

Do we really have to talk about art?

Daan Bauwens on redefining male eroticism in Sam Scarpulla's work

“Do we really have to talk about art?”

Admittedly, this was a rather surprising question to be asked by an artist who's asking you to write about his work. Sam was sitting in front of me, naked in the mobile sauna we rented out for winter. With that hint of innocence and vulnerability that one who knows him, knows about. Our third friend Michael hadn't turned up for the morning appointment, though we might have happily could have made use of his psychoanalytic insights into Sam's sexually-tinted work. This winter of 2020 the three of us all three experienced what you could call our covid sexual prime. But this morning Michael's prime had turned into an exchange of too many difficult words in difficult constructions. Some dates risk getting out of hand. It was a crisp winter morning with a deep blue sky, one that reminded us of those on the other side of the Atlantic.

We do not need to talk about art, no. A painter doesn't use words, if so he would be a writer or a poet. But that still begs the question why Sam paints what he paints. What inspires him to depict simplicity? There's an up, down, right and left in his paintings. The motion shows. The balance is always there. The painting is a still of an end-state. The finish in the search for poise. That is what I see. The colours make me relive joys I had as a child when I imagined other-worldly places which I then thought possible. You never forget about those but you need to be reminded of when your mind was allowed to lose control and played with impossibilities galore.

That, necessarily, leads us to the eroticism in Sam's work. Eroticism, not as an excess but of what lies beyond and we do not know of yet. A safe playing field to be naked in. That what makes us long, that what makes us desirous. Slowness, even a still, silently waiting at the tip of your fingers, is erotic. “You can get in trouble with this”, was one of my notes of what Sam said and I intuitively thought meaningful. In trouble because of the phallic, maybe, and the role that it is given in this work. Sam's depiction of the phallic is on equal terms with what is called yonic - for obvious reasons a forgotten or seldom used term. Both phallic and yonic are strong and soft at the same time in these works. They have found their balance and inner peace. It makes one think of the first stroke, at the giving or receiving end. “Each painting is a way to get to know the canvas”, Sam said, “it is like reaching for another dimension.” Treating phallic and yonic on equal terms means inviting in female desire. To give it the place it deserves. Both of our desires. So it blends. It floats. It glides. V for vagina or void. Pistil in the middle. Laid bare. Z for zen. B for bowl. U for uterus. Uteri. In proportion. Proportionally. Perpendicular. Gradual. Personal. Up close. G for a number of reasons. Hit the spot. It is pornographic at times. But does that hurt? We meet in harmony. But what we do, disturbs as it always does.

“I had no idea what I was painting”, Sam tells, “Longing, maybe. I was at my father's place in Italy. I lived like a Buddhist. Painting in the morning, in the afternoon, cooking and then a film. I guess what I painted was related to human shapes, the passion of an embrace, maybe. But abstractions of vaginas? People immediately picked up on the sexual elements, to my surprise. So that is what it became. It makes sense, I guess. I do consider myself to be a very sensual person.”

Then, without obvious connection to what was just said, he adds “these are revolutionary times”. In Sam's most graphic depictions of fire and sex, the phallic encapsulated in the yonic is a display of innocence. It's acceptance. Is it about decolonising, as in stripping symbols of their worn-out meanings and imagining, focusing and thereby producing what is possible and new? It is innocent. A male chapter in the book of feminism? It is due.

The next morning the three of us were sitting together on the bench in the mobile sauna. With Sam and Micheal pouring buckets of cold water on themselves on the parking lot after a session, I felt a little uproar of inspiration, jumped up and opened the door. “Sam”, I said, “remind me of the next sentence for your text: I want to change your channel.” I felt it was appropriate and still don't know why. But art doesn't need an explanation, does it? We should not speak of art.

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