

MANNING WILLIAMS

The Man In The Canoe



THE BO BARTLETT CENTER
COLLEGE OF THE ARTS, COLUMBUS STATE UNIVERSITY

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BRUNO CIVITICO'S AMERICAN CLASSICISM

By David Carbone

During the 1960's a number of important figurative painters rejected the prevalent modes of abstraction, painterly expressionism, photography and consumer culture as a way of moving toward self-realization. They brought their knowledge of abstraction to working from life and began to re-examine the assumptions previous realists had readily accepted. In addition, the traditional discipline of figure drawing had essentially withered during in the post-war era, a correlative effect of the growth of university art departments, fueled by the G.I. Bill. This was also a bi-product of the academization of abstraction. Furthermore, without a coherent American culture to draw from, each artist realized that he or she would have to forge a "personal tradition," creating a unique lineage of artists across time and cultures. This generation would re-invent objective approaches shorn of the sentimentality and bathos of illustration, social realism or semi-surrealism in order to successfully compete with the best abstraction.

Toward the end of the decade, Bruno Civitico began exhibiting post-painterly realist figures in New York. Throughout his career, Civitico's forms tend toward an extreme sculptural tactility—the presence of things—which holds the key to the expressiveness of his work. His earliest works showed a sympathy for the closely observed perceptual representation of Philip Pearlstein, building form through large shapes in pale-toned values. This way of modeling is distinctly modernist: opaque paint strokes in both the lights and shadows, painted in sharp focus on a large scale in a pared-down environment. This initially placed his work alongside other similarly "cool" figurative painters such as William Bailey, Gabriel Laderman, and Alfred Leslie.

A generation younger than the rest, Civitico quickly distinguished himself by developing an overt modernist classicism, quite unlike the kitschy classicism of the late nineteenth century. He boldly drew on Picasso's laconic neo-classical figures, stripping them of their lumpen comedy and instilling their simplified pink and grey bodies with a lyric animation in scenes of bathers by a lake. Civitico's work had quickly moved from perceptual observation to synthetic invention, set in landscapes

suffused by a soft luminosity that kept shadows close to the objects that cast them. His simplified descriptive brushwork dispensed with superfluous detail, delivered in a thick paste of direct touches, like Neil Welliver's contemporary landscapes. This emphasis on the painting itself as an object, draws attention to its underlying harmonic structure and intervals, to the modulation of space and light: essentially to its sense as a whole. This idyllic order—the painting's "music"—comes out of a distinct classical sensibility, an off-shoot of the counter culture to set against the brutality of the time.

In a canvas of 1972, here is a unique appearance, before a cleared pasture of New England farmland: a comely naked youth, seated on a tree stump, distracted from his surroundings, absorbed in thought, reed pipes in hand: The god Pan. Well, not quite the god of the Greeks, he has none of the usual attributes of a faun or a satyr, but he does claim music, and implicitly, its irrational potential to transform us, much as the painter is a transformer. It may be a symbolic portrait of Civitico the artist, a declaration of his ambition: to depict both the dream of Arcadia and its corresponding "trouble in paradise," inspired by retelling tales from Ovid, for his generation.

Throughout the seventies—his time in Portsmouth, New Hampshire—Civitico set many of his mythic tableaux in rooms of the colonial house that he had restored, connecting his classical impulse to the Puritan simplicity of the Federalist period: an American Classicism. Despite an increased attention to realist detail, Civitico composed with a keen attention to the interlocking relationships of large planes of tone derived from his study of works by Juan Gris, the "classical" cubist. This is especially evident in two of his most luminously sensuous depictions of Danaë and Io.

One of Civitico's most austere works, "The Testament of Eudamidas," is inspired by Poussin's famous work on the theme of moral responsibility. The story is taken from Lucian's dialogue of Stoic philosophy on friendship, "Toxaris." Civitico's modern version pays tribute both to his parents and indirectly his artist friend and mentor, the painter-theorist Gabriel Laderman. Civitico posed his father, as Eudamidas on his deathbed,

















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