

Adriana Tomatis Souverbielle

(b. 1981, Lima, Peru)

“South American Racism”

Adriana Tomatis, from an important family in Lima, is a contemporary painter and an upper-class inquirer. Like reportage, her pictures ask why ‘white’ is privileged? She means, in *double-entendre*, white as a skin color and white ‘elites’ as political regime. Whites of European origin govern her country, and its entire landmass is often covered in a white-grey fog mist and clouds – akin to her paintings, which indeed demonstrate white as the master value. “Why are ‘dark’ Indian facial features ‘low class’ in her native Peru – wherein such ‘types’ are not granted entrance into “Euro” establishments? And, by allusion, the same is asked of all Meso- and South America, in which there is often a pervasive prejudice against ‘Indian-ness.’ In both cases, Indians are ironically and intimately enmeshed with Euro families, serving as maids, cooks, guards, gardeners, nannies, etc.

In art-speak, an important concept in painting is “clear-dark,” almost always used in its Italian form: *chiaroscuro*. It was first coined to describe the stunning Baroque contrasts between shadow and light in paintings of that era, which had not been a feature of the prior Renaissance and Mannerist traditions. Notice that “black” is rather demeaned by the Latin ‘*oscuro*’ or obscure, while ‘white’ or ‘lighted’ equals ‘clear.’

Black means dark, hell-bound, blind; whereas, white is heaven, salvation, purity: “A blackguard is never pure as the driven snow.” To this day, racism exists in Mexico and South America with creole families – immigrated from Europe and never having mixed with the indigenous peoples – ‘on top.’ ‘*Indios*,’ with no foreign blood, are the lowest “caste,” while ‘*mestizos*,’ or ‘mixed’ peoples (rare in Peru), neatly fit into the middle, somehow. The *ultimate* irony for a painter is that, while colors of the rainbow are called ‘hues,’ black and white are called ‘values,’ because a drop of either into themselves or into a color creates shades. Since black is the *absence of color*, it is theoretically the least ‘colored,’ while ‘white,’ *containing all the colors* is theoretically the ‘most colored’ – go figure.

Tomatis, whom one can think of as a bohemian, or at least a ‘liberal,’ questions this caste order, in spite of the fact that she is of the upper classes. Being an artist, she is somewhat prone to being a renegade, perhaps holding out against her family’s wish that she should have enjoined business, the law, engineering, architecture, commerce, medicine, etc. – the only areas of pursuit considered legitimate by *depassé* European aristocrats, if one also includes the military. In old Britain, the arts and music were the lowest professions into which ‘Sloan’s’ let their sons pass.

So Tomatis, an expansive spirit of great empathy and even irony/satire, is not only expressing ridicule and disbelief toward her country’s class system, but is also personally

rebellious against the axioms of her own family, and career-wise, not following their 'plan.'

Critics have pointed out that Tomatis' use of white covers her canvasses like 'the fog of an unenlightened elite' – white and 'politely' racist to the core. This blanching enshrouds the figures of Indian nannies, maids, and helpers. In Peru, they must dress in all white, akin to nurses, to serve families – as if whitewashed to duty among white people and children. Insofar as white children are 'covered by Tomatis white,' they are the same color as the world they inhabit – the 'better' match than those brown-skinned caring for them, and veiled by the white motif. In being ghosted, do they disappear, uncomfortable attachés? Is this a scrim game of Euro, racist denial: servants everywhere, yet invisible?

“Memory and Perception”

Tomatis paintings are so carefully and expertly crafted that one wonders at her facility for brushwork – silken strokes almost rococo in shape and pattern. (Note that baroque and rococo are the grand styles most present in historical arts of Latin American.) Tomatis' paintings seem to recall the past, as in “the veils of memory,” or to project into the future like a *Polaroid* photo developing in front of one's eyes. Due to the dynamics of retina/brain exchanges, her works may at first seem unreadable and lacking content. As one looks longer, however, the paintings gain saturation of hue, as the retina feeds the brain, and the brain begins to consolidate the image over a few minutes' time – like seeing a long gone friend in a crowd, and having to stare awhile to make sure the facial features are at least of the same shapes of the presumed one. In short, her pictures have to 'penetrate white' before they are seen, or vice-versa viewer-wise. What's more, the more one looks, the more one perceives her painting's politics.

From initial glance to a longer look, gallerists have noticed different viewers reading the same work by Tomatis but differently. In one painting of *gallinazos* on top of a building, others have seen fish jumping around into grid-like pools, and still others – leaves blowing across an empty plaza. One thinks of two witnesses to a crime, who describe the culprit as, on the one hand, tall and dark, and on the other, medium height with a mustache and brown hair. We may accept her point, given the evidence both in police work and in art viewing, that different people will perceive widely varying versions of the same subject. The artist seems to have returned full circle to the question, “Why do I as artist/empath see the absurdity and injustice of my country's class structure, while others 'stay blind,' solidly accepting the status quo as best for the country – and a given, by way of history?”

“Technique”

Tomatis' technique is rather 'divine' in its conception and execution, and if not divine then exceptionally refined and 'new.' In an Andean country, one must certainly grow up aware of the concept of isomeric maps – those that through their ascending and descending color values indicate various elevations of the terrain being mapped; these are also used in navigation to indicate the varying depths of the waters. The concept of up and down seems to speak to class hierarchy. Ironically, it was the 'darkest' of native

Indians who originally ascended the highest Andean peaks, long before the arrival of 'Europe.' Today, on sea level, Lima sprouts white hegemony, which in an obverse way *racially* stands for "the highest." Thus, Tomatis ironically shows that the 'highest may be the lowest and the lowest, the highest' – touching the heavens or down toward hell? – all of it executed through the visual metaphor of isomers. Does she respect the completeness, authenticity, rigor, and value of pre-capitalist Indian culture – no help needed from Europe, thank you?

The isomer technique is based on Tomatis' ability to moiré a photo digitally into isomeric shapes, and then use the 'blurred' result as the model for her painting.

"Post-Modern Deconstruction"

The idea of switching perspectives from a Caucasian/male/Christian/European perspective to that of 'The Other' was a revolutionary development in philosophy, history, sociology, political history, and art history, starting in the 1970s, mostly in France, and then dominating most of academia into the 1990s. Rather than accept the *received idea* that "Fertile Crescent" and Chinese civilizations were of primary and lasting cause on all peoples of the globe, feminists, Marxists, people of color, homosexuals, colonials, and others began to question the veracity of what's in textbooks – elementary through post-grad; to perceive their glaringly slanted POVs; and to then take on the deconstruction of the symbols, images, works of art, social studies, and narratives they purport by 'receiving' these signs and histories (called 'texts,' as if syn. with "contexts") from the perspective of *The Other*.

All of a sudden, a painting by Picasso is *derived* from 'the school' of African art, not the Modernist start of fourth-dimensional dynamics on a two-dimensional surface. First of all, the very term 'the school of' is waved off, merely a referent from the place that *had* 'schools' of art. In Africa, traditions and stylistic continuity have always existed over time, but African tribes do not recognize their artwork as essentially historical, collectible, or merely decorative – but sacred, and capable of transmitting/receiving blessings from the spirits, and of contacting ancestors and nature, as they are carved by the shaman in real time. Although chiefs and shamans may secure works for the village in their own quarters, they are used in ceremony outside. In similar fashion, a parish priest does not own the art in his church; *The Church* owns it, and the church is God *and his people*. There exist many African masks from the 18th and 19th centuries that demonstrate the presence of dynamic motion as facets turn, rotate, double, wave, or push-pull. Question is, did Picasso really invent fourth-dimensional dynamics in paintings, or were his cubist discoveries suggested by earlier African art, which we know he collected and abstracted?

Another example: when one walks into an encyclopedic museum to find the African collection, one will not find a placard stating, "African wood carvings and masks must surely have been the first works of art on the planet, if one accepts that *Homo sapiens* first developed there." Instead, a student of 'primitive' art will be shown the "Venus of

Willendorf,” an early-civilization, bronze miniature of a fecund earth mother found in Germany – or the cave paintings at Lascaux and Alta Mira. This is clearly an absurd place to begin with the history of *world* art, when it only comprises Europe’s. Works of African art from countless, past millennia were nearly all made of wood and therefore have not lasted over the ages. The oldest examples of extant African art, of which there are some few in the world, only go back to the 17th century, as Europe developed into the Baroque paradigm. To fully understand the reasons for Europe’s treasure of older art, one would have to enter the realm of geography. (Cf. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Jared Diamond.)

Tomatis deconstructs the very ‘terrain’ and politics of Peru into isomeric maps, which then imply ‘high’ and ‘low,’ which then imply class order: ‘native’ mountain altitudes being literally ‘*higher*’ than Lima’s ‘lower, yet higher-classed’ plain. The use of white ghosting over hues seems to convey the idea of a cloudy, dim, out-of-focus perspective of her own society, perhaps ‘developing’ some day like that *Polaroid* into a firmer clear-sightedness.

The artist then transfers this socio-political deconstruction to other fine works of hers that adapt more formal and decorative subject matter – a boat on the beach, a tree on the horizon, although she seems to insert symbology even into these more or less politically ‘neutral works.’ The same happened in the period of the chiaroscuro Baroque, when forceful, re-evangelizing techniques and styling against Protestantism, were later adapted to profane pictures.

Given its variety of aesthetic, socio-political, technical, and perceptual dimensions, one can say a Tomatis painting is a grand ‘jigsaw’ puzzle – her isomeric, interlocking paint shapes supporting, by technique and values, that which is metaphoric on the many levels of her important themes.

* The overall term for ‘reading,’ deconstructing and then re-reading an icon(s) or a book from The Other’s perspective is called “semiology,” the study or science of the meanings of ‘signs,’ in the sense that symbols may convey one or many prejudicial implications, but can be viewed ‘topsy-turvy’ to see the Other’s perspective. It is curious to note that, try as they might, the French authorities were unable to find a generic name for their new museum of ‘tribal-and-ethnic’ art. No single or compound word were they able to discover that would properly identify all the types of non-European art to be curated. Is Eskimo art geographically displaced Asian, or ‘ethnic,’ Amerindian tribal? Should Apache art be called ‘tribal,’ even though many Apache tribes were connected like a separate ‘civilization’ within the system of Indian cultures coast-to-coast? And if we call Apache art ‘regional,’ what art is not ‘regional?’ Is a contemporary woven basket from New Mexico a modern or traditional, ethnic or ‘civilizational’ work of art? If the latter, then why is Hopi civilization displaced into an ethnic U.S. museum, while Greek civilization is core material at the National Gallery in D.C? Are Hopi-Americans not here and now part of the U.S. any less than Greek Americans? And who among us, does share true Greek origin? To secure the point, if some art is ‘ethnic,’ is not everyone ethnic? Or do white people qualify for blank! The savvy and exacting French

Minster of Culture finally settled on "The Quay Branley Museum," so named for the *quartier* it inhabits! European man is no longer able to neatly compartmentalize all Others under one tag. Each art case must be taken and discussed individually, just as we talk about Tomatis as her own special case.