

Reviving Iconography

CRISTINA VERGANO AND IRENE HARDWICKE OLIVIERI

by Gail Leggio

Many contemporary realist artists, passionate about recovering old master skills, are intimidated by the iconographic burden of the past. Their caution is understandable. Symbols and visual tropes wrenched from their original context and pastiched into contemporary compositions can seem jarring, even ridiculous. Yet the best representational art has always been an inspired amalgam of mimesis and imagination. Cristina Vergano and Irene Hardwicke Olivieri, who had solo exhibitions in New York City galleries in the fall, are developing highly individualistic styles and iconographies. While some may find their work eccentric, these paintings are rooted in thoroughly assimilated traditions. Fashioning cosmologies out of a crazy quilt of inherited and personal imaginative constructs, they are creating art that is both beautiful and rich in ideas. Vergano and Olivieri take the notion of reading a painting literally, combining text and image in inventive ways, and they share a pantheistic attitude toward the natural world. Because the visual traditions they draw on are very different, however, the worlds they depict deserve to be examined separately.

When we think of Italian Renaissance painting, we often focus on the humanistic classicism of artists from Giotto to Piero della Francesca to

Cristina Vergano
*Please Leave When
It Is Wise To*, 2006

COURTESY
WOODWARD GALLERY,
NEW YORK CITY



Raphael. But there is another Renaissance, characterized by puzzles and grotesques, that we glimpse in the allegorical paintings of Lorenzo Lotto and Cosimo Tura, and esoterica crops up in more mainstream artists as well. One aspect of this occult Renaissance was the amalgamation of word and image in emblems and *impreses*, playfully metaphysical constructs that illustrate mottos, either derived from a variety of traditional sources or invented by the artist. This is the vein that Cristina Vergano mines in the off-beat, luminous paintings seen at the Woodward Gallery in New York City. The title of the exhibition, “Figures of Speech,” aptly describes compositions that include both figures—human and animal—and words, but the phrase also denotes literary devices such as metaphors and similes. In the sixth century B.C. Simonides of Ceos famously remarked: “Painting is mute poetry, poetry a speaking picture.” Vergano takes this dictum literally, fashioning rebuses that invite decipherment. As Milton Klonsky notes in his delightful anthology of pictorial poetry, the reader-viewer does a “double-take, like the flash of insight followed by intellectual comprehension that occurs in solving a riddle.”¹

Some of Vergano’s rebus paintings have a deceptive simplicity, like pages from a nineteenth-century children’s book designed to teach the alphabet or simple moral lessons. A series of foot-square animal headshots is colorful and appealing, with outsized letters and other elements frequently breaking through the fictive barrier of *trompe l’oeil* frames (all 2005–06). The puzzles are fun to solve visually, in part because the colors—white and red letters against the cerulean of the backdrop and the gold of the frame—are so vibrant. What makes these lighthearted images really striking, however, are the personalities of Vergano’s protagonists, whether a grey and white rabbit or the hornbill of *Belief and Ability*, who grips the edge of his *trompe l’oeil* frame with vermillion talons and fixes us with a lively eye. All of Vergano’s subjects—human, animal or hybrid—project warmth and intelligence; a spark of soulfulness emanates from their eyes. While many traditional allegorical figures are essentially mannequins to be accessorized with attributes, Vergano’s figures are beings that elicit a response from the viewer.

Larger rebus paintings feature women in idyllic landscapes of verdant hills, cerulean skies and pillowy clouds. The three-quarter figures look heroic in expansive outdoor spaces. In *Please Leave When It Is Wise To* (2006) a young woman in a cherry red Renaissance-style dress gazes at us over her shoulder. A bold black “Ple” combines with her sleeve, a white “W” with the hen tucked under her arm and an italic “it,” an “is” with a book open to a page with two “Ys” and a “2.” *When, What, Why?* (2006) features a nude blonde in a beribboned garden hat as the protagonist. Three crisp white “W”s float in space, in front of another cradled hen, the hat and—strangest of all—the eyeball the young woman holds delicately in her fingers, like the attribute of St. Lucy. We have entered a curious visual realm, illusionistic enough to seem reassuring yet invaded by gnomic utterances from the two-dimensional field of words.

The self-conscious artifice of these compositions is part of their pleasure. That pleasure can be traced back to the emblem tradition, which rests on a fundamental and gloriously fertile misunderstanding of Egyptian hieroglyphics. Klonsky cites the belief “that in some lost Arcadian foretime mankind had actually possessed a single sacred language in which idea and image were one.”² The *Hieroglyphika* of Horapollo, a fifth-century scribe, published in Venice in 1505, quickly disseminated this belief. Albrecht Dürer designed emblems based on Horapollo. Emblem books, which paired enigmatic drawings and brief texts, reached their height of popularity with collections such as Andrea Alciata’s *Emblematum Liber* (1531) and Cesare Ripa’s *Iconologia* (numerous editions from 1593, one published in Mexico in 1886); English-language versions included Francis Quarles’s *Emblems* (1635) and John Bunyan’s *Divine Emblems; or Temporal Things Spiritualized* (1686). A related device, *imprese*, was favored by noble families. Giorgio Vasari designed an *Allegory of Patience* (c. 1554) for Ercole II of Ferrara, who had it translated into coins and medals.³ The widespread influence of such visual-verbal conceits extends to the theologically (or sexually) loaded puns of the Metaphysical poets, especially John Donne (1572–1631). We see a related kind of punning in Vergano’s pair of 2005 tondos *Why Be Honest (To Be Honest)*, depicting colorful birds “on nest,” one on brood, the other contemplating two open-mouthed hatchlings.

Although she lives and works in New York City, Vergano was born in Italy. Her father was an architect; her grandfather, a painter. She holds a Masters in Art History from the Università di Genova. She has assimilated the hermeticism as well as the fluidity of Renaissance painting. Text and image co-exist comfortably in single continuous landscape spaces, without the awkwardness of historicist pastiche. And yet she has her own highly personal worldview. Her human protagonists can be people of color,

Irene Hardwicke Olivieri
Beloved and Bewildered, 2006

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suggesting that her allegorical realm extends beyond the confines of Europe; her characters are often animals or hybrids, testifying to sympathies beyond the human species. Her ecological and evolutionary breadth is suggested by *The Nature of Things* (2005). A red-furred ape sits in a tranquil landscape. One delicate, almost-human hand holds a blue butterfly; the other rests on an hourglass. Part of his body has been replaced by a rippling scroll with a text in French that reads, translated: "We will no longer go to the woods, all the laurels have been cut." The artist cites a folk song her father sang to her as a child and interprets the picture ecologically: "the monkey holding the hourglass tells us of the short time that is left for Nature as we know it." The ape looks soulfully into our eyes, appealing to our understanding. The reference to the laurel in the text carries implications of the artist's crown, underlying how nature and art are inextricably connected. The great scholar of hermeticism Frances Yates explains what, in magical images from the Renaissance, the monkey represented: "Man's Art by which he imitates Nature, with simian mimicry. Man...has become the clever ape of nature, who has found out the way that nature works and by imitating it, will obtain her powers."⁴

Latin inscriptions—on cartouches or scrolls within the fictive space of the painting, or inscribed on the frame—are frequently included in allegorical works, but Vergano uses ribbons of text to supplant parts of body: the word becomes flesh. In the tondo *To Painters and Poets* (2005) the half figure of an unclothed young woman rises from foliage that suggests both the poet's traditional laurel leaves and an Henri Rousseau-like jungle. With one hand she displays a small Picassoid image; the other holds a papyrus with a poem by Sappho, which dangles outside the trompe l'oeil frame. A banderole swirls around her body and encircles—and partly replaces—her head like a turban, bearing a text from Horace's *Ars Poetica* which translates: "To painters and poets alike the license has always been given to dare anything." The displacement of body by text is more surreal in *I Love and I Hate* (2005). Two young dark-skinned girls stand, locked together, in a tropical landscape. Their torsos are gone, replaced by curls of ribbon with a text from the Latin love poet Catullus: "I hate and I love: you might ask why I do this. I do not know, but I felt it happen, and it tears me apart." Between the curves of ribbon, we glimpse the landscape itself, the palm trees and distant mountains. The exotic locale reminds us that the Renaissance was an age of exploration, of searches for a "strange new world," as Miranda remarks with wonder in *The Tempest*.

The loveliest of Vergano's paintings in this vein may be *The Pleasure of Knowledge* (2005). A dark-skinned girl appears in the landscape, regal as a goddess. Scarlet tropical birds lift strands of her crimped hair, fanning it out like a halo. She holds a branch of coral, and an emerald green insect moves across the open page of a book. One arm and thigh have been replaced by a scroll which reads, translated: "Words pass, but the pleasure of knowledge remains." Vergano wrote the text herself, based, she notes, "on my memories of

five years of Latin.” She paraphrases Oscar Wilde to elucidate: “Culture is what one achieves when one forgets what he learned.”⁵ Vergano wears her learning very lightly. Her young goddess is both scholar and pantheist, naturalist and child of nature. Discussing the hermetic Renaissance, Yates distinguishes between two kinds of Gnosticism: pessimistic, in which the soul is imprisoned in matter by evil, and optimistic, which sees the material world as saturated with the divine. The optimistic gnosis, she writes, “consists in fully grasping it, as it is, and holding it within the mind.”⁶ Eve is a kind of heroine in this strain of Gnosticism, because she sought knowledge, and the figure of Eve appears in Vergano’s panoramic landscape rebus *Are You as Bright as I Believe?* (2005). At the center of the work is a young black woman writing with a quill pen, in a traditional pose signifying thought.

The components of Irene Hardwicke Olivieri’s paintings—female figures, animals and words—are similar to these in Vergano’s compositions, but Olivieri starts from a different place. Vergano begins with Renaissance painting, and her text style draws on inscribed mottos and elegant, oversized copybook letters. Olivieri’s models come from folk art and surrealism, and her miniscule stream-of-consciousness texts often cover the bodies of her figures like delicate tattoos. Born in Texas, Olivieri traveled throughout South and Central America as a teenager, becoming entranced with the Amazonian ecosystem. She studied art in Mexico, earned a B.F.A. from the University of Texas in Austin and, while attending graduate school at New York University, worked as a gardener and lecturer at the Cloisters (the medieval enclave of the Metropolitan Museum) and made drawings of neo-tropical palms at the New York Botanical Garden. She now lives in a solar-powered house in the high desert of central Oregon, sharing her world with ravens, badgers, lizards and a host of other creatures. The handwritten texts of Olivieri’s paintings combine detailed descriptions of the appearance and habits of closely observed flora and fauna with personal musings. Barely visible in most reproductions, these texts are mesmerizing when you encounter the paintings themselves. The long process of reading pulls you deep into her universe. Rarely is the voice of a visual artist—not just her interests and preoccupations but her inflections and curious associations of ideas—so palpably present. In the tondo *Ravenous* (2005) a nude female figure with a nest for a crown rides on the back of a majestic raven. A variety of birds from the corvidae family, in various sizes, like illustrations from an ornithological guidebook, surround the central figure, along with a few bird-headed humans. Tiny texts fill in spaces and make up the wing of the great bird, an homage addressed to the “big bold beautiful bird with your powerful black bill, your purple blue black glistening wings your long crazy croaking call.” Pragmatic and unsqueamish, she describes her daily experience: “every time I’m riding my bike or in my car I constantly look for dead animals to bring home for you.” Seamlessly, she moves into shamanistic reverie: “By night I read books about you. Sleeping I dream of you.”

Irene Hardwicke Olivieri, *Fig, Pomegranate, Persimmon*, 1999
COURTESY ACA GALLERIES, NEW YORK CITY



Olivieri studied in Mexico, and Frida Kahlo is an obvious point of reference for discussing her work. In his Introduction to *The Diary of Frida Kahlo*, Carlos Fuentes remarks that surrealism “has always been an everyday reality in Mexico and Latin America, part of the cultural stream, a spontaneous fusing of myth and fact, dream and vigil, reason and fantasy.”⁷ Kahlo’s work is famously autobiographical and populated by a bestiary of totem animals, mischievous monkeys, jaguars and dogs. In *The Little Deer* (1946) she places her own head on a stag’s body pierced, like St. Sebastian’s, with arrows. These hybrid creatures, which Olivieri also favors, have the hierophantic look of zoomorphic Egyptian deities. Kahlo’s *Diary* mixes paintings and drawings with free-association poems and unsent letters. Mixtures of text and illustration belong to a long tradition; William Blake’s are probably the most celebrated. Kahlo’s *Diary* was private, not originally

intended for publication, but it serves the same purpose as many other hand-held, intimate works of art. Olivieri’s work is on a different scale, and the gallery setting alters the experience.

Olivieri draws on Mexican art in another way. Her work can be seen in the context of folk art forms such as home altars and ex-voto paintings, often created in memory of saintly interventions. The supports for her paintings underline these vernacular roots. She often uses rising bowls, which carry associations of breadmaking and provide a shallow concave space reminiscent of the wayside shrine’s niche. Sometimes she draws in these spaces, as in *Paleo Girl with Ponytail*, *Cat Dog* and *Raven on the Roof* (all 2006). The drawings are assembled from the pale, delicate, low-sheen bones of birds and mice, found by sifting through owl pellets—an extraordinarily ecological way of art-making, a kind of recycling not for the fastidious but fundamentally reverent. While

these works are intriguing, however, it is her rich painting style that defines Olivieri.

Her supports include old wooden doors, and the splits and weathering—even residual hinges and handles—add to their timelessness. In *Beloved and Bewildered* (2006) an epic woman's face is overlaid with a greenish veil, diaphanous but scrimmed with miniatures of boats on curling waves, figures on lily pads or nestling under trees, animal companions and a schematic map of Texas, her home state. The little scenes have the magical quality of Mughal miniatures. Between the vibrant blue eyes of this goddess is a drawing of a woman covering her face with prayerful hands. Like the marginalia of medieval manuscripts, Olivieri's microcosms encompass some curious hybrid creatures. The central figure of *Ten Thousand Kisses* (oil on wooden dough bowl, 2006) is surrounded by neatly depicted owls and ravens, but the supporting cast includes a striking bird-headed woman—poised on improbable platform shoes, her body covered in vegetation patterns—and a plump mouse wielding a paintbrush. The paintbrush figure is a recurring motif, playful and self-deprecating. *Climbing the Giant* (2006) features a miniscule nude bent under the weight of a relatively huge paintbrush. In this painting, which lent its title to Olivieri's show at ACA Galleries, the central figure is a monumental deer, upright on hind legs and holding a giant ladder. A monkey moves through the forest of his antlers, and a tiny female nude scampers up the ladder. A snowy mountain, a tiny polar bear, globes, more figures and a filigree of foliage add layers of pattern. *Climbing the Giant* has a more American look than much of Olivieri's work, like an illustration of a folktale retold for grown-ups. Dislocations of scale are crucial to her aesthetic. As in the more nightmarish world of Hieronymous Bosch, they are disorienting but contribute to a sense of multidimensional richness. Yet some of her loveliest paintings subordinate fine detail to a strong simple form. *Heat of the Day, Cool of the Night* (2005) has large blank spaces that allow the natural beauty of the support—a weathered greenish door complete with handle and hinges—to shine. Nearly filling the space is a girl on a rudimentary swing, apparently suspended from the door itself. Texts and drawings cover every part of her body except her face; a frieze of otter-like creatures runs along the hem of a diaphanous skirt, and badgers, woodchucks and rabbits appear among the stripes of text. A tree rises through her torso to burst into branches filled with birds across her shoulders. The girl wears all this naturalistic copy like a fine garment.

Olivieri's works on paper, such as *No Small Agony* (2006, pencil, ink and collaged maps), are graceful but lack the sheer physical presence of her paintings. Paradoxically, the paintings are not only more impressive but also more rewarding in close reading. The information about flora and fauna is presented in a way that is not dryly encyclopedic but fresh and personal. In *Fig, Pomegranate, Persimmon* (1999) the shapes of the botanical-specimen fruits echo the coiffeur of the girl whose face and upper body dominate the baking-paddle

support. The tracery of text and illustration that lightly covers her skin suggests how completely she has assimilated this lore, and a flowering tree blossoms from her heart. The softness of the often sepia-toned text restrains the sense of patterning, in contrast to the horror vacui that pushes everything up flat against the picture plane, as we see in obsessive outsider artists. Olivieri's universe is teeming and not without danger, but she is serenely at home in its complexity. In *Wendy and Pato Go Boating* (1999) a dark-haired young woman, her naked body covered in script and illustration, and a self-possessed black cat float on the turquoise water, cradled by an organic leaf boat. The extremely narrow format of the painting (46-by-11 inches) fits the adventurers like a glove.

One of the primal functions of art is to create vehicles for the soul's explorations. Rudolf Wittkower is discussing the high culture arcana of the European Renaissance when he writes "there is no saying how and where to draw the line between aesthetic and magical function,"⁸ but his statement has a universal resonance. Both Vergano and Olivieri, in different ways, are rediscovering the potent magic of iconography.⁹ The Woodward Gallery is located at 476 Broome Street, New York, New York 10013. Telephone (212) 966-3411. On the Web at www.woodwardgallery.net. ACA Galleries, 529 West 20th Street, New York, New York 10011. Telephone (212) 206-8080. On the Web at www.acagalleries.com

NOTES

1. *Speaking Pictures: A Gallery of Pictorial Poetry from the Sixteenth Century to the Present*, edited by Milton Klonsky (New York: Harmony Books, 1975), p. 25.
2. Klonsky, p. 5.
3. See Rudolf Wittkower, *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1977), p. 109.
4. Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1964, reprint 1979), p. 145.
5. E-mail to the author, September 11, 2006.
6. Yates, p. 33.
7. *The Diary of Frida Kablo: An Intimate Self-Portrait* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1995), p. 14.
8. Wittkower, p. 187.
9. Among other artists reinvigorating iconography today I would single out as exceptional Lani Irwin (see my article "The Interior Theater of Lani Irwin," *American Arts Quarterly*, Spring 2001). In the last few years, her iconographic repertoire has continued to evolve, and her color has ripened. Her next United States exhibition will be at the Boulder Museum of Contemporary Art, Boulder, Colorado (June 1–September 1, 2007).