

CLAMANTIS IN DESERTO: THOMAS FRONTINI AND THE INFINITE PRESENT

Written By Peter Frank

There has always been an abundance of space in Thomas Frontini's pictures. However much he has loaded the foregrounds of his paintings and works on paper with object and incident, Frontini has made sure that such phenomena have been enwrapped in a volume of light and distance. Toward the beginning of his career, such comfortable immensity was the grounding, visual as well as literal, for the entire composition; structures and creatures appeared, more or less isolated, suspended in imaginary landscapes. As his pictorial thinking evolved, Frontini came to place more emphasis on the things in front, moving away from a mysterious monumentality and more towards narrative vivacity, populating his foregrounds with an abundance of fauna, flora, and odd architecture. The picture became devoted less and less to atmosphere and more and more to biosphere. Over the past several years, however, Frontini's vision has been gradually opening up again. The once-busy pictorial plane has emptied out, seemingly step by step, until all we see, once more, are vast plains of numinous light occupied by one or two starkly described things, perhaps in the foreground, perhaps in mid-ground, perhaps somewhere in the deliberately ill-defined distance.

Frontini's most recent paintings, larger and smaller, have emptied out so radically as to verge on invisibility – an invisibility interrupted by a single thing, to various degrees of visual conjuration and definition. In some paintings, an object, usually a flower, pushes itself right up against the picture plane, practically rushing into our arms in a frantic embrace. We read these fragile growths as synecdoche of nature, and in their clamor to occupy our space, they herald the looming ecological crisis. They are also impelled by broader metaphors of human tenderness, desire and sexuality, and the paradox – the brevity yet durability– of organic life. In other pictures, the single thing posited in the middle of nowhere – usually at some remove from the forefront, although rarely enveloped in air– is evidently a building of some kind, an abode or redoubt constructed in a fashion that seems old but not ancient, familiar but distant, in time as well as space. This hut or castle will seem familiar to anyone who has traveled in certain parts of Europe, or even simply gazed upon paintings from those parts of that continent. We may have seen these looming yet intimate shelters perched on the cliffs overlooking the Rhine or nestled in the sides of the Apennines; or we may have seen them dotting the same kinds of hills and dales in landscape painting from the 15th and 16th centuries. Indeed,

Frontini's imagery has been compared to that of the proto-Renaissance, and to a certain extent we might consider.

Frontini's pictorial heritage finds its DNA as much in Dali as in Duccio. His visual language veers towards the inscrutable and dreamlike. It is resolutely irresolute, in contradistinction to the search for both rational and religious verity that impelled the artists of six hundred years ago. In its carefully calibrated vagueness, it addresses not the seen world, the known world, the measurable world, but the world of fantasies, of castles in Spain, you might say, not Germany or Italy. The clouds and deserts that predominate in these newest paintings are the vast plains and skies of our dreams. Even as they contain symbols of sensuality and shelter, they speak of abandonment and desolation. If interpreted as the environments we as a species inhabit, their inferences are ominous: we are bound for extinction. But if they read as the habitat of an individual, as the place where you the viewer find yourself, they are renditions of a gentle mortality. The finality implicit in the echoing vastness of Thomas Frontini's newest works is at once terrifying and delicious, manifesting a kind of 21st-century sublime.