

HYPERALLERGIC

Elise Ansel's Ab-Ex Annunciation

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One of the highlights of a semester abroad in France during the spring of 1974 was viewing the Joan Miró retrospective at the Grand Palais in Paris. Among my favorite pieces in that vast exhibition (which included the artist's *World Trade Center Tapestry*, later installed in the South Tower lobby and destroyed in the 9/11 attacks) were three paintings from 1928, in which the Spanish painter deconstructed Dutch interiors from the Golden Age.

On a visit to Amsterdam, Miró had purchased several postcard reproductions at the Rijksmuseum. Back at his studio in Mont-roig del Camp in Catalonia, he pinned them to his easel and started riffing. Looking at his *Dutch Interior I* alongside its inspiration, *The Lute Player* (1661) by Hendrick Martenszoon Sorgh (c. 1610–70), you can appreciate the fun he had applying his surrealist sensibility to the elements of the interior, distorting, changing pictorial emphasis, and generally cavorting with the old school material.



Denys Calvaert, "Annunciation" (c. 1597), oil on copper, 20.8 x 15.4 inches

The motive for these acts of transformation? Aside from the simple joy of the send-up, Miró was confronting the art of the past, exploring the possibilities of a re-generation. The Dutch interiors served as a springboard to leap into new idioms.

The stated goal of New York City-born, Portland, Maine-based painter Elise Ansel is "re-creating, re-visioning, and re-presenting" paintings from the past. Subjects of her bold re-renderings have included Édouard Manet's *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe* (1863), Nicolas Poussin's *Flight into Egypt* (1657), and Caravaggio's *The Taking of Christ* (1602).

For her show at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, the artist chose to remake Denys Calvaert's painting *Annunciation* (c. 1595). This small painting — 20 by 15 inches — from the host museum's collection is typical of its genre in the same way as the Dutch interiors with which Miró messed. Calvaert, a Flemish/Italian painter (c. 1540–1619), depicted the angel Gabriel paying a visit to the Virgin Mary to announce her divine role: future mother of Jesus, the Son of God. The lily, the lectern, God looking down on the scene: the painting features all the standard elements of the familiar subject.



Elise Ansel, *Revelations II* (2015), oil on canvas, 24 x 18 inches



Elise Ansel, *Revelations VII* (2015), oil on canvas, 60 x 48 inches



Elise Ansel, *Revelations IX* (2016), oil on canvas, 18 x 14 inches

Hung in a small inner gallery on the museum's second floor, the exhibition, titled *Distant Mirrors*, opens with a clutch of seven graphite and felt-tip pen drawings, abstract notations made as a means for exploring the armature of the Calvaert painting. The drawings are uniformly energetic. Without the source painting across the room, you might not make out the trceries of its composition through the tangles of linear and color notations.

As Miró did with his postcards, Ansel used these drawings for guidance, pinning them to a wall of her studio. Turning to oil and a palette parallel to that of the Calvaert, she created a series of nine brushy abstractions, channeling de Kooning as she moved from *Revelation I* to *Revelation IX* (all 2015), progressing from semi-representational to complete abstraction.

Miró deleted a female figure in his version of Sorgh's interior, and Ansel rings dramatic changes on the *Annunciation*. The artist has said she is interested in transforming works in which women are seen as the Other. Among noticeable renovations: the angel has no head and God and Mary are subsumed in paint strokes — a complete Ab-Ex makeover. By the time we reach *Revelation IX*, Calvaert's painting has been reduced to a collection of loosely-swiped, broadly-brushed patches of color, like that moment in a jazz performance when you wonder how the musicians are going to make it back to the original theme.

In an essay on the work, "Dialoguing 'Interweavingly' to Self-Affirmation," Hanétha Vété-Congolo, exhibition curator and associate professor of Romance Languages at Bowdoin, offers a theory-heavy explication d'art. "Elise Ansel is a pictorial cannibal," Vété-Congolo states, "who does not practice simple ingurgitation but performs complex regurgitation of an incorporated product to advocate for a multiplicity of perspectives, for freedom, the right to self-definition, and even for justice and balance."

While this rather unappetizing analysis may help build an academic reading of what we witness in Ansel's de-/re-constructions, it doesn't address the satisfaction derived from the paintings and drawings on display. This artist wields a mean brush — and pencil and pen — in her variations. She is a serious and inspired action painter whose work at its strongest brings Howard Hodgkin's paintings to mind, who employs similar painterly shorthand.

In her poem "Annunciation," Denise Levertov encourages the viewer of pictorial versions of this momentous event as formulaic as Calvaert's to look more deeply into the narrative. She writes:

*...We are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.*

*The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.*

God waited.

While Ansel professes a related mission in her artist's statement in the exhibition brochure — "to translate images from the Western canon into a personal lexicon that depicts female experience from the inside out" — at face value her work is not overtly political or feminist. If the works in this latest engagement, by distilling the imagery into gesture and color, have rescued the Virgin Mary from a locked-in world, defusing age-old archetypes and symbols in the process, they have also simply allowed the painter to carry out her own annunciation: some good old luscious paint for your viewing pleasure.