

Identity Card for States of Mind: *The recent work of Seboo Migone*

*We live in a fantasmic world, in which
little by little we make ourselves at home.*

Alberto Savinio

It was not until very recently that it occurred to me to ask Seboo Migone the subject of his doctoral thesis at art school. He seemed somewhat taken aback for a moment, as if thinking I should already have guessed. "Kafka, Gogol, and Philip Guston." The answer was revelatory: two European writers and an American painter; an incongruous combination of elements possessing all the synthesis of a mathematical formula that could reveal the submerged points by which Migone has from the beginning charted his navigations on canvas. The elusive traces of narrative that manifest themselves through the camouflaged paintings and drawings of Seboo Migone sometimes call to mind their mirror opposite in the work of writers: painter employing narrative elements as writers assume certain painterly techniques. Flaubert once wrote to a friend, "I feel like a traveller crossing the desert on a camel. I am the traveller, I am the desert, but I am also the camel." This conundrum could just as easily serve as a description of a painting by Seboo Migone. The sound of a military band heard arriving from a distant street to the ears of Franz Kafka; the dread aroused by Nicolai Gogol's cloak: both could be at home in a painting by Philip Guston. The art critic Bernard Berenson, stressed the plastic qualities of Gogol: "a strong, decided swirl, converging into a heavy, whirling point of involution, and emerging from that in an ever broadening evolution." Kafka, Gogol, Guston: in each case, icons of subjectivity possessing all the validity of "truth" through artistic rendering of an emotional cargo. Seboo Migone, like every artist, has felt the pull of predilection and circumstance, sensibility and epoch, coming to discover and to reclaim for himself his field of endeavour in the zone wherein creator merges with created: the realm of metamorphosis, a vague terrain in which mental processes intermingle with landscape, external and internal, where geography blends with psyche. The sensation for the viewer can be like that of listening late at night as two barely perceptible languages fade in and out on the shortwave radio. It is like the cinematic narrative technique of *voce fuori campo*: the voice off-screen. Each artist establishes his own arbitrary vocabulary of symbols to give life to his own cosmology. Seboo Migone reclaims the painter's privilege to practice the grand conversation with the self. Each of his works appears before us as a soliloquy, an interior monologue of sequenced questions like those a musician poses himself and as quickly answers. Like the meditations of the nightingale in the rapture of its endless variations, this interior monologue has its own tempo, its own innate rhythm: it is enough to indicate that the *disjecta membra* which constitute these emotive bursts all eventually reassemble themselves, just as nature itself reveals her secrets little by little, in fragments, before the perception of the whole perceived through elements thrown about in seeming disorder. The paintings as well as the drawings of Seboo Migone reaffirm that our mental activity is made up of a sort of perpetual loop, a palimpsest of superimposed visions, the on-going build-up of continual monologue that stops now and then to segregate images or thoughts out of the chaotic turmoil between our exterior surroundings and our inner life of the mind, a sort of fermentation, a tempestuous process of gestation, the necessity of reassembling or re-recording the flow of consciousness in visual terms, which compels both writer and painter to employ it as a melodic line. This is most particularly pronounced in the artist's densely worked drawings in charcoal. If even the most casual examination of our inner consciousness shows us that this presentation is far from objective, nor does the painter work on one plane alone, but rather on several simultaneously, balancing recollection off against

immediate perception, one overlapping the other until at every point the multi-layering become explicit. Supremely dismissive of random chance, nature draws no line between important things and the insignificant; there are no "accidents." Nature had nothing to learn from Surrealism. The earth's attraction operates equally on an ant as on an elephant; nothing is indifferent or irrelevant. *Nature loves to hide itself.* So does the artist.

I don't like to dictate to my subjects. I prefer an image to emerge spontaneously. If I have an idea or see something, the first thing I'm concerned with is forgetting it. That is the only way I can get close to the initial feeling or thought. Yellow is a wonderful colour as it can be so elastic in describing the light of the sun as well as artificial light, a light of the earth, a glow that comes from within. Add purple and it becomes earth, add red it becomes blood or fire: it brings me into communication with Spanish painting.

Seboo Migone's paintings and drawings possess a *bucolic hinterland*. It is significant that the artist, for all his love of the school of New York abstract expressionist painters, received his training in London, while his inward eye always turned back on the Tuscan landscape which remained encoded in his way of seeing. Yet we are very far indeed from landscape painting in the strictest sense. Such an interpretation would be as unsatisfactory as calling Bosch a *paysagiste*, or Arcimboldo a still life painter. The phenomenon we encounter is instead the employment of natural external fact as departure point for establishing the *field* of the work, a portal leading toward the internal workings of the imaginative mind. These are paintings that defy interpretation, they remain stubbornly "context-resistant." I suppose the term *mental landscape* is as applicable here as it is in the topography of Samuel Beckett's natural backdrops, latent with immanence, for while the paintings are full of intentionally ambiguous evocations of incident, which may include remembered temperatures, humidities, aromas, all of which play upon the sensory memory of the viewer, at the same time they are also inhabited as in dreams by an incongruous cast of unusual creatures who haunt the woods like the Wolf lying in wait for the unsuspecting Little Red Ridinghood.

The bigger a painting is, the closer it comes to feeling like a natural fact. This is a paradox, as nothing is less natural than a monumental painting conceived in a locality like the Val d'Orcia. Depth obtained through density of surface/mark: a tactile perspective. I enjoy the pull between painting taking you closer to things and it taking you somewhere else. I would like paintings to take me Somewhere Else. In the last years it has become more clear that paintings and drawings are imagined as sources of internal light, as screens. In the paintings, light is more painterly, physical, in the drawings light is more like that from the headlights of a car, or the moon. I learned to recognize two energies in conflict, one that desires to reveal a clear image, that desires to make a direct statement, and the other that wants to negate, to hide, to create a third dimension.

There has always been something going on in the paintings of Seboo Migone that reminded me of *Les Illuminations* of Arthur Rimbaud, even something as elemental as the separation of field from wood which runs throughout these prose poems as a sort of refrain. And here one could also cite the radical originality of Paul Klee's ambitions, which took painting far from the problem of the realistic representation of objects and instead set out to capture states of mind. This journey is a deceptively idyllic, and, like that of the "witness" who would seem to be narrating the acts of the *Illuminations*, the painter strives above all to recover a primary perception, the first glimpse, the sensations of earliest infancy in which the state of utter marvel is imprinted on all of our experience, unmarred as yet by the hoard of accumulated memory. The child's discovery of the world. Gauguin sought in Tahiti what he had caught glimpses of in Bretagne, D.H. Lawrence kept looking for it from Etruria to Oaxaca. "At the theatre, adults regain the ferocity of childhood," wrote Jean Cocteau, "but never their clairvoyance." Seboo Migone seems to be striving to achieve this vista of

unfiltered perception, as William Blake did in his *Songs of Innocence, Songs of Experience*. The vehicle to communicate this state in painting has been sought by artists as diverse as Giorgione and the protagonists of the Blaue Reiter. In its extreme form, this quest manifests itself in sort of percussive dissonance found in music as diverse as Arnold Schoenberg and ghetto rap, in painting from Pollock to Penck. The insistent percussive throb of *Le Sacre du Printemps* came in answer to as much a need as did the atonal wail of John Coltrane's saxophone. As if answering some dietary deficiency, dissonance serves as a sort of drastic cure, and intuitive refuge from some unnamed malaise or ailment of the spirit, as dogs sometimes start to chew grass or seemingly rational individuals succumb to the mute urge to get a tattoo.

My paintings are accumulative families in which the odd-one-outness of each character is balanced against the other. Human character, landscape, still life emerge in unexpected combinations to me. Psychological and naturalistic colour are of equal importance in shaping paintings that record the shift between internal and external worlds, the passage between night and day. Those artists who experienced the transition from figuration to abstraction and vice versa, such as Wassily Kandinsky and Philip Guston, are of interest to me. The contrast between purity and impurity, the balance between fairy tale and horror story needs to be re-dressed today...A very strong influence I have to acknowledge is that of children, their anarchic impulse has crept under my skin.

Halos, auras, seem to shimmer like living forces around the figures that occur and reoccur in Seboo Migone's paintings and drawings, just as Pierre Teilhard de Chardin spoke of *énergie spécifique d'arrangement* in the schematic cycle of entropy and regeneration, the play of order and disorder, the transition between germination and maturity. In Migone's paintings, the "specific energy of arrangement" insistently evokes the fluid zone wherein immaterial energies are continually released upon the living world, with the interpenetration of forces living and inanimate, as witnessed in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, igniting aura in the moment of conjunction. From the pre-Ovidian world of metamorphic readings of the transactions between man and nature, between man and the divine, there have come down to us such ancient cosmologies as those repeated today only in children's bedtime stories, where animals speak what is on their minds to their fellow creatures. Likewise in the paintings of Seboo Migone we encounter such leitmotifs of allegorical animism.

Tales of innocence and malice, of good and evil, have inspired many storytellers; in fairy tales they are in strong antithesis, good is very good and bad is very bad. In Philip Guston's work an interesting contrast occurs between the spontaneous and the studied, the primitive and the sophisticated: in some way he manages to twist the way one thinks about one or the other.

Spielen ist Experimentieren mit dem Zufall, wrote Novalis: *To play is to experiment with chance*. While in the act of painting, Seboo Migone would seem to be playing out his own ritual recreation, one that culminates, with all the solemnity of child's play, in the bringing into being of an autonomous demonstration of the living world, a psychosphere in which matter and spirit come into union. The more the artist's inessential accessories drop away, the more his efforts reveal their radical force, and their timelessness. While Migone pillages every source available to him for his images, including photographs taken himself, he is far from adhering to the post-Richter *école* of academic photo-realism. In an age of infatuation with, and ever-increasing enslavement to, technological prosthetics both mental and physical, which accelerate regression to decrepitude, as if against the grain Seboo Migone insists on the painter's primacy, taking his sacred craft all the way back to its most ancient of origins, restoring to new vigour primordial intuitions. Goethe, offering advice to Caspar David Friedrich, encouraged him "to study clouds from a scientific point of view..." Seboo Migone would most certainly agree with the painters answer: "That would be the end of landscape painting."

Standing before the paintings of Seboo Migone I was struck at once by the highly accurate translation from the actual mood of early summer landscape beyond and the testimony rendered on the canvas: the murmuring undercurrent of unspoken crepuscular anxiety lurking in the stillness of the receding hours of the day, the exact humidity, temperature, the single simple lamp mutely glowing from a house all but hidden against the darkening profile of a hill of cypress trees. It was the unsettling suspension, the half-extended promise, the freeze-frame of Giorgione's "Tempesta," where rather than depiction the painter stalks the very embodiment of the fleeting moment itself. "The imagination has a history, as yet unwritten," said the writer Guy Davenport, "and it has a geography, as yet only dimly seen." If for De Chirico the metaphysical touchstone was a deserted city square, or for Warhol an airport lounge, the locus of Seboo Migone's recurrent reverie would be that specifically Tuscan landscape which he seems to carry within him as the geographic precincts in which the drama his imaginative process is played out.

The process of making a painting is like you are going into a different world where time works in a different way. Paintings are like time machines. It has to do with an arm, a brush, and things that happen. Unlike easel painting, working on a larger scale means having less control: the painting leads you, not the other way round. It is like a ship, something that moves and takes you somewhere else. Story telling is very present and perhaps more evident in the drawings. It comes out of the use of the materials themselves. Finishing a painting is very hard. You're not familiar with what you've just done. It's strange and familiar at the same time. And there is always the question in the back of your mind: "Can this be a painting?" And that is a very open question.

A "boundary" between day and night, between the rational and the subconscious, underpins the inner world of Seboo Migone's paintings. Paintings can possess temperatures and humidities, even aromas. Throughout *Les Illuminations* of Arthur Rimbaud one phrase occurs again and again: *à la lisière des bois*, at wood's edge: there where a narrow country lane passes along the woods to one hand the open fields to the other, the demarcation between dark and light, chiaro-scuro, chaos and geometry, the wild and the cultivated. Along with Rimbaud, Virgil's "Georgics" could be another good companion when venturing into the terrain of Seboo Migone's paintings, from forest to field, from darkness to light. In these fields no general is depicted triumphant on horseback, no saint kneels before a shrine at the wood's edge. There is only a bucolic void, populated by the ever-shifting enigmatic tribe of the living. Dissembling and resembling, the figures we encounter in Seboo Migone's works appear poised at the brink of some essential moment, the moment of anticipation, of imminent crisis. Supernatural occurrences seem to await from one minute to the next. But what if the expression we take for horror is actually one of awe? The answer was perhaps best given by James Joyce: "To find ourselves we must first lose our way." Again, at wood's edge, where the eye lends its colour to the world.

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