

READING DE CHIRICO¹

Alexander Adams

This dual-language large hardback catalogue for the exhibition *Reading de Chirico* at Tornabuoni Art, London (closes 12 January 2018) includes essays, illustrations and plentiful information which throw much light on the exhibition. De Chirico wrote poetry, fiction, memoirs and art criticism. Some of the painter's thoughts on art were formed in a poetic allusive manner akin to that of prose poems.

The inclusion of much written material is the reason for the exhibition's title *Reading de Chirico*. Poems and letters exhibited are reproduced in the catalogue and translated. They include and Metaphysical poems and love letters to Cornelia, written at a time of romantic turmoil. The artist had just married his long-standing partner Raissa before separating from her. This period (1929-1930) was also when he met his future second wife, Isabella. Two important letters dated from 1910 and 1911 are printed. These establish the date of the foundation of Metaphysical Art. Recent attempts to locate the origins of Metaphysical Art to 1909 – and to attribute the foundational ideas to de Chirico's brother Alberto Savinio – have not been generally accepted. These letters bolster the case for the accepted history, namely that de Chirico commenced painting in a Metaphysical style in the summer of 1910 in Florence.

The "Metaphysical Art" journal has been publishing de Chirico's writing (and writing about him, as well as letters to him) over the last decade in Italian, French and English. This has contributed to a wider understanding of de Chirico as a writer and the links between his writing and art. This catalogue and exhibition further that aim.

In addition to the texts of two speeches, there are two articles by de Chirico on lesser known contemporary artists and other more general pieces on de Chirico's art. There is an angry polemic against the domination of Modernism. "No one raised a voice in defence of reality with regard to art or to life itself. Fake intellectuals, having renounced truth, which they considered lost, tried to expel reality from all manifestations of the spirit. These fake intellectuals of our unfortunate age..." In another article he explains the persistent melancholy of absence in his art. "I remember the strange and profound impression a picture seen in an old book bearing the title *The World before the Deluge* made upon me as a child. It represented a landscape of the tertiary period. Man had not yet

¹ A. Adams, review of *Reading de Chirico*, exhibition catalogue edited by K. Robinson, Tornabuoni Art London, 4 October 2017-12 January 2018, English/Italian, Forma, London 2017. Part II of a two-part article, part I being the exhibition review; first published on alexanderadamsart.wordpress.com on 26 November 2017.

appeared. I have often meditated on the strange phenomenon of ‘human absence’ in metaphysical aspects”.

The lithographic illustrations of Mysterious Baths images for Cocteau’s *Mythologie* (1934) are reproduced in full in the catalogue. (They are displayed only partially visible in the exhibition vitrine.) Illustrations of works such as *The Daughters of Minos (Antique Scene in Pink and Blue II)* (1933) show just how peculiar they are. In this small painting one sees classical motifs on a generic shore, predominantly blue in hue, with discrete areas painted in monochrome red-pink and orange-pink. Like an optical illusion, it gives the impression of being a classical work or art while aggressively asserting it is nothing of the kind. It exists in two states: classical and Modern. In this instance, the modes are incompatible and contradictory. In terms of figural motifs and iconography it is classical; in terms of handling and palette it is Modern. They fluctuate. When we consider one the other does not impinge upon us; as soon as we consider the other aspect the first is forgotten (or at least impossible to incorporate into our consideration). Like the famous optical illusion, we can see the old woman and the young woman in one picture but never at the same time. If de Chirico understood what he was doing in this painting (in terms of optical perception and modal schematism) is unclear.

An essay by Gavin Parkinson discusses the reception by the Surrealists of de Chirico’s writing and the artist’s views on Symbolism, Impressionism, Courbet and other art. Parkinson’s mention of the criticism of Magritte, de Chirico and Picabia’s “bad painting” cites de Chirico’s use of bright colour in the post-War variations of classic Metaphysical compositions as a conscious response to that criticism or even a reaction to Pop Art. Parkinson suggests that de Chirico’s “bad” colour was an attempt to combat the fashionable connoisseurship that generated demand for his Metaphysical paintings. It seems much more likely that the artist, bored and belittled by the requirement to paint replicas at the behest of dealers and collectors, was simply attempting to retain engagement during the painting process by exaggerating the colours. The aim was most likely an attempt to see how variation might intensify a feeling or introduce an element of unpredictability into the stultifying work. The powerful palette is an attempt to stimulate the artist himself.

In the Neo-Metaphysical period (1960s-1978) the painter needed to sustain his engagement and bring something new to established compositions. The addition of the Mysterious Baths, sun-on-easel and the sun/moon-cord motifs were a means to provide the painter with a syncretic language, vary his art and summarise his former periods in his last period. It seems a private choice, one detached from consideration of the debate over “bad art”, Pop Art or the expectations of others. The Neo-Metaphysical works are one of de Chirico’s most important achievements. With droll wit and disconcerting mental agility de Chirico reassembled his artistic world in a theatre of cosmological paradox which is deeply unsettling and to this day barely understood.