



The New Pop Art by Giuseppe Veneziano

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What is the novelty factor of Giuseppe Veneziano's Pop Art? His favourite medium is painting, along with water-colour and sculpture, although to a lesser extent¹. The objectivity in his work as well as his affiliation to Pop Art are central characteristics of his art.

Vividly executed and surrounded by only a few details, Giuseppe Veneziano's pieces present a limited number of figures from politics, religion or pop culture to the viewer. Their respective configuration directly invites the viewer to examine the works for longer. Then the viewer's eye is usually caught by a consciously staged provocation, through which complex levels of meaning unfold in the work. One is finally left with a closer consideration.

By way of example let us first turn to the painting *La Pietà di Superman* (2010). The composition of the *Pietà* opens up to the viewer and invites to compassion, as a characteristic of Christian iconography². A reference to earlier works from art history is unmistakable. In particular, Michelangelo's *Pietà* (c. 1500)³ in St. Peter's in Rome and its successors, along with many other *Pietà* by Annibale Carracci⁴, dating back to around 1600, can be seen as direct precursors. The young Pop-Art artist does not shy away from either reference. A comparison of the historical works with Giuseppe Veneziano's ones shows that the motif is subject to a tremendous change in relation to Michelangelo, while Carracci is crucial for the young Italian's composition. The differences do not only relate to the art genres and the materials, but the time of creation, the composition and the artistic intentions are also completely different.

Michelangelo not only pursued an anatomically correct representation of the two figures of his *Pietà* in order to achieve a humane image, but also an increased expressive power of physical and emotional suffering. He wanted to evoke the feeling

Portrait by Livio Mallia, 2016

of compassion in the viewer. Carracci chose the *Theatrum sacrum*, a scene staging preferred in the Baroque, whereby the gestures of the figures and the lighting are used to add additional emphasis. Michelangelo's Renaissance art piece, on the other hand, is an altar sculpture made of marble. The marble dyad, made up of the youthful-looking Our Lady and the lifeless body of Jesus Christ, is deliberately chosen to be placed above, in the chancel, in order to symbolise the sacrifice to the faithful. Michelangelo achieved a graceful and at the same time haunting representation of a scene which, as a motif, has shaped for centuries the general consciousness of both Christians as well as people with an affinity to the arts. Thus it has served as a model for many artists.

Giuseppe Veneziano embraced the *Pietà* motif, itself a symbol, and gave it his own interpretation. His work on canvas was created for a private installation site and does not resemble Carracci's work in this regard⁵. Annibale Carracci turned the usual *Pietà* dyad into a group of four, which Giuseppe Veneziano then reduced down to a triad. In line with his Baroque example, he lowered the group down from a perspective elevated for the viewer though deciding against a view from below⁶. Instead he opted to have the representation at the viewers' eye level. The Madonna sits on the floor and leans against the tomb, whose stone slab rests at a slight angle. The lifeless body that rests in her lap is a well-known figure from a comic. The position turned towards the viewer and the pose of the lifeless figure are also borrowed from Carracci and result from lying on the floor. The two brown areas are the soil, as the comparison with the *Pietà* of Naples and, above all, a draft sketch testify⁷. It further suggests that the artist was not concerned with an anatomically correct depiction, but much more with an abstract depiction focused on a few essentials. This simplification and the focus are a pictorial strategy aimed at a more intensive examination of the representation on the part of the beholder. The prototype function of Pop-Art artists such as Alex Katz and Andy Warhol is just as evident as the kinship with the achievements of classical modernism, especially those of the New Objectivity.

In 1923 Wassily Kandinsky was already speaking about the New Objectivity of a "New Reality"⁸. Giuseppe Veneziano belongs to the Italian artist group Italian Newbrow, which, at least in its name (new), emphasizes the demarcation from the old, yet is unable to break a connection to it, and even feels obliged to renew it. Just as dominant as in the works of the New Objectivity artists, especially those influenced by Henri Matisse, is the colour scheme of the clearly separated areas. Although the type of colouring and the hard shadows suggest a light source, it cannot be pinpointed exactly. Although Giuseppe Veneziano's portrayal distances him from the dramatic lighting of Baroque artwork, the shadow that is cast ensures a sculptural modelling of his figures, while the homogeneous colour areas contribute to the overall mood of the composition.

The purple sky in the background could be seen to represent the powerful symbolic function of colour, metaphorically expanded by a sombre emotional message from two contracting clouds⁹, rather like the two differing brown floor panels as a symbol of the earth. At the same time, these floor slabs serve as a motif for demarcation, in order to set dimensional standards and to both draw the observers into the

scene and to keep them at a distance from it. As a comparison to this, three works by Giuseppe Veneziano presented in the exhibition "Mash-Up" in the Munich gallery Kronsbein from October 19, 2017, are cited: *Super Cocaine* (2017), *Quasi amici* (2017) and *Only a friend can betray you* (2017). In all three, the foreground consists only of a single colour field, which invites the viewer into the scene, but without the braking refraction caused by the brown contrasted colours as in *La Pietà di Superman*. This effect is further enhanced in *Super Cocaine* by the white diagonal of cocaine and in *Quasi amici* by Micky Mouse's diagonal figure lying in a pool of blood.

The choice of viewing perspective takes on an equally important role in the pictorial composition as does colour, in particular for a figurative representation such as in the given examples. One can again turn to works of the New Objectivity for reference to this. Painters of this style, like many of the avant-garde artists at the beginning of the twentieth century, used two or more perspectives for contemplating the same composition, to unsettle the observer's viewing habits and thus induce them to explore the depiction in more detail. The use of several perspectives simultaneously in one and the same work also relates to achievements of earlier styles, such as those of the Cubists from 1907, who oriented their image strategy on the associative frame of the experience of the beholder. The New Objectivity as an "anti-avant-garde avant-garde"¹⁰, however, did not use this to break with the artistic tradition, but rather their innovations wished to emphasize a link with the old masters. The New Objectivity artists wanted to correspond to the new visual experiences of their contemporaries and at the same time expand and reinterpret them. In this way, they mixed their achievements from different eras together and produced another reality - a pictorial reality. With the aid of a strictly objective presentation, New Objectivity painters incorporated this new pictorial reality into their works. In his work, Giuseppe Veneziano describes this process, albeit modified, as "fake reality": "Through my work I always try to get reality to interact with what is make-believe so as to generate a third dimension that I have called 'fake-reality'. In this third dimension the borders are so confused that the image tends to take the place of real thing"¹¹.

Multiple viewing perspectives, distinct fields of colour and an abstract depiction of the objects are just some of Giuseppe Veneziano's pictorial methods, along with the revival of those of the old masters. This includes searching for the compositional effect in the lengthy drafting phase. It is particularly well illustrated in a draft pencil sketch on paper and a watercolour study for the work *La Pietà di Superman*, which also documents the creation process. While Giuseppe Veneziano drew the pencil sketch in portrait format—similar in orientation to the format of Michelangelo's *Pietà*—allowing more room for the sky and the height extension, with the choice of a horizontal format for the watercolour he changed the impression to a depressing mood, clinging to the earth. Ultimately, the square format was chosen, which ensures the view is focused onto the subject and its meaning. In this way, the attention is more directed to the individual protagonists and one's gaze is denied the distraction of surrounding details.

Immediately after this initial glance one feels the need to interpret the protagonists and their interaction. Unlike traditional examples of *Pietà*, the dead body of Jesus Christ is replaced by the lifeless figure of a modern, comic superhero, clearly identifiable by his attire: it is Superman, as the title affirms. At one time this would have been considered blasphemy, today, however, the change in the character leads to intense reflection. The artist himself mentions in an interview that his works are open to several possible interpretations¹².

It is not just multi-layered strata of meaning which are inherent in this work, but also direct provocation. Giuseppe Veneziano says of the provocation in general: "Many provocations in art attempt to question preconceptions. This is why one must never speak of useless provocation. On the contrary, a work of art that does not provoke is useless"¹³. One might assume that the Church is not impressed by the fact that the millennia-old archetype of Jesus Christ has been replaced by a superhero, that the artist raises a comic figure to a modern deity and thus provokes the viewer to think. Presumably, this is also the guiding inspiration of the artist: people do not change, only external circumstances do. People will always need an example, one to be emulated, one with superhuman abilities.

Fallen superheroes often appear in the oeuvre of Giuseppe Veneziano. They mostly raise issues that revolve around the theme of coexistence. In the painting *La solitudine dei numeri due* (2011), the comic character Robin is cowering, lonely, a figure who looks vulnerable. Despite his weakness, he seems to be strong and to have effortlessly climbed to the top of the mountain. This can only accommodate one person, who seems to have moved to be within reach of the viewer. The figure seems so close that you would only have to reach out to give him a comforting pat on the shoulder. In *Super Cocaine* (2017), the protagonists are enjoying life without inhibitions—Batman and Wonder Woman have rolled up dollar bills and are using them as a tool for consuming drugs. In this way they are showing their darker side which is hidden from society and are conveying the message: Even superheroes are human. Even the otherwise amiable cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse, Minnie Mouse, and Goofy are plagued by self-blame and despair. The latter still holds the pistol in his hand after the act which he presumably committed. Is Mickey Mouse dead? Did Goofy shoot him? Were the two not best of friends or just "quasi amici" (2017)? Did Goofy kill his best friend after this one had learnt about Minnie's infidelity as in *Only a friend can betray you* (2017)? Even Snow White, the beloved Snow White, kills her saviour in *The Murder of Grumpy* (2017).

In order to practice social criticism and to question coexistence, Giuseppe Veneziano not only uses superheroes and other comic figures, but also examples of real people from politics and public life. For example, in *Mela Mara* (2011) he depicts the Italian show girl and later Minister for Gender Equality under Berlusconi Mara Carfagna in the role of Eve as seductress with the snake and the apple—symbols of the fall of man—naked, face on and in close proximity to the viewer. Donald Trump is portrayed as Darth Vader in *The Dark Empire* (2017): his mask removed, self-loving, complacent in front of a seemingly dramatic background. Is the merging of Vladimir

Lenin (presumably as a representation of his ideology) in *Goodbye Lenin* (2017) with the brand name on a red background an insinuation of hypocrisy? Where is the Pope going on a skateboard in *Scater Pope* (2017)? The artist proceeds in a similar way with well-known actors and works of art. The figure of Marlene Dietrich in her legendary role in the film *The Blue Angel* seduces the viewer to think further, as shown in *L'angelo azzurro* (2017). The same is true also for the depiction of Madame Récamier by Jacques-Louis David, who instead of lying on a sofa is on a modern daybed by Le Corbusier, as in *Madame Récamier* (2016), or the figures who invoke the sculpture *The Kiss* by Auguste Rodin in a lounge chair as in *The Kiss of Ball* (2016). Even artists are not spared: *Merda d'artista* (2011) joins together the eponymous work of Piero Manzoni with the portrait of Maurizio Cattelan. The ironic allusion refers to both artists, but does not exclude Giuseppe Veneziano himself as the author. He and his work are consciously or unreally sheathed in this irony. Giuseppe Veneziano says of irony: "Irony is a metaphor of life that I personally find very interesting. My paintings often embody irony, which I consider a vital element. Irony underlines a distance from reality, thus allowing entry to other worlds"¹⁴.

Several layers of meaning, complex viewing perspectives through abstract, vividly portrayed figures, the symbolic meaning of colour, the skilful use of irony and provocation, the contemporary and at the same time traditional: all this and much more embodies the art of Giuseppe Veneziano—this is how it speaks to the viewer. His works are an artistic enrichment and a kind of new beginning of Pop Art. They represent a constantly new and lasting relevance. Italian—Newbrow—Newborn—New Pop!

¹ There are numerous articles and several exhibition catalogues on the person and work of Giuseppe Veneziano. For an overview, see the bibliography for the catalogue *Giuseppe Veneziano, Un artista contro...*, ed. by Giuseppe Veneziano and Galleria Contini on the occasion of the eponymous exhibition in Venice, Italy, from 28.12.2014 to 06.04.2015, pp. 88-91.

² Beatrice Söding, *Pietà*, in W. Kasper (ed.), *Lexicon of Theology and Church* (LThK), 3rd edition, volume 8th, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 1999, Col. 289.

³ Michelangelo Buonarroti, *Pietà*, circa 1500, marble, 174 x 195 cm, St. Peter's, Rome.

⁴ Annibale Carracci, *Pietà*, circa 1600, oil on canvas, 156 x 149 cm, Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples.

⁵ It is believed that this was a work commissioned by Odoardo Farnese, and it may have been intended to be installed in the private chapel in Palazzo Farnese.

⁶ Michelangelo's *Pietà* can be viewed from all angles and was even supposedly designed by the artist to be at the viewer's eye level. It was however created for an altarpiece, which was

only necessary to view from one side. In addition, the client decided against the artistic goal of elevated positioning.

⁷ See Giuseppe Veneziano, *La Surreale cronistoria del reale*, ed. by Galleria Contini, Venice 2011, without pagination.

⁸ See Wassily Kandinsky, in *The Art Journal*, 6th year, 1922, H. 9, pp. 386-387, ed. by Paul Westheim. The publisher Westheim launched a survey entitled "A new naturalism?" Many well-known artists and critics took part in the survey, including Wassily Kandinsky, who changed the term "naturalism" to "realism".

⁹ The clouds could also hark back to Carracci, Giuseppe Veneziano has, however, softened their gloomy dramaturgy.

¹⁰ See Janina Nentwig, *Akt Darstellungen in der Neuen Sachlichkeit*, Peter Lang, Frankfurt am Main 2011, p. 395.

¹¹ Quote from: Ivan Quaroni, *La Rivoluzione d'Agosto*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria Studio d'Arte Fioretti, Bergamo 2007, p. 42.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

