

A Cloud of Smoke

Runo Lagomarsino

15.1 - 27.2 2022

'Es hermosísimo.'

In the space where I first met Runo Lagomarsino, the offices of the Whitney Museum's Independent Study Program (ISP), it would have been rare to hear the word "beauty". That might seem strange to an outsider, for whom it might seem natural to equate a museum's study program with reflections on what makes beautiful works of art. But the ISP, for now more than half a century, has dedicated itself less to the particulars of aesthetic craft, and more to helping artists understand their work within a broader—and much less beautiful—world. When Lagomarsino and I would speak about his work—in his table of a studio, at a bar around the corner, in the nook I had occupied as a writing desk—it was more likely about colonialism and war than composition and color. What kind of indulgence is it, what kind of spectacle of leisure and comfort, to think of beauty amidst bombs and broken lives?

Today, though, as I look at his works, I am thinking about beauty. Perhaps I am growing old and sentimental—it's been fifteen years since we first met. Perhaps Lagomarsino's work is changing. Or perhaps my approach then was simply naïve. Perhaps, as the essayist Rebecca Solnit has recently argued in *Orwell's Roses*, if we are *against* the ugliness of this our present world, then we must also be for the beauty of something else. Even more challenging still, she exhorts us that we must be able to find beauty in this damaged life. It is, after all, pleasure, and joy, that drive the resistant logic of Winston Smith, the doomed hero of Orwell's otherwise bleak 1984.

But I am not quite thinking about beauty in the same way here. In one sense, Lagomarsino's show is almost the opposite of Orwell's novel. If for Orwell beauty is what drives us to overcome terror, Lagomarsino points to the terrifying opposite: when beauty hides the horror. As one enters the space, the elegantly installed and whimsical maps of *La Carniceria* dance slowly on their hooks. The rolled maps of the world are rendered ethereal. But this piece is called the butcher's shop for a reason. These are hanging on meat hooks for a reason. Map lines mark the bloodstained contours where empires carve up the world into their domains. And while these cartographies may seem a temporally distant project, *The Crossing* reminds us how present they are. These seemingly abstract works of subtle black and white carry the violence within their process. Lagomarsino makes them by puncturing a sheet of protective plastic over photographic paper as the passport control does their border checks on the train ride from Copenhagen to Malmö. The sun imprints the violence of the act, but not in blood or scars—rather, in tufts of black cloud, almost like a flock of birds on the page. The beauty we see in the gallery space is the thin veil that the art pushes us to see beyond. The exquisite design is still a masquerade.

And yet, this is not *Guernica*. This is beautiful to look at, all the same. In the second room, I find myself mesmerized by *Europa Point*. I watch it again and again. The idyllic countryside as much as the slow burn, incandescent flame, and dancing black ash. That the video does not end with the burning but the ash points us toward the afterlife

of empires—both in that they persist and that something else comes after. Much of world history is the churn of empire, one replacing another as the flame in the video burns—slowly at first, then engulfed, then dying down, preparing the way for what comes next, if only by leaving its ruins. It does make one wonder, as in *A Cloud of Smoke*, where a candle's wax slowly overwrites the day's reporting, if what we call news is not news so much as an epiphenomenon of this churn of empire. The real news, which would be the end of this cycle, is elsewhere. Perhaps it is time to look toward a different light, a different kind of beauty.

As the wax drips and the video loops, I think of these lines from *Try to Praise the Mutilated World*, by the poet Adam Zagajewski, an exile in the US, who died in the early days of the pandemic: "Praise the mutilated world / and the gray feather a thrush lost, / and the gentle light that strays and vanishes / and returns". I think I understand something of Lagomarsino's work that I haven't before—it's dialectical character. The way it asks us to move between the terror and the beauty. That it is indeed, as we spoke of in our youth, a stark stand against the ignorance of the brutality that makes the world turn. And that it is also, as I did not understand then, a reminder of the kind of a world we are struggling to achieve. Not a perfect world, not one without the blemishes and bruises and betrayals that are part of our condition. But one, at least, where the comforts of some are not hung on the pain of others.

-Avram Alpert

Runo Lagomarsino was born in Lund in 1977 and lives and works in Malmö. Recent solo exhibitions have been held at Lunds konsthall (2021), Moderna Museet, Stockholm (2019), Dallas Museum of Art (2018), La Criée centre d'Art contemporaine, Rennes and Malmö Konsthall (Carla Zaccagnini) (both 2015). He has been featured in group exhibitions at daadgalerie, Berlin (2019); LACMA, Los Angeles; Fondazione Trussardi, Milan; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (all 2017); The South London Gallery (2016); the Guggenheim Museum, New York and Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid (both 2014). He also participated in the Guangzhou Triennial and the Gwangju Biennial (both 2008); the Venice Biennale (2011 and 2015); the Istanbul Biennial (2011); the São Paulo Biennial (2012), Prospect New Orleans (2017), the Gothenburg Biennial (2015 and 2021) and the Ural Biennial (2021). In 2019 he was awarded the Friends of Moderna Museet Sculpture Prize and was DAAD artist-in-residence in Berlin.

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