

Between Frankenstein and Übermensch

Francesca Zappia interviews Sybren Renema

Francesca Zappia: While doing this interview we are listening to different musical interpretations of the *Stabat Mater*. *The Stabat Mater* is a poem that has inspired you to make a new series of drawings and a book. What part does music play in your artistic work and how do you deal with musical and artistic heritage?

Sybren Renema: I think that a lot of my work is about culture in general and about how we relate to the canon. I think music, but also poetry and literature, are important to me as an artist because they have a similar cultural value. What is maybe more specific about me is that I am also active as a musician, and so I have a direct connection to music. It is a creative tool for me, just like sculpture or drawing. Now, I am not necessarily a classical musician, I play the saxophone, but music is always around me and is maybe even more present in my life than art. My early memories are of my mother listening to Mozart and even if you don't try, you are influenced by these things. What I am doing in my artistic work is translate these interests in music, writing, poetry or literature, into visual objects. I think it is very important or useful to juggle between subjects and between mediums. We have had symphonies in music but not in art. Why is that? Formally, it would be possible to learn from the structure of a symphony and translate it into unexplored artistic regions. A concrete example I can give you is the *Stabat Mater* which exists not only in the form of religious paintings, but also as a set of compositions. Every composition is related to this one text which is an 800 years old poem. I think it is interesting to see how a text migrates between art forms, and to follow the afterlife of the text, particularly because I am not religious by any means.

FZ: Even if you are not religious, you are addressing religion, and in particular Catholic religion, with the works presented in this exhibition. Why did you choose to deal with this specific subject within a larger interest in Romanticism?

SR: Well, I think historically, of course in the Western world, Catholicism is the main patron of every art form, and I think this cultural dialogue is very interesting. Catholicism's mystical components interest me less than the historical or formal dialogue. With regards to my over-arching interest in Romanticism, I don't think Catholicism in itself had a particularly great influence on Romanticism. Romanticism is largely a protestant phenomenon: the tormented man at the centre of the universe instead of God. It is a kind of rebellion. But like the Catholic formalism of the *Stabat Mater* Romanticism is a cliché: the man who walks around in the mountains, suffering a lot, having a very difficult beard...

I think maybe if you want to connect the two, you could use the Romantic

cliché that God is dead. The question of how to create something within a tradition that is dead is very interesting.

FZ: So your 'death mask' is related to a dead tradition?

SR: My death mask is very much related to a tradition that is dead on one side, but that on the other side seems to be walking, alive. You know the cliché of the Romantic genius is a cliché that luckily has largely died out, but at the same time in different forms we are still living it. The notion of the Great Man, the great hero, you can see it quite well in the American election. And this is the notion that maybe reached its pinnacle during Romanticism, with Napoleon as the patron saint of the radical Romantics like the young Wordsworth or nostalgic Victorians like Carlyle. The same could be said for Goethe, whose Werther caused people to commit suicide in emulation. Werther committed suicide. So yes, the death mask is maybe the ultimate expression of this sentiment of greatness and also the opposite, as a sort of Frankenstein and Übermensch at the same time.

FZ: And you are also playing with a cliché by approaching the subject of *Death and the Maiden*...

SR: Yes, what I do there is something which I also do in the *Stabat Mater*, which is taking a subject that is used so much and instead of adding music or images, I present the words, because they are good enough. They have enough power already. Maybe something you could compare it to is something I saw a while back on the television. The famous conductor Leonard Bernstein was teaching children about Mahler, and he said that Mahler was the last person to write relevant symphonies, because he knew the art of symphonies reached its logical conclusion with his work. However, he still wanted to write symphonies, so according to Bernstein the struggle for Mahler was how to add to a tradition that is already fulfilled. I think this is a very interesting question that the *Death and the Maiden* and *Stabat Mater* relate to as well.

FZ: In the *Stabat Mater* drawings you use words, but also create a new visual aspect by using old books as a support for your drawings. You are transforming one medium into another. How does this relate to the transmission of forms and ideas?

SB: I think that in the case of *Stabat Mater* I picked these images because they are quite dramatic. They represent children's bodies, which are an emotional subject that echoes the subject of the poem: a mother suffering by her dying son. But by painting them white I am almost trying to reduce the image to a clean white page that can be used for drawing. And of course there is a certain set of meanings associated with that. They could be formal,

such as Robert Rauschenberg's *Erased De Kooning drawing*, or they could be related to the content, with the X-Rays being the representative of suffering, or the absolution of sin. And I think there is a sort of tension between these meanings that remains for the audience to think about for themselves.

FZ: The *Stabat Mater* drawings are also part of a new book that is being presented at Artissima. For the book you have commissioned several texts that deal in different ways with the subject.

SR: I think the book is almost like a symposium where you take a text and you present it to people from very different backgrounds who you just happen to know. They all responded with their different expertise and interests. I think it is a logical extension of what I said earlier, which is about the question of how to produce an artwork like this that is still relevant in the 21st century. The book contextualises the drawings.

FZ: Within the exhibition there is a series of collages made from the superposition of different photographs of statues of Popes. Can you tell us more about this piece?

SR: The Popes are a digital kind of collage where I used face morphing software on statues to create an average of Renaissance Popes. The title of the series is *Super hanc petram edificabo ecclesiam meam*, which is a sentence from the Bible that means 'On this rock I shall build my church'. These words are what Christ said to Saint Peter, and which Catholics claim gave Saint Peter and his successors their political power. The title is a play on the statues, which are also stones. The rock from the title could be the stone from the statues. Of course, like the death mask, the work relates to a certain power that doesn't really exist anymore but at the same time is still present in our world. And again there is the literary reference in the title, which connects the works presented here as a rummaging through the Western canon. In this respect, the Renaissance is particularly interesting because it is at this moment that the papacy became the dominant patron of the arts.

FZ: Some of your works refer to conceptual artworks, by the use of neon or of words. And others deal more directly with the idea of sculpture, like the Pope collages or the 'Death mask'. They are made using digital technologies. Why did you choose to use this specific technique?

SR: I think digital morphing is a very good way of approaching the subjects, because it seems factual or scientific. It appears like there is no emotion but of course by selecting and releasing certain image and not choosing others, you do show emotions. The popes have something funny and tormented about them, maybe a bit carnivalesque or a bit grotesque, and

the death mask is very clean and emotionless, even though it is supposed to show the greatest emotional geniuses of all times. I think this presentation at Artissima has a certain sensibility; the stern Romantic sensibilities on one side and the dramatic southern warm-blooded Catholic works on the other.

FZ: In December you are taking part in a show in Geneva, *Le retour des ténèbres*, which aims to explore the Gothic imaginary after Frankenstein. Can you tell us more about the work you will present in this show, as well as your future research? Are you keen to go in depth into an exploration of this dual sensibility you are approaching in the presentation for Artissima? Or are you opening new paths within your research you would like to share with us?

SR: In *Le retour des ténèbres* I will be showing the death mask again, which combines all the things that make Frankenstein interesting: death, Romantic yearning, pseudo-science and the search for the ideal man. The catalogue will feature an essay by me, about Romantic death cults in relation to the 27 Club. The exhibition will also feature lots of manuscripts, original portraits of the Shelleys and Lord Byron, as well as art work from that era. It will be very fascinating to see how my work will hold up in direct conversation with those objects. Currently I am in the midst of preparing for a series of works about Goethe's scientific output, which is a nice way to incorporate my interest in geology with my interest in literature. I am talking to Radek Szlaga, a Polish painter, about this project and we might be making a show together. I think I might even be doing some painting myself, which I look forward to, as it is the only medium for which I haven't yet found a creative solution within my overall artistic persona.

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Francesca Zappia is an independent curator, living and working in Glasgow. Her research focuses on the transmission of memory and the construction of knowledge in artistic practices, which she reflects in her own curatorial research as she experiments with new ways of presenting works, both online and offline. Recent projects include *past forward*, an online curatorial platform launched in 2014; *East End Transmissions*, The Pipe Factory, Glasgow 2014; *Raoul Reynolds: A Retrospective*, Scotland Street School Museum, Glasgow & *La Friche la Belle de Mai*, Marseille, 2016. In 2015 she was awarded a curatorial research grant by the Centre national des arts plastiques in Paris.