

# MARC STRAUS

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## Sandro Chia, Artist-Saint-Hero by Donald Kuspit

There's Sandro Chia, the artist-saint, slaying the dragon in *Il Pittore*, 1978, and there's Sandro Chia, almost forty years later, no longer Saint George, but still a saint: Saint Francis preaching to the birds—ducks in one work, penguins in another work, both 2016-17. In another painting he's a tormented saint, his hands bound together—perhaps symbolizing a time when he was too distraught to paint, too full of self-doubt, more broadly suggesting the suffering that went into making his art—but accompanied by three lovely birds, forming a colorful rainbow, lined up in a diagonal ascending straight to heaven, implicitly symbols of the Holy Ghost and spiritual salvation. The ducks and penguins are grounded, the birds fly freely. Indeed, he seems to be in heaven, as the sky-blue stone on which he sits suggests—it rests on a pitch black ground, suggesting the melancholy underlying the hopeful blue. It is an updated, streamlined—essentialized—version of Albrecht Dürer's *Melancholia I*, 1514, an allegorical rendering of the artist's melancholy position, as the art historian Erwin Panofsky convincingly argued in his interpretation of Dürer's masterpiece. With the wonderful difference that Dürer's unholy bat is replaced by Chia's holy birds, suggesting that the Italian Chia is more hopeful than depressed—emotionally oppressed—than the German Dürer, a difference suggestively attributed to the difference between Catholic Italy and Protestant Germany, the warm South and the cold North.

Chia is clearly a visionary, and what his paintings envision is his state of mind: he is their subject matter—in one work the young, narcissistically self-absorbed painter looks into the mirror of his art, in which he sees his inner self, and in another work he sees himself in old age, walking with the aid of a cane and accompanied by a dog. Crucially, the blue bird of happiness—another version of the Holy Spirit—hovers beside him. The rooster, with its red comb and feet and blue body, that accompanies him in another work is another version of that inspiring Ghost.

I am suggesting that Chia's paintings are symbolic self-portraits—portraits of a man whose life has been devoted to painting, a point made by the Joseph's coat of colors he wears in two paintings. In one he is accompanied by a demonic black horse, suggesting the drive—instinctive urgency—that informs his paintings. That same horse, ridden by a naked young woman, appears in two other paintings. As the angelic red birds that surround her in one work suggests, she is his heavenly muse, the object of his spiritual desire. In one work the horse floats in the sky, in the other work it stands on the earth, and the naked muse has become pale and gray, her black hair turned white with age. Her body has lost its flesh color, down to the detail of her bright red lips. She has become a ghost—the ghostly muse of old age rather than the physically fit muse of youth. Chia looks youthful and strong in most of the paintings, his vigorous body preserved in timeless art.

Chia is taking stock of himself, making a final summing up of his art—of his devotion to the heroic figure, grandly present in all the paintings, and, more subtly, his subsuming of abstraction in its representation, as the abstract patterns that appear on the figure's shirts, in effect becoming a part of it, make clear. The pattern is gesturally complex and “maximalist” in the

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work with the ducks, geometrically simple and “minimalist” design in the work in which he is gazing at his reflection in the mirror (implicitly a painting in process), indicating his complete mastery and understanding of gestural and geometrical abstraction. In his art representation incorporates abstraction, treating it as decorative design, emotionally suggestive but beside the larger point of the all-too-human figure, the winner in the battle between abstraction and representation that raged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One may recall that when Chia first appeared on the American scene in the 1980s, the minimalist Donald Judd dismissed his figures as backward-looking “academic mythology,”(1) missing the point that the so-called academicizing and mythologizing of the figure are a way of acknowledging its inevitability and indispensability. The figure is the conveyor of existential meaning, and its elimination from art—carried to a pathological extreme by Judd’s emotionally hollow “specific objects” (delusionally regarded as progressive art)—is responsible for the much noted dehumanization of art that has occurred in modernity.

Chia’s new group of paintings lack the painterly fervor of his early works—they are dramatically expressionistic in their handling as well as in their themes. Beside themselves with instinctive energy, they carry figurative expressionism to a fresh extreme. The new paintings are calmer, more concentrated and pithy. It has been said that in old age one tends to be more epitomizing, suggesting that Chia’s late paintings are a sort of epitomizing allegory of painting. The individual is their focus; Chia is the emblem of sustained individuality in an alien modern world—not only the individuality of the artist but of every person. He may be misunderstood—are the ducks and penguins the dumb, uncomprehending public, while the seals, one “artistically” balancing a ball on his nose, surrogates for the artist (they look up to him like his pets)? — but he holds his own. He looks inward even as he faces outward. These new paintings are introspective. Chia stands alone but he is not lonely. The psychoanalyst Anthony Storr, in his discussion of artistic creativity, notes that the late work of a serious artist has no need to “persuade or convince” the public—has no need for the expressionistic pyrotechnics, not to say emotional excess, of much early work. He not only works in solitude but celebrates his solitude. Where Chia was once extroverted, he has now become introverted. Storr writes: “The great introverted creators are able to define identity and achieve *self-realization* by *self-reference*, that is, by interacting with their own past work rather than by interacting with other people.”(2) One has to see Chia’s late work as a kind of revisionist commentary and clarification of purpose of his early work. Responsively interacting with his early figures, he achieves new self-understanding by accepting his solitude.

## Notes

(1) Donald Judd, “A Long Discussion Not About Master-Pieces But Why There Are So Few of Them Today, Part I,” *Art in America*, 73 (Sept. 1984):13

(2) Anthony Storr, *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (New York: Free Press, 1988), 147