitment her earlier work showed to the classic poses assumed by the western sculptural body since Roman and Greek antiquity. The parallel iconoclastic developments in Islamic and Western European art should also be considered. The innate and historic love of representation of the body to be found in Rome and Athens offered a staunch defence against the Abrahamic injunctions against this very representation. But what was it that the body represented for the classicist but harmony, geometry and perfection - the very things underlying the stupendously complex and beautiful abstract or foliate decorations to be found in Islamic art and architecture. These seemingly opposing concerns at all times created art forms within which tension is paramount, whether in the modulated contrapposto pose or the negative sculpting of the muqarnas.

A third geometry that we see emerging in Berti's work is the geometry of music. She forms attractive harmonies of elements, and sometimes individual motifs from a more complex design float as minor notes over her work. We can see this in 'Composition no. 3', created recently where a number of disarticulated golden "Rumi" leafs seem to swim over the surface of the work. This is a reminder of how many Persian carpets represented the pleasure pools and gardens of paradise. It is important to remember that for Berti the sheer pleasure of the aesthetic experienced by the viewer is paramount, even though there is a contemporary twenty first century sensibility behind the work. She seeks to present joy and harmony. There is always a sense of exuberant linkage from one point to another, and between different materials and textures. Her compositions are an articulation of experiences rather than just forms. As we look at these most recent works there is also a sense of Rauschenberg's once around the block approach to his assemblages of items and images. We sense that the pieces reflect a process of gathering or foraging, and as such we are linked to the moment of creative time. The process and its expression are again issues articulating the aesthetic experience considered earlier. There is much that is fleeting and indeed merely hinted at - as we see with the human forms suggested rather than described in a work such as 'Complexity'. Their shapes become symbolic rather than actual. The body does not lose its power, but other elements do not become subservient to it. To take a more detailed look at the works themselves there is an interesting strategy of disarticulation.



Sara Berti phototelling from Turkey, 2014, digital print and collage on vintage photo, 25.5x20cm. Courtesy of the artist



Sara Berti Arabesque 1, 2 & 3 and little arabesque composition, 2014, acrylic and collage on paper and canvas.155x230cm. Courtesy of the artist

Things and motifs not only float freely within the compositions, but sometimes exist as clearly unambiguous, autonomous elements. This can be quite stark as in the case of 'Details of the Arabesque'. Here two pieces of cut paper enter into a querulous dialogue. One seems to be a cartoon outline of a head shouting loudly at the other. Both have delicate imprints of an arabesque design on them. These pieces seem to have stepped away from the other works by Sara in order for us to witness their singular and passionate discourse. Other examples of this disarticulation are seen in the work 'Selected Textiles' which actually works as part of an installation with 'Complexity'. Again the two textile pieces, while being related to, have stepped away from the collage work. We are asked to consider the two pieces not only as part of a scenario but also within their own discreet concerns.

Sara of course must also remain an outsider in relation to the local context of the surrounding environment itself. The artist may seek to interrogate the tensions and delights of her personal, contemporary and global experience, but leaves herself open to the charge of orientalism, and perhaps even aesthetic colonialism. How can her responsibilities as a fully informed contemporary artist still allow for a joyful juxtaposing of diverse, identifiable cultural elements? We must seek awareness on her part of the visual conundrum related to identity and art. I believe we can find this in her earlier works. In 'Phototelling from Turkey' we see the reuse of a black and white early mid twentieth century portrait photo of a Turkish woman. In this Berti has covered over the eyes and the heart of the young woman with red tinsel paper - a serious but at the same time light hearted gesture. The fact that the Turkish woman in the picture wears western style clothes as a matter of course acknowledges the hybrid cultural experience of modernity. This work shows an insight on the artist's part into the complex postcolonial psychologies of this very hybridity and also cultural ambivalence as discussed by Homi Bhabha. She positions her work within the Third Space he postulates. Viewers and the artist herself inhabit a new discourse that is both recognizably part of a pre-existing history but also folds in the paradox of a difference felt in the present moment as part of contemporary existence.

ABOUT THE WRITER

Tom Keogh comes from an architectural and fine art background. Born in Ireland he initially graduated from the Architectural Department of Bolton st. College of Technology in Dublin in 1987 and worked in various architectural firms for a number of years. He later completed a degree in Fine Art and the history of Irish Art at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin and an MA in Art Curatorial practice at Goldsmiths College London. He has curated a number of exhibitions in Ireland, the UK, Spain and Turkey, and initiated and managed an Art project space called Meals & SUVs in London from 2005 to 2008. He moved to Izmir Turkey in 2009 and teaches in the Art and Design faculty of Izmir University of Economics. He also runs an art residency and contemporary art exhibition space called Maquis Projects in the old historic centre of Izmir. This space has hosted a number of international and local artists over the last 3 years and has had an ongoing committed program of exhibitions and talks.