

# IN ANOTHER LIGHT

di Martin Holman

2011

A first reflection on the work of Simone Pellegrini

Looking at Simone Pellegrini's work on paper brings the word incunabula to mind. It is not the definition of the term itself that seems appropriate but an atmosphere that its use implies. For, in truth, Pellegrini's images are neither pre-1500 nor, strictly, books or broadsheets, which are requirements of the correct identification of incunabula. Instead, they are productions that are contemporary to us today. But their ambience is medieval and, moreover, they pertain to books in more than one way. Above all, these 'paintings' are not strictly drawn but emerge from a base that is printed, and print is the domain of the incunable.

Pellegrini's images take shape through rhythms, patterns and devices requiring line. These lines perform tasks of forming, enclosing and decorating and they vary in intensity from slender to thick, from light (as it were) to dark and heavy. The patterns are important as they provide that atmosphere which is the strongest impression left by the work. In their consistent manner on the paper they appear to know their place although, to the viewer, the significance they seem confident about conveying fails to transmit. It is as if language, culture and time have inserted themselves between the painted surface and the modern observant viewer to dull their tone to near silence. That silence is resonant although it drowns out direct meaning with misplaced vocabularies.

What these images silently declaim from the wall has to be groped for. In fact, that search is in keeping with this intriguing medievalism, because meaning, for want of a better term, is locked away in symbols and, conceivably, references. The viewer is thereby called upon to undertake detective work although in this case the clues are rare and what has to be relied upon is the broader echo of each piece in the imagination. A suspicion surfaces, even, that references are internal and that this artist presents an hermetic sphere of separate existence.

Pattern often comprises half-formed human figures; their bodily evolution is halted at the waist so some are only arms while others lack torsos, upper limbs and heads. What exists of this variety, the most populous, are legs and groins that are often depicted in perpetual interconnection, either as couples or in groups enmeshed in propagation or self-protection. Their movements in shoals are made instinctually; lacking eyes, their only means of relation to their surroundings is by physical sensation.

When they appear, heads are frequently disembodied elements encased in seraphim-like wings or at the centre of orbs fringed by fronds. Occasionally they belong to bodies with incomplete outlines and when without heads, it can be assumed that the figures lack brains. What mentality they possess is located in bowels, bladders, sex and legs in perpetual erotic positions. By constantly twinning and combining, Pellegrini's humans lack independence of movement and action. All are small and frail, unsubstantiated peripheries that contrast with the colour-gorged mandorlas, symmetrical emblems and stylised organic embellishments that command most space on the strictly planar landscape of each work. It is natural for the viewer to pick out the human element. In Pellegrini's counter-universe, however, these primitive beings or reduced forms are the least in a formulary of activity that exists beyond description in the present day. Far stronger than 'man' are fiery perimeters; six-legged creatures; and pool-like enclosures with surfaces that spiral with rose petals. There are diagrammatic formations that resemble maps of non-Western creation myths or the cartography of ritual; they imply the relationship of one area to another, like a performance, a provenance or liturgy.

It is in these overarching shapes that substance, coagulated colour and the presumption of volume reside.

The artist, therefore, presents a supposed concatenation, which nowadays we may call narrative, that cannot be known despite its graphic clarity. Instead it is felt. Hence the analogy with things medieval.

The prevalent yellow tonality is derived from Pellegrini's choice of support. It resembles parchment but is closer to the paper that was used to transfer preparatory drawings for frescoes to the wall on which work was to be done. The paper was thin enough to perforate and transfer the outline by means of blowing powdered pigment or graphite through the pinpricked holes so that delineating the under drawing, or sinopia, could commence.

The yellowing in Pellegrini's images also infers maturity, age, a faux-history. Umberto Eco's first historical novel, *The Name of the Rose*, is a skilful combination of whodunit, historical invention, contemporary thought, literary cross-references and ineffable style; one senses that Pellegrini wants to operate within a similar cast. Consequently the sensation exuded from these animated surfaces recalls looking closely with the aid of candle-light. Each sheet is large enough to enfold the observer who stands close to follow details and thus become folded into this alterative and mysterious world. Moreover, spots of what resemble wax pock-mark the image as if to confirm the illusion.

Although worlds as diverse as Aztec Mexico, pre-Classical Egypt and European Romanticism may suggest themselves, the most alluring is the intellectual foment of early modern Europe. With the Renaissance still waiting over an approaching horizon, the continent remained in the gulf between progressive enlightenment and an anxiety of suspicion, ignorance and speculation. About the Middle Ages, Eco wrote that there was 'a geometrically rational schema of what beauty ought to be, and on the other [hand] the unmediated life of art with its dialectic of forms and intentions'; the two were cut off from one another as if by a pane of glass. The unforgettable depictions of humanity by Hieronymous Bosch come to mind, not so much for that late medieval didactic sermonising of his panoptic paintings which attempt to interpret late medieval morality, but for the weird abundance of his landscapes with their intermingling of dimensions of existence, from the earthly to the spiritual and infernal.

Although they are eclectic in the present situation where eclecticism is valued, Pellegrini's images are not ephemeral.

As made objects, they assert the artist as technician. Choice of paper aside (but not to diminish it in any way as in it is carried part of the work's intellectual as well as visual and physical impact), how the image is produced contributes to the intensity of Pellegrini's practice, revealing its multifaceted nature. As mentioned at the outset, these works on paper are not drawn but printed. Once printed, colour is applied with ink as in a manuscript and is limited to black and red. Other elements are added, like wax and what the antiques trade describe as 'distressing', but with full probity.

Within the printing, however, exists a strong conceptual strand. Pellegrini applies an image transfer technique so that the graphic elements are, as it were, impressed on to the sheet from an incised panel that has been inked. This process accounts for two effects. The first is the even touch that characterises the descriptive lines. The second is the mild stippling or 'burr' around these lines. Once the image is printed, all that follows in the creation of the work is undertaken manually.

Why this significant detail? One reason to use print may be a desire to produce a multiple of the same design.

This intention is unlikely as the artist appears to adhere to the notion of a unique artwork. Indeed, his method is monoprinting with no further copies beyond the original produced. A more cogent reason links Pellegrini to the past once more, but to the very recent past in art's terms. Rauschenberg and Warhol made comparable use of image transfer from the late 1950s and, more recently, Nancy Spero used printing and collage frequently from the 1970s. The significance of these experiments had a fundamental hearing on how the image is interpreted, making the task unpredictable. For what is seen is both an image and an image of an image.

This semantic consideration is compounded by the sense of detachment implicit in printmaking. Between drawing and inspection comes the mechanical duplication of what has been drawn. This distancing comes across as part of the artist's strategy for an effect that is 'other', not being of now but neither emerging from a definable past. The evenness of line masks the hand-made origin of the compositions, introducing the possibility of some other form of creation than the human hand.

Inevitably it is interesting to muse on the origins of Pellegrini's approach. A source may be his drawings in pencils on the end-papers and empty back pages of books. The drawings are inevitably much smaller than his other work and so the general scale is reduced. One assumes that these are volumes that he owns rather than titles he has borrowed or appropriated in another way with the intention of defacing them, albeit in the most desirable fashion for the actual owner, before returning them. The relationship of drawing to text rewards investigation; it is not identifiable as illustration. And the choice of book to illuminate in this way requires further description, but as an indication of Pellegrini's concerns, the titles which he has selected for reproduction reflect a mind with particular interests.

Among the authors are the Russian Orthodox theologian and scientist, Pavel Florensky, and the poet, Osip Mandelstam, both of whom perished during Stalin's purges in the late 1930s; physicists Dan Hooper and Werner Heissenberg; the distinguished Italian commentator on the Bible, Sergio Quincio, and As Salumi who wrote a very early treatise about Sufi women's spirituality. Also treated in Pellegrini's distinctive fashion are books by Roberto Calasso, the writer and intellectual who writes about mythology and the culture of modernism, and the contemporary Puglian poet, Domenico Brancale who, like Pellegrini, lives and works in Bologna.

Pellegrini, of course, makes no use of text in his images. It could be that the images themselves are conceived as hieroglyphs or non-verbal linguistic equivalents. But the key to translate them is not offered. Eco has proposed literary texts as open, internally dynamic and psychologically engaged fields, what he calls the Opera Aperta. The opposite, the 'closed work' as it were, are texts that maintain a single dimension of univocal meanings. In a sense, Pellegrini pursues a visual equivalent, in which 'meaning' is determined by context rather than by general definitions. Once more, in this regard, he asserts the artist's role as creator, the one who establishes that context.