

Storytimes and Timelines: The Art of Jane Gennaro

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By Dominique Nahas

Mark Rothko once noted, “There is no such thing as a good painting about nothing.” The cultural speculation of where, exactly, does “quality” dwell in an artwork and what qualifies as “good” as opposed to “not so good” content continues unabated. Such a line of inquiry will naturally lead to this one: What makes an artwork worthy of contemplation and discussion?

In a recent exchange I had with the artist Jane Gennaro the conversation addressed what lies at the center of “worthy” art. This is a key question and one that every artist bears down on. Gennaro responded that the artwork’s “story” is what differentiates potentially high cultural achievement from potentially low cultural achievement (or merely intended but failed cultural achievement). Gennaro’s reply, keeping in mind her (other) distinguished career in the acting and entertainment world, is perceptively salient to the world of visuality. Indeed, “the story” that we, as viewers, “get” or “don’t get” --- or the art’s storylines we “get to question” in our own individuated way as receivers of visual stimulus --- is at the heart of the experiencing of art. How and how much we are “moved” or “touched” in subtle often nearly imperceptible and unanticipated ways by an artwork, by a sensibility, determines how we value it and its maker.

Three major stories unfold in Jane Gennaro’s artwork in the form of the *Eggs and Bones*, *Hair and Models*, and *Kinderdraussen* series. These narratives move along a major autobiographical axis and are distinguished by three separate viewpoints: introspective, extrospective and retrospective.

The *Eggs and Bones* assemblages use found organic forms and animal remains. These hermetic and interiorized works invoke Gennaro’s ontological musings on contingent Nature and its life/death cycles of which we are part. *Eggs and Bones* are Gennaro’s speculations and meditations on species evolution, survival, propagation and finitude.

*Hair and Models* as a series is vested in addressing human nature, social mores, behavioral dysfunctions and coping mechanisms. The artist explores the interplay between culture and the self-identity and self-image construction of women. In this group the artist takes samples from her own body, her hair and forms all over surfaces to create energetic fields on paper and canvas. At other times the artist creates decoupage silhouettes cut from fashion magazine ads, forming hybridic human-like creatures with monstrously elongated and attenuated limbs in the form of silhouetted art-nouveaush design patterns. With its allusions to corporeal alteration, bodily transgression and the slippage between opposites (living and dead, human and animal, surface and depth) *Hair and Models* is unsettling work. It pertains to the oscillating appetite of the American psyche that veers between repulsion and desire that culminates in the objectification of the female body.

*Kinderdraussen’s* mixed media collages offer commentary on nostalgia for time passing and the sadness of its passing. Old family objects’, ephemera and mementos are used along with animal bones as associational triggers for compositional play in these works. Of *Kinderdraussen* and its template of memory Gennaro writes in her journals “Memorabilia is such a beautiful word...it evokes longing, dreams, hope and fear with memories of places, people, stories and things...real and imagined.”

Jane Gennaro’s artwork is closely observational in tone and temper. We sense a fastidious application of touch along with what appears to be a preternaturally precise handling of various materials and media. Gennaro’s studio methodology stems from what I call “mindful intuition.” This approach balances the rational and the spontaneous and produces what appears at first to be highly personal even idiosyncratic work yet such work remains firmly under the control of a systematized application of materials whether they be canvas, paper, animal bones, string, hair, coloring book illustrations, or garters.

The artist organizes her materials in a vibrantly straightforward yet, somehow, unpredictable manner. The result is the production of significant form. She is a master in the use of rhythmic structural devices such as repetition, seriality, or doubling --- techniques that mark her production with whiffs of the

meditative and the cultic, both aspects attended by a fetishistic presence. The artist effectively incorporates natural materials and organic remains abetted by an assured use of a selective palette within a limited tonal range that eschews artificiality. This creates the effect of a rigorous visual storyteller recounting stories that refer to often conflicted and ambivalent sensations and drives within the (social) body and (cultural) mind. This is done with artistry, namely in a freshly conversational, contemporary yet iconic way that infers timeliness and timelessness. For example, Gennaro's incongruous juxtapositions of natural and cultural artifacts in *Kinderdraussen* inform her take on gender roles and false idealizations assigned to children. Unanticipated comedic and even grotesque visual effects enliven her visual world and give her vision an edge. Using proportions and sizes in each of her series that are commensurate to the personal stories that beguile us the artist explores complex issues in highly thematized ways yet in an intensely intimate manner.

The end-result is truly "worthy" art, that, as Jane Gennaro puts it, "seduces us with questions." There is no better story than that.

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