

The art of transformation in the work of Francesco Pignatelli

By Camilla E Brown

Looking through Pignatelli's work it is immediately apparent that he is a truly experimental artist. Pushing the boundaries of photography, and his own practice, he seems unafraid to explore new ideas and techniques. It is unsurprising that he admires photographers such as Man Ray and Alfred Stieglitz, who shared these qualities of innovation. He almost appears to develop a new visual language for each series of work. And yet, despite the differences across the series, there are several overarching themes which recur. We see nature, an investigation into the spiritual and an interest in iconography today. There is also a pervasive sense of transformation of materials, context and ideas.

In *Reversed Renaissance* this transformation is readily apparent, as he shows us a reversed image of familiar Renaissance paintings such as Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* or Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. Taking a photograph of them, scanning in the negative and altering the colours, the final work is a Lambda print. This approach of mixing digital and analogue processes is used throughout his work. The artist states it is the perfect way to 'make a link between the digital and the traditional dark room'. It can also be seen as a form of contemporary alchemy and this magical transformative process seems key to reading and interpreting the work. The impact it has in *Reversed Renaissance* is that it casts a new light or perspective on icons that we are already familiar with.

Perhaps incongruently the visual technique he uses reminded me of x-ray views of such paintings. This relatively modern application of the x-ray has excited conservators and museum curators alike, as it unveils how the artist worked and reworked the paintings. Suddenly the images secret history is made visible, and we see literally underneath the surface of the painting. In contrast Pignatelli's approach gives the work less depth of field and makes the image more flat and abstract in its look. Rather than show us more and reveal more, it holds us outside of the image. Particularly it flattens the illusionary perspective the original works set out to showcase. The bright and bold blocks of colour become something else, and have an almost other worldly appeal. The impact of this is that it creates an uncanny sensation which forces us out of our passive complacency when viewing the art works.

Later we see installation shots of these images in sites such as a Church and also civic spaces like a hospital and jail. Those familiar with Thomas Struth's work will have seen his large scale, and staged, photographs of people looking in hoards at cultural objects and masterpieces in museums. These secular viewing spaces to a certain degree have taken these art works out of their commissioned context. In some ways this has potentially taken away the spiritual aspect of the work. In this way Pignatelli has sought to return his contemporary versions of these works back home in his installations.

Pignatelli's work seems as much about the viewer and how they navigate the work as the image itself. In his large scale images *Fragile* the viewer is central again, this time they are dwarfed by the work. Here the photographs immerse us into the woods, where we are engulfed by the trees. This taps into a long tradition in Christianity of hermits communing with nature in order to regain a closer connection to God. But it also relates to nature's strong role in many other religions and wider spiritual beliefs. To me Pignatelli's prints transport us to these woods and yet we are simultaneously made aware

of the artifice as the prints are crumpled and distorted. This moves the work from a flat two-dimensional plane to what seems closer to a Renaissance relief sculpture. This is further emphasised by the works being encased in Plexiglas. There is a sense of alchemy of material and matter here, of the trees depicted which have been turned into paper on which the image is printed.

In *Homeless* Pignatelli seems to take this one step further. This work evolves from his series *Handle with Care*, in which he photographs domesticated nature in the form of popular flowers people have at home the Rose, Lily and Orchid. Photographed on a black background these cut flowers are symbols of death. In *Homeless* these prints are manipulated by hand into objects that sit on the floor. Placed on top of each other in piles they could be garbage bags whose value it would seem has gone. They tap into contemporary sculptures concerns of materialising the dematerialised, making something that seems a concept or idea into a concrete and real thing. The objects become everyday and move away from the monumental scale of *Fragile* into the small scale. The flowers look more artificial and plastic than they really are with their heightened colour. Again transformation seems key here.

Finally in *Observatory*, Pignatelli moves from sculpting three-dimensional objects from photographs, to shooting through the photographs in order to rupture their surface. One cannot help but think of Lucio Fontana's slashes into a canvas here. By doing this he violently punctures the surface of the work forcing it to become a three-dimensional object. This cathartic and creative use of violence and force has been a strand of many contemporary artists work, in order to transform the object. The fact the shots have been fired behind the print and come through to the front, also seems significant. This stands in contrast to Fontana who was very much stabbing through his canvas from the front to back. This reversal seems aimed at the viewer in Pignatelli's again directly addressing them and bringing them into a conversation with the work.

The image through which the gun shots are fired is of the sky and the title of the series suggests a celestial connotation of these star-like forms across the surface of the image. Here the spiritual connotations return as one imagines the space above the sky, which for some might be Heaven or others the universe beyond, is being bridged or connected with earth by this act of firing. Again this act of transformation is both literal and metaphorical in the work. Overall Pignatelli's approach forces us to question what we see and think. In this way his art of transformation has a truly transformative affect on the viewer.

Camilla E Brown is an independent curator, writer and lecturer based in London. She regularly contributes essays to books and is a contributing writer for the forthcoming Thames and Hudson book Photography: The Whole Story to be published Autumn 2012. Other recent published texts include Cast on Dryden Goodwin's work Steidl 2009; and Sally Mann: the Family and the Land published by The Photographers' Gallery 2010.

She gained her MA in History of Art from the Courtauld Institute of Art, London. From 2000 to 2010 she was Senior Curator at The Photographers' Gallery and was previously Exhibitions Curator at Tate

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