

Introduction to the catalogue "Francesco Pignatelli – Reversed Renaissance" published in May 2006.

## **Reversed Universe**

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These are all-too-familiar, historic images, but the veil of illusion has been torn off to reveal them reborn as something new. It's like seeing an old friend smile in a way that you have never seen before, a peculiar fusion of *déjà vu* and a totally fresh sensibility. The brain is stimulated, perception is sharpened. A powerful seduction draws our gaze into a fascinating world of images we've never seen before.

For *Reversed Renaissance*, Pignatelli has selected masterpieces of Renaissance art. All incorporate established motifs: the Annunciation, the Virgin and Child, the Last Supper. All address religious themes, have been renowned for centuries and have been scrutinized by innumerable eyes. What they also share is the cumulative grime of interpretation, amassed through the passage of time.

The reputations of these and so many other historic paintings are now so firmly established that they seem unshakable. Encountering their world, we find ourselves imprisoned by conventional thinking. Struggle as we might to free our senses and sensibilities, we are slaves to an academicism that has tacitly imposed its seal of approval, its received interpretation. Today, shackled by information and knowledge, we find it difficult indeed to free ourselves from conventional concepts in viewing our artistic heritage. Is the act of gazing at those images with brand new eyes enough to restore the purity of our vision?

The *Mona Lisa* is Leonardo da Vinci's most famous painting. Famous for the riddles that surround it, it offers plenty to stimulate our imaginations. Was there an actual model? Who was she? What was her relationship to the artist? Why is she smiling so enigmatically? What is the real meaning of that smile?

This scandalous masterpiece has been the topic of an assortment of scholarly books and historical ruminations, as well as figuring in novels and movies. Given this huge historical burden, who would have the courage to challenge its value as one of the greatest works by one of the greatest masters in the history of art?

Pignatelli's method is to call into question a painting's status as a true image - a positive - by presenting its antithesis. The paintings in *Reversed Renaissance* are recreated through the eye of the camera, with the information the light conveys reversed on the negative. Pignatelli then works his own definitive art upon that negative image to create his finished work. Film is a transparent medium. Images are produced when light passes through it. The film takes the place of the eye's retina, absorbing the light that passes through the camera's lens and then through the film's own transparent substrate. As light passes through the medium we call film, accumulated memories are stripped away and the image is purified. In the image reflected from the film's smooth, stiff substrate, the negative replaces the positive.

Painting is a world in which colors are added through addition of colored materials, the oil or tempera of the paintings. By contrast, the medium of photography captures its vision through the passage of light through transparent film, where color is subtracted. From this fundamental difference in character comes a latent difference in creative form.

In the paintings we see not only the effects of the layered colored materials and brushwork: the veil of time also covers the surface. Form results from adding colored

materials that become progressively thicker. Over time, the color may darken or fade. In, however, the reversed world of Pignatelli's photographs, the images of these paintings are freed from discoloration. The thin, transparent film of the negative restores the purity of their creation. In the process, images are also freed from the values added by the fixed associations of their appearance on the plaster walls of churches, the cracked surfaces of altar panels, or canvases.

We encounter a masterpiece. That encounter with the real form of a painting we know as a highly familiar part of our information store is accompanied by comparing it against the coding for the image already input into our memory, producing a "yes, that is the way it ought to be" confirmation. The multitude of reproductions of them have made such iconic figures as the Madonna, Christ, the Archangel Gabriel, and Mary all too familiar. Repeated exposure during the course of our education has burned them into our brains, and it is that memory, reproduced, that we experience. Rare is the individual, then, who can recall his first encounter with La Gioconda. Her existence is something we take for granted, for the painting in all its fame has always been there for us. Or perhaps we find ourselves face-to-face with The Last Supper. Be it in Paris or Milan, in that moment in which we stand before a masterpiece acknowledged the world over, just how do people encounter the painting itself?

The photograph was, to begin with, a memory device designed to capture a particular moment. Pignatelli's unique contribution to photographic art is to use it instead as a way of erasing the memories piled up since a painting was created. He denies or excludes the memories deposited layer by layer over hundreds of years. This act of purification, washing away the wall of time, dramatically shrinks the distance between the time in which a masterpiece was born and the time and space in which we view it. The effect is a virtual experience of a particular moment from the past that we cannot in fact touch. It is rooted in photography's fundamental ability to recall an image through the light and shadow created at a certain point in time. His approach, thus, rejects the absolute value ascribed to interpreting a painting as a masterpiece, with all the added value that has accreted upon its intrinsic value as a painting. Rejecting all that conventional values have attached to a painting, Pignatelli addresses the work itself with a purity and directness that restores spontaneity.

The longing for historical things rich in stratified sensation - the pages of history - arouses our imagination in relation to things that existed in the past. Observing the familiar image from within is a stimulating and fascinating intellectual pleasure. Perhaps that is why at the time that photography was born, the relationship between photography and painting was much debated, the theoretical arguments burning at white heat. The nineteenth century photographers addressed the issue head on; Pignatelli's approach is different, but the same question drives him.

Seeing the world reversed, with light and shadow changing places, expands our horizons. The complementary colors invert the language of the message. The Virgin Mary's blue robe, which communicates here innocence, turns yellow, blue's complement. West becomes East, the holy becomes the profane, bright lights are reversed into shadows. The process is precisely the same as that which converts positive into negative images on film. When the Annunciation, the Last Supper, and the Madonna and Child are reversed, what meanings do they convey? If the angel and Mary switch places in the Annunciation, if the place of the betrayer is switched in the Last Supper, if the positions of Madonna and Child are inverted, what does this say about these religious motifs, or about Renaissance painting? Antithesis gives birth to antithesis. A worldview is destroyed; unprecedented, totally new icons are created. In this visual world of endless, mysterious play, we who live in a new century find a new intellectual pleasure.