

# The Significance of blood

By Robert C. Morgan

Over the past two decades, the use of blood as a medium for art-making has taken a different turn. Its former romantic connotations – as expressed in Cocteau’s remarkable film, *The Blood of the Poet* – began to move in another direction, a foreboding direction. The previous innocence associated with the poet’s inscription given to the “body” of one’s desire came to a sudden halt. Blood became a signifier less about love – let alone, desire – but of disease, regret, tragedy, and loss. In his recent series of work – based on the literalness of the “body” – Pietro Costa intends to push this foreboding signifier into another frame of reference, a more objective usage, but one that is exempt from the interpretative strategies that have haunted its recent past. Given Susan Sontag’s distinction between the metaphor of illness and its literal effects, Costa has in a certain sense recontextualized the medium by allowing it to exist unaffected by politicized rhetoric. His desire is one of constraint.

In each of the “drawings” included in the series, Costa applies a vial of his own blood between two translucent sheets of mylar vellum. His action offers a proposal in opposition to the politicization of the signifier and replaces it again with its more subtle, intrinsic power. Yet, at the same moment, he rejects the expressionistic impulse as *raison d’être*. One may detect an affinity with Rothko, but only in combination with the variations made possible in a process-oriented drawing. Instead of charcoal, Costa uses blood. He interjects neither politics nor expression into his craft. He simply proceeds to model the surface, to give it resonance in a formal sense. To process in a formal way does not necessarily lead to a formalist aesthetic. Costa has made certain of this through his choice of medium. He does not need to “load the signifier” with political baggage in that the choice of blood as his medium will automatically serve that purpose. By remaining neutral through a definitive process orientation – not unlike some of the modular procedures employed by Eva Hesse between 1966 and 1969 – Costa is able to achieve the most active engagement with the surface.

He can “mold” the surface without feeling beholden to either his expressive needs or the past baggage of a time-worn, anti-aesthetic rhetoric.

Costa’s attempt to reinvigorate his medium, and its signifier, as a common material, taken from his own body, does not deny the ritualized history of blood – rather, it holds the ritual in suspension. By functioning as an artist’s medium in relation to the process of drawing, the meaning is divided between ritual and contemporary usage, between the absence of an historical signifier and the presence as a bodily fluid. It no longer carries the weight of identity, sexual preference, colonization, or feminism. For centuries, the medium of blood was given a high religious significance. The followers of early pagan sects, such as those who worshipped Mithra, emphasized the immersion of the body in animal blood. In a

different context, Roman Catholics have long adhered to a belief in transubstantiation, where the wine used for communion is symbolically transformed into the blood of Christ upon being blessed by an ordained cleric. One cannot easily forget or ignore the ritualized symbolic inference that transcends the everyday life of people and confers something extraordinary upon their existence.

In recent Modern and Postmodern art, we find artists ranging from the late Italian body artist Gina Pane to the Austrian Actionist Hermann Nitsch, from the American performance / installation artist Carolee Schneemann to the Chinese conceptual artist Wenda Gu. In each of these artists' works, the medium blood has played a significant role. For Pane and Nitsch the ritualized aspect of the performance is essential to how one experiences the art. While Pane's violence to her own body was systematically subdued, Nitsch's overtly violent gestures – such as the slaughtering of cattle – and other expulsive mannerisms have tended toward the heroic sublime. With Schneemann the work is more psychological with relation to the body, thus emphasizing the mind not as autonomous from the body but inextricably bound to it. In a large-scale conceptual work from the late 80s, Wenda Gu had women from around the world mail their sanitary napkins to the artist accompanied by statements about menstruation. Interestingly, Carolee Schneemann has used sanitary napkins and menstrual blood in many of her performance and assemblage works from the 70s and 80s.

Pietro Costa's use of blood as a medium for his art is different from all of the above. There is nothing overtly violent or symbolic about it. There is no politicized rhetoric. His statement tends towards the relatively "neutral" presence of formal manipulation. But the term "formal" must be reassessed in Costa's work because of the "loaded signifier" of his medium. Just as "the body" is never absent in its signifying potential, so blood as a sustaining part of the body is never absent. What makes Costa's work original is the manner in which he manipulates the blood as a repetitive action between the translucent mylar. His manner is neither ritualized (in the traditional sense) nor self-consciously aesthetic. Costa engages in another type of surface penetration. As he spreads the vile of his own blood between the vellum, he is creating patterns in an all-over sense that suggest a type of space that is both contained and open, a kind of interior galactic space. His layering of this precious bodily fluid coagulates into a cosmology of physical matter, both elusive and diffuse in its substance and reality.

Costa's technique is integral to his process. His intention involves nothing arcane. There is nothing of the superstitious or symbolic weirdness often associated with the ritualized aspect of blood. Through his process, the work evolves toward certainty. It is a formal investigation of the medium in relation to the surface, but not one that is exempt from content. I have argued that it is exempt from symbolic content, but not all content in art is symbolic. It is important to distinguish between an artist's use of subject matter and the reception of content. Subject matter – when fused with a material medium (including one that

emanates from the body) – is more or less within the province of the artist's control. Content, however, is a matter of aesthetics: that is, a matter of how the work is received. Costa provides the set-up, even the provocation on the most subtle and intriguing level, but the content goes well beyond the set-up, beyond the intention in order to connect with something more basic on the level of intercultural exchange. This is where I find the power in Costa's work. It gives us the sense of being in a world that is not limited by the fake sensations (and cynicism) of popular culture. It transmits a sense of being whole within the fragmentation that exists around us.

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