

Elena Sisto's Personae

Essay by Stephen Westfall

Let's begin by discussing the term, "persona," because understanding what it means and how it might be applied to a body of imagery in painting is crucial to appreciating Elena Sisto's extraordinary body of work. The term refers to the social mask that one wears out into the world, a mask that may overwhelm our deeper individuality if we continue to identify with it when situations that call for more complicated responses arise. It can also refer simply to a fictive role adopted by an actor. Since "acting" of some kind is required of most of us in many different social situations, it's easy to see how a theatrical "self" can develop pathologically, like Norma Desmond imagining she's back in her glory years in Sunset Boulevard.

But painters and auteurs may provide an incredibly rich aesthetic and narrative experience when they play with personification. In film we need only think of Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp, or Buster Keaton's sad sack. In painting, there's Picasso's serenely fertile Maria Therese and raging Dora Maar, along with his late portrayals of himself as both matador and conquistador and Philip Guston's Klansmen. In literature there are Robert Browning's and Fernando Pessoa's speakers (including a character named Fernando Pessoa in *The Book of Disquiet*), Shakespeare's Lear and Hamlet, Roberto Bolano's eponymous character in *The Savage Detectives*. The list is nearly endless.

This exhibition documents the three major modes of portraying feminine personae that have occupied Elena Sisto's painting for the last ten years. In fact, Sisto has been exploring the personified figure for at least 25 years, beginning with her painterly re-castings of Nancy, Ernie Bushmiller's comic strip character from the 1930s. Other artists had appropriated Nancy, notably Andy Warhol and Joe Brainard, along with post-modern comic artists Bill Griffith ("Zippy, the Pinhead") and Scott MacCloud, but Sisto is probably the only female artist to have made such extensive and beautiful use of the character as a personification of the feminine psyche. Sisto's Nancy is anxious and precocious, a giant little girl in social interactions of adult complexity.

In some of these paintings, she is overmatched by the situation and can wear a look of desperation. In others she seems befuddled by the very existence of the painterly world she inhabits. Sisto is taking the opportunity to paint more schematically in these paintings, pushing the flat world of cartoons into painterly volumes so that Nancy sometimes seems just barely held together by outline, or obscured by a wash that catches light like a cloud. Imagine her surprise!

Sisto is a New York schooled painter who studied with both Mercedes Matter and, most importantly, Nicholas Carone at The New York Studio School. It was a heady time. Her schoolmates included Robert Bordo, David Humphrey, Joyce Pensato, and Christopher Wool. Philip Guston passed through, and though Sisto never studied with him directly, she was to assimilate the tactility of his drawing with paint and his Italian Scuola Metafisica influences: Morandi, de Chirico, and Carlo Carra. Steeped in such a painting culture, she is reluctant to make a distinction between abstract and representational painting. After all, her teachers practiced both and tied them both to drawing that enforced a flexing pictorial space which torqued the entire picture plane. Behind everything was Cubism, and its half-life as post-Cubism.

Perhaps the biggest question in 20th century painting was how far to take the abstracting energies unleashed by Cubism. Neither Picasso nor Matisse (who assimilated Cubism without being one of its creators) ever left representation, specifically the figure, totally behind in a push to Cubism's abstract implications. Mondrian and Malevich did. Klee lightly danced back and forth like some kind of darting dragonfly, and Kandinsky found his own route to abstraction through Expressionism. By the end of WWII, the American Abstract Expressionists appeared to have settled the matter: the most ambitious painting was going to be abstract. Minimalism was really a technocratic reiteration of the provisional triumph of the abstract in Abstract Expressionism. But embedded in this procession were the ghosts in the machine of De Kooning's women and Pollock's late figures. And when Guston breathed a beery narrative life into his own figures, accreted from the writhing brushstroke of his abstract paintings, the old ambivalences resurfaced. West Coast painters were developing their own figurative evolution out of Abstract Expressionism, but Sisto wasn't taking her directions from them. She had cast her lot with the New York School and

the particular manner of establishing narrative that was exemplified by Guston.

Guston developed a lumpen codex of objects and personages that rotated in and out of his pictorial tableaux: a lightbulb, cherries, a clock, body parts, a rug, the eyes of Musa (his wife), Klansmen, wine bottles, cigarettes, bugs, a patched coat, paint brushes, his own head as a lima bean shaped Cyclops, etc. Many of these forms were comprised of interchangeable parts: Musa's eyelashes could also be the legs of a bug or the tassels of a rug. But was the flexing space that held everything together. The grey or pink fields his protagonists cavorted or conspired in was both a bearer of hazy light and a fleshy semi-solid, a "skin" of paint that his forms moved through as though they were half a part of it, the way space sticks to everything in dreams. It's also the space of Max Beckmann's later paintings.

Sisto's Nancy dissolves into and reemerges from a similar sticky dream space that's also the taut membrane of the picture plane. So do her subsequent figures from the 90s: a balloon-headed baby girl and a Tin Man speaking a blank, comic word balloon. Most of these figures are painted as portraits that fill the pictorial frame from the neck up, rather than actors in a more elaborate, narrative mis-en-scene. But they are definitely protagonists in a psychological narrative of some kind. The baby girl's head changes color from painting to painting. She has something in her mouth: a pacifier or a gum bubble. The Tin Man's speaking head is viewed from slightly underneath, as though we were looking at him from a smaller person's (child? wife?) point of view.

Sisto was raising a young daughter with her husband at the time and though it's important to insist there's no direct corollary to these characters, it is clear that her work has become preoccupied with the psychology of developing personhood. She has said they reflect some of her own moods and her psychological readings of family friends, besides her immediate family, and here the transference and mutability of persona becomes vividly recognizable as a form of play. In the spirit of play she subsequently made paintings of her own figures from imaginary fairytales (a double imagining) and then a remarkable group of portraits of older women with trussed up hairstyles that she refers to as her imaginary Spanish ancestors. I think of these characters as the Fairy Godmother "aunts" of the young girls who were to debut in her paintings that commenced

the new century.

All of which deposits us where this exhibition begins, with Sisto's luminous Daughters series of three quarter portraits of adolescent girls in dresses with simple geometric design, which double as pleated abstract paintings, like Malevich's peasant costumes updated and given supple volume. These are perhaps the most restrained paintings of Sisto's career, though more loosely painted than hyper-real, with some of the simplicity that Beckmann summons in his portraits from 30s. The other precedents I find are the standing solo standing saints in Piero della Francesca's predella panels. Like Piero's saints, Sisto's girls are lit from above. Their background is more like a wall than a cloudless Tuscan morning sky. Sisto is creating an atmosphere in which the sensual and sacred are intermingled.

By this time her own daughter was entering adolescence and she was reminded of what it was to be young girl growing in self-awareness and as yet, perhaps, not entirely aware or sure of her allure. The girls, essentially life sized, look directly at the viewer. Their gaze seems to have fallen upon us just at a moment of introduction; they are our interlocutors, simultaneously shy and engaged. In an interview conducted with the painter Ron Janowich in 2002, Sisto insists on the fictive or composite identities of these girls and the larger subject she is able address through them:

I'm trying to create a figure that has its own reality, not a reality taken from life, and to make a painting that works as well on an abstract level as on a content level. I want it to have a sense of life and the weight of life, but not be a copy of life.

...

It's also about self presentation – the construction of an identity and the presentation of that identity to the world. . . . These characters are just at the threshold of being a part of a public world, coming out of a private one. That brings into action all kinds of things like sexuality and design.

This “threshold” space is presented as something numinous, or at least a space where the numinous can be inferred. It’s where a pending loss of innocence can be compensated by a gain in awareness. Sisto is a feminist painter because she sees each stage of development in a woman’s life as a stage of empowerment. But as her comment above makes clear, she is never relinquishing a purposeful formal dialogue with the entire history of painting for the sake of illustrative content.

By 2005 Sisto’s three quarter portraits were giving way to portraits of slightly older women from the neck up (there had been a few before, notably Mara (2002), but she belongs with the younger girls). As with all her figures, the faces of the bust portraits are composites or entirely made up. They are set against simple backgrounds that most often suggest a crepuscular outdoor twilight. They have a simultaneously melancholy and enchanted air, as though they are setting out on or just becoming aware of the immanence of their futures. I think of them as contemplating college or some other journey far from home.

Sisto’s concentration on the face, whether in front or profile, allows her to more fully play with the gaze of the subject. Almost all of them seem to be looking at something to one side beyond the frame of the picture, rather than the frontal regard of the younger girls. As with the Spanish Ancestors, the narrative suggestions in these portraits don’t conflict with the simultaneous awareness that they are made of paint and painterly drawing as Morandi’s endlessly recombinant bottles. It’s as if we can see into their coalescing into images as a happy byproduct of Sisto’s otherwise “abstract” building of a painting’s surface.

And yet, the narrative pull of characters into a representation of the psychic states of the female passage into adulthood persists. Many of Sisto’s most recent paintings present various iterations of women art students, as though the girls looking beyond the canvas in her earlier paintings have decided on their futures as makers and spinners of their own narratives in paint. Some of the recent paintings are portraits of young women lost in thought in front of a painting, perhaps their own or that of a classmate. Others show a student working, with postcards of paintings behind them pinned to a wall. There is a happy resonance in these paintings with Matisse, who loved to make a picture gallery out of the material picture plane “behind” a figure. And, of

course, there is the resonance between the easels, brushes, postcards, and paints that surround these young women and the menacing, crepuscular studio attributes of a raging, aging Guston.

Sisto herself is a revered painting instructor who has taught for many years at the School of Visual Arts and as a regular Visiting Artist at Chautauqua, among many other colleges and residencies. Like a mother seeing herself in her daughter and her daughter's friends, she clearly empathizes with these young women, as sensual in their youth and fiercely concentrating in their practice as a Hellenistic Greek warrior or athlete. In fact, it's become obvious that for the last decade Sisto's women have been modest inheritors of Picasso's Neo-Classical figures. They are more relational in scale to everyday life and more familiar to anyone who has ever identified with another's growing pains and promise. They also possess the same combination of simplicity and purposeful expression in their features: a similar combination of looseness and clarity in their expressions.

Over the last decade Sisto's career took a backseat to motherhood and teaching. Now she has a new gallery, Lori Bookstein, and this travelling exhibition to bring her work to the attention of a wider public. What they will behold is an artist wearing her acculturation and range of skills lightly, possessed of the deepest insight into her means and sympathy for her subjects. Any serious consideration of her body of work would reveal an artist who takes her place among the best figurative painters of her generation.