

## DANA VELAN TRANSFORMATIONS

McClure Gallery,  
Visual Arts Centre  
350, avenue Victoria  
November 4 - 27, 1999



Fire project, 1998, photography.

Fire has long been a phenomenon of great interest to social anthropologists and social theorists including Gaston Bachelard and Joseph Campbell who called fire "One of the earliest signs of a separation of human from animal consciousness". Working in a large scale with oil sticks on transpagra, a translucent material that allows light to pass through the paper, Dana Velan has created a body of large scale works that recreate images of fire as a primal, spiritual force we associate with energy – both creative and destructive. Velan's approach is thoughtful, reflective, a cultural journey of epic dimensions. Through a series of steps that have involved looking at primitive dwellings, natural forms, forms built by animals, forms built by humans and now fire itself, Dana Velan has gradually built a holistic vision of the artmaking process. These large scale drawings are the result of a search within for a greater intuitive sense of our links to the natural world.

Since ancient times humanity has sought to capture fire. Vestiges of fire sites have been found in the caves of Peking man dating from 400,000 B.C. The extensive history of human involvement with fire as a source of sustenance, a subject for storytelling, religious rituals and rites, makes it surprising so few artists chosen to work with fire as a subject. Fire as primordial, intuitive unity links our dreams with the conscious. As Velan states:

"Why fire? Because of its mesmerizing and hypnotic beauty. Because there is nothing as changeable, ever-moving and elusive, yet so present. Fire as a symbol for metamorphosis. Fire as a metaphor for life... Fire connects us to the raw, basic essence of life. Fire is the reminder of where we came from. It makes the mythological stories and ceremonies of some present day tribes alive for us."

Dana Velan's style is immediately expressive, textural, makes use of bold outlining, and earth-based colours. While some of these large scale depictions have a documentary look, others integrate a sense of passage, of a journey, of things we cannot see as much as what we do see in them. Velan uses fire as imagery in her artmaking practice much as the "primitives" once captured fire. This ritual of re-creation informs her work with a holistic sensibility. Velan's search involves building an environment that celebrates our eternal links to primordial forces. These works do not simply objectify fire, make it a subject. The act of drawing revolves around the dilemma of object/subject, creation and perception, a constant problem in modern and post-Modern art. As the post-Modern re-creates meaning, original meanings are lost, yet they are still as relevant as ever!

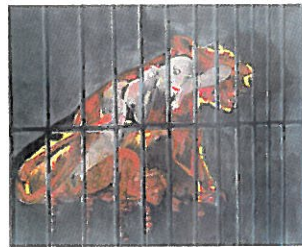
The most arresting of images Velan has created for the McClure Gallery show is a 420" x 96" wall drawing of fire. Darkness and light, vivid colours and a sense of unending ritual are evoked in this powerful piece. Both as an environment and as a subject to look at, this expansive work evokes images of reflection, resolution, identification, of universal energy. Other studies are close-up views of fire. As if entering into a dream state we sense a volatility, a mesmerizing force that captured our ancestors imagination in ancient times. Other works display the embers, what remains after a fire has followed its course, the bodies of once living tree trunks amid an array of smoke and embers. Dark, charcoal blacks and greys create intense contrasts with the bright resonating orange and red colours in the live fire works. Photo documents of fire have been brought together into large "books" presented on a table in the McClure Gallery. One opens them to read imagery instead of words. The imagery in these books communicates the feeling that fire is like oral language or legends, something more alive in fluid than solid form. Fire, like art-making as process, is an oracular vestige of primeval life that captures life's mercurial essence. In seeking to recognize these forms of explosive fire, regenerative fire, unending fire, an allusion to the immateriality of form and matter gradually builds up. The message is that the earth is on a journey of transformation just as we are. Notions of civilization become unconscious, conjure up associations that are as illusory and transformative as fire. Dana Velan's art has a handle on this temporal nature of life that fire transmits. Her art raises our

awareness of the linkages between nature and culture, investigates the age-old ties between humanity and nature. At the heart of Velan's art is this sense of endless mercurial movement - like fire - in many directions at one and the same time.

John K. Grande

## FRANCESCO CLEMENTE CONTEMPLATIVE VOYEUR

Dominion Gallery  
1438 Sherbrooke W.  
February 5 - 26th, 2000



Unborn, 1994, aquatint.

In the early 1980s when the art world was buzzing with talk of neo-Expressionism, Francesco Clemente attracted a great deal of attention as one of its leading proponents. At the recent Guggenheim Museum show in New York, Clemente was attacked by critics for exhibiting a "courageous frivolity", lacking any real conviction in his delightful dalliance with artmaking. But his *14 Stations of the Cross* seen at C.I.A.C., Montreal in 1987 and a centrepiece of the Guggenheim show, is nothing less than brilliant, stunning. Clemente's sources range from Tantric symbolism, to Baroque painting, to alchemy, sex, the occult and tarot. An intracultural voyeur who keeps a studio in India, Clemente is part classicist, part contemplative. From a billboard-sized portrait of Grace Jones, to Indian miniatures, to images of death and fecundity, Francesco Clemente is a master appropriator. He has an eye for imagery and symbols, borrows from Asian and Western cultural sources at will, hybridizes these sources, and paints like a lover, not a fighter.

The hybridity and trans-cultural vision that made Clemente a leader of the Italian neo-Expressionist "movement" involves a simultaneous break with tradition and a borrowing from diverse cultural traditions. Clemente's current show comprises a series of stunning large scale print-works pulled in Rome in edition sizes varying from 40 to 70. There is a dreamy character to these works, and an eclectic, nomadic sense that

is sometimes lost, sometimes found. Spiritual and sensual, they recall the influence of Fuseli and Blake, but always have that European sense that one cannot escape history. The vibrant colours and visual analogies display a theatrical interest in eternal themes of life, death and transcendence.

In the aquatint *Unborn* (1994), two figures, that of a male nude and a tiger are fused together. Printed in deep amber, red and yellow colours the bones, fiery matter and dense atmosphere suggests a theocratic cosmology of life. The unborn is neither a monster nor innocent, but instead a fiery force whose fate is inescapable, prescribed by a pre-natural worldview. A couple embraces in a blue sea-like ocean in *Conception* (1987), dwarfed by the curvilinear and fan-shaped shapes of shells placed in an *ad lib* fashion in the foreground. The sky is a collage of toy-like warplanes. Some are blue and others pink. *Friendship* (1987) turns the visual phrase of a black dancer with bandage-wrapped legs, who has three white shoes in his hand into a metaphysical dream reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico, but the style more fluid is. An almost cartoon-like, reptilian head leaps out of the left side of the composition, directing our attention again to this curious dancer, who sits on classical stone steps. Clemente's grip on allegory is almost feminine, introspective and whimsical.

There is this sense that all events are linked by mysterious forces in *All That Remains* (1990) an etching and aquatint one of the largest pieces in the show. In the lower section, a child clasps a mother whose body is outstretched nearly the full length of the piece. A similar somewhat androgynous body, is linked to, and clasps the mother's legs, repeating the pattern. Geometries arranged in varying linear and cube-like configurations occupy the upper section of the piece. The structures are self-contained studies, while the bodies are inter-dependent, and grasp their way into space. There is a sense of immanent tragedy, of unfathomable events that surround and eclipse these subjects, somehow adding to the sense that Clemente's scope on the human situation is ageless, escapes the bounds of contemporaneity to somehow reform it all into his own, highly eclectic cosmology. Clemente treads through life like an angel on a mission, builds a feeling out of it all, endlessly reinventing the subjects he studies and is drawn to. These works are, to say the least, joyful incantations!

John K. Grande