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149  Rise of the Phoenix

“Only the wisest and the very stupidest who can not change” Confucius

Miracle is 3 months ago all is in the air... and now the invitation cards and catalogs arrived from Italy!

Showing art in Italy is same as bring coal to Newcastle: the saying nowadays coal is in use only if there no other way, nuclear power is the thing sometime body heat but I talk here is about the inside job not about the externals: more stuff and more of stuffs!

Show and sale art to make big money, getting famous is the artist dream alas there isn’t the case: life isn’t about success or failure, it’s about doing thing I was wonder that I ever could show art again because I had been dead for a longtime. Self-centered, alcohol and doing my way do me into do nothingness besides stay in the bar dream that I am the best thing since the slide of bread then afterward feel sorry for myself that the world do not capice me; blame on God, on the women, the gays, Jews, blacks and all who nearby!

I left Paris 36 years ago, no one remember I a painter as my friend Dr. Jacques Latournerie said it now is the time to revive my name specially now I quit sucking booze and cigarillos: there is a credibility in what I man doing; come to believe there is a Power greater than myself restore I to sanity... I can live again! Sober is Power! Cara Italia, Vive la France, God blesses America!

NGUYEN DUCMANH
Velocity is foremost in the art of Nguyen Ducmanh, the Hanoi-born painter, poet and memoirist who has made New York City his home, on and off, since 1965. Ducmanh’s slashing calligraphic strokes speed over the canvas like those brazen homeboys who zoom around the urban centers of his native Vietnam on motor scooters, scattering everything in their path. In fact, in a recent group show at Allan Stone Gallery, the prestigious Manhattan venue where he has exhibited since the late sixties, Duke (as he is known to his Western intimates, not only as an “Americanization” of his name but also because the moniker suits his rakish persona) showed a characteristically energetic canvas. It featured one of his gestural ideograms splayed out on a pristine white ground. Out of its swirling rainbow impastos sprouted a clump of real hair, suggesting a high-speed collision between a Chinese character and a small animal!

A viewer unfamiliar with the artist’s sporadic neo-Dadaist caprices might assume that a good sized brush had disassembled under the pressure of an especially emphatic calligraphic gesture, but for the fact that Ducmanh generally eschews that most common painter’s tool for a heavily laden palette knife. One can almost imagine him brandishing it like the late John Belushi’s manic Samurai character to execute his paintings in a swift sequence of slashes, slaps, stabs, and shrill screams. The precise placement of his forms at the center of the primed canvas, however, gives the lie to that comic-romantic notion, hinting at a less impetuous mode of attack, more akin to that of a Zen archer. While he may not lumber and ponder like Franz Kline, laying down big black girders of pigment, or get as viscously mired in agonies of revision as Willem de Kooning, it is obvious nonetheless that Nguyen Ducmanh must step back periodically to calculate and ruminate between lunges. If his abstract forms have an ejaculatory energy equivalent to that of his rhythmically fractured broken-English prose (which most often chronicles his amorous adventures in the wildly exaggerated manner of a slapstick Henry Miller), his compositions are by no means random or slapdash.

For all his gestural flamboyance, there is none of the public buffoonery of the posturing “action painter” ala Georges Mathieu in Ducmanh’s approach. He is far closer in spirit to that other doubly gifted painter-poet Henri Michaux for his desire to write undecipherable pictures and draw imaginary words. Unlike Michaux, however, Ducmanh did not become enamored of the calligraphic impulse as an exotic aspect of a foreign culture. Rather, it was native to his Asian heritage, with its literati tradition, although his forms are generated spontaneously and are not beholden to any existing writing system. Ducmanh’s conscious influences are, in fact, international: He marries the muscular physicality of Abstract Expressionism to sinuously formed arabesques of his own invention, forging a dynamic synthesis of Western heft and Eastern grace with fluid slashes of of vibrant color, their variegated streaks of red, yellow, green, and blue often enlivening a single stroke of the spatula. Set against their white grounds, his colorful shapes swell and disperse in space, generating an exhilarating variety of formal configurations from canvas to canvas. They waver and dance, performing an array of wisty twists, slippery skids, and serpentine permutations akin at their best to the succulent linear articulations of de Kooning.

Some of Ducmanh’s compositions consist of a few spare, well placed gestures, while others are comprised of denser concentrations of layered slashes that create intensely clustered energy constructs at the center of the white canvas.

Although Ducmanh has by now lived the better part of his life in the West—having resided in France from 1950 to 1965, before emigrating to New York—and is very much the mainstream modernist in style and sensibility, his work still suggests the ancient Asian principle that the quality of expression in every stroke is determined by the personal qualities of the artist who creates it.

In his writings—antic accounts of bold schemes, epic drinking bouts, and comic seductions—Nguyen Ducmanh proclaims himself an inveterate rascal, a recovering alcoholic, and a struggling sex addict. His paintings, on the other hand, proclaim only themselves and blaze with the conviction of the actual. Not merely art objects, but records of movement and action in time, they encapsulate all the reckless vigor of an extravagant and bohemianly exemplary existence.

Ed McCormack
(Gallery & Studio N. Y. C. 2001)
untitled - 4.2000
acrilico su tela,
acrylic on canvas,
acrylique sur toile,
cm. 49.5 x 40.5
He was born in the Tonkin, Hanoi, Vietnam. He has lived in Paris. He lives now is New York. He is an American. Thanks to Roberto, here he is in Italy. Like the ferret of the song: “He went through here, he will go there again”.

Nguyen Manh Duc, a/k/a Ducmanh, was born in Hanoi, on March 16, 1933, during the time of the French occupation. His childhood is like a novel by Marguerite Duras. When his father dies, Due is only three months old, he has only an older sister. He is an orphan. The family is wealthy, but his mother is a gambling addict: she isn’t really motherly at all. Soon she marries again, a non-commissioned officer of Czech origin (this man’s father was enlisted in the Foreign Legion). Due soon has seven half-brothers and sisters. The orphan isn’t happy but he is precocious. By the age of four, he has learned to read alone, that’s “his joy, his comfort” he says. He is not wanted at home: he will go to the French Jesuit School. They always manage to detect precocious pupils. His wish for drawing is still latent but the child is gifted. He does well in the classical fields. But then he is grown: he is seventeen old. Perhaps he will demand his part of his inheritance?

The scene changes: it’s no longer Marguerite Duras, but Charles Dickens. The idea is simple: he will be sent by ship to Marseilles. Even the crossing will not be paid: a friend will take care of it when he arrives. This is how in 1950, Duc lands after twenty-two days at sea and heads to Paris. The teenager is alone, penniless, in the “City of Lights”. Fortunately, two uncles welcome him “by Providence” he says. Soon, Duc begins to satisfy his hunger to learn. Of course, he visits art galleries and museums. At the Louvre; he particularly admires “Le Radeau de la Meduse” by Gericault. He goes to hear lectures at the Sorbonne. He enrolls in the Julian Academy, in the Graphic Arts School of La Porte des Lilas. He begins to paint by copying classical masters (Rouault, Marquet, and Vlaminck...).

But he has to earn a living. All the more so as he marries and gets a child. For seven years, he is a typographer at the printing plant Grou-Radenez, 11, rue de Sévres, Paris.

I meet him in 1957. He ha already crossed the threshold into abstract painting. He lives on the rue de Charonne, in the neighborhood of La Bastille with its ancient working class traditions, the district of Gavroche and the “Paris Mysteries” by Eugene Sue. He uses lacquers in his studio and, by night, he sells his work on the terraces of cafes, driving his old “4-Chevaux” car piled up with portfolios. First he would drive to La Coupole following in Modigliani’s footsteps. Later he goes to the terraces of Les Deux Magots and Le Cafe de Flore. He meets, among many others, Roger Vadim, Giacometti, Man Ray, Robert Guccione (owner of Penthouse Magazine). Everyone buys something from him. César buys a canvas and ushers him into La Colombe d’Or of Saint-Paul de Vence.

At the same time, a few galleries become interested in him: the Gallery du Haut-Pavé and the Philadelphia Gallery (subsidiary company of the Fleicher Gallery in Philadelphia, USA). Some time after, the great René Drouin, who had shown, among many others, Fautrier’s “The Hostages”, Wols, Dubuffet, Kandinsky, after the war in his previous gallery at the Vendome Square, now, with his infallible flair, has spotted the young Ducmanh. Iris Clert, whose slogan “le Contemporain du Futur” introduces the artist to Lucio Fontana who purchases a dozen of Duc’s miniature paintings. So Ducmanh’s work starts to be diffused: René Drouin, partners at the time with Leo Castelli, introduces him at the René Metras Gallery in Barcelona.

The artist takes part in many group shows in Belgium, Holland, Germany, Switzerland (at the Kasper Gallery in Lausanne) and France (at the Argos Gallery in Nantes which belongs to the great surgeon, Dr. Audouin, also the owner of the Hartman Clinic in Neuilly).

The future seems to be promising. At this time, an accident occurs: on a winter day, Ducmanh is working at the rue de Charonne in an ancient cellar without ventilation. There’s a kerosene heater. Vapors catch fire: Explosion. Firemen inundate the cave. All of the artist’s work there is destroyed. From
now on Ducmanh will have to work in the courtyard. For him, really, it is too much.

Will he have to be a worker forever, instead of an artist?

Ducmanh dreams about America. He speaks only a few words of English. He has no money.

The three of us try to help him: René Drouin, in spite of recent reversals of fortune. David Hamilton, the photographer of evanescent young girls, and I. So, in 1965, Ducmanh flies to the USA with his wife (their son has been sent to Finland). Some of us think we will see him again in three weeks. We don’t know him as well as we think we do.

He is used to adversity. He has little saved, but above all, he has great confidence: he will be a painter and only a painter. For the time being, he is successively a dish-washer, a waiter, a taxi driver.

But the wheel of fortune is turning: he is awarded two successive Rockefeller grants. He becomes an art instructor at the Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville. In 1973, he gets a personal exhibition the Allan Rich Gallery. He takes part in many group shows and become a US citizen, at the height of the Vietnam War.

Then a man enters in Ducmanh’s life: this man will be crucial to his fate. This man’s name: Allan Stone. The great gallery owner in New York, who provides the artist with a steady income. This finally allows him to find autonomy and stability.

Thanks to him and a self-help program, Ducmanh can free himself of alcohol. Since 1988, he has not drunk a drop of it and his life has changed. He is able to devote himself not only to painting but also to writing, his new “hobby”.

Thank you, Mr. Stone.

Of his paintings, what can I say? On such a sensitive subject, a friend has difficulty in expressing himself. Lacquers have given way to acrylics. These make it possible for him to do collages and mixed media. The gesture is majestic. Some painters use the brush. Ducmanh uses the knife.

If he is asked, the painter says the impulse come from the gut. Two words are often repeated:

One English word: “Stroke”
One Japanese word: “Ken” memories.

This work has been absent from Europe for 36 years and is not recognized here. But now, thanks to Roberto, it is getting a foothold again in the ancient world.

Let’s hope a new era is dawning, on both sides of the Atlantic.

MOSTRE PERSONALI
Expositions Personnelles
Solos Exhibitions

2001 Galleria Peccolo, Livorno, Italy
1994 Galerie Bieri, Basel
1980 Galerie A. G., Paris
1978 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1975 Shelburne Hotel, Dublin
1973 Allan Rich Gallery, NYC
1968 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1966 Galerie Kleine, Aachen
1965 Club des 4 Vents, Paris
1964 Galerie des Capucines, Paris
1963 Galerie Argos, Nantes
1961 Galerie Kasper, Lausanne
1960 Galerie A. G., Paris

MOSTRE COLLETTEV
Expositions Collectives
Group Exhibitions

2001 The Art Show, Seven Regiment Armory Park Ave 67th St.
2000 Talent 2000, Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1999 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1998 Chicago Art Fair (Allan Stone Gallery)
1996 Allstone Gallery, NYC
1996 Gallery MBM, NYC, Collage
1995 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1994 Station Gallery, Katonah, NY, Collage
1993 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1992 Capital Cities/ABC, 37 Artists on view, NYC, Abstract painting
1991 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1987 Ray Kerr Gallery, NY
1986 Gustavus Adolphus College, MN
1985 Gallery Marko Tanaka, NY
1980-92 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1978 Ray Kerr Gallery, NY
1976 “Young Drawings” Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1973 Gallery Castagno, NY
1970 De Vore Gallery, Boston, MA
1969 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1968 “Young Drawings” Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1966 Allan Stone Gallery, NYC
1965 Gallery Castagno, NY
1964 Saigon Biennial, Vietnam
1963 “New European School”, Lausanne, Anvers, Zurich, Brussels
1961 “Essai pour une Peinture de Demain”, Galerie Rene Drouin, Paris
1960 “5 New Painters”, Galerie René Drouin, Paris
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- Phoenix's From The Ashes
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"Where Everything Is Music"
by Jelaluddin Rumi, translated by Coleman Barks

Don't worry about saving these songs!
And if one of our instruments breaks,
it doesn't matter.
We have fallen into the place
where everything is music.
The strumming and the flute notes
rise into the atmosphere,
and even if the whole world's harp
should burn up, there will still be
hidden instruments playing.
So the candle flickers and goes out.
We have a piece of flint, and a spark.
This singing art is sea foam.
The graceful movements come from a pearl
somewhere on the ocean floor.
Poems reach up like spindrift and the edge
of driftwood along the beach, wanting!
They derive from a slow and powerful root
that we can't see.
They open the window in the center of your chest,
and let the spirits fly in and out.
Stop the words now.

"Where Will You Be For Eternity?"

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WHERE WILL YOU BE FOR ETERNITY?