

Between Art and History

by Robert Mahoney

Every week or so artist Pietro Costa retreats to his quiet studio opposite the rectory and gym of an old neighborhood church in brownstone Brooklyn – the kind of building that sports a Marian memorial to the dead of World War I in front of it – and draws blood from his arm into vacuum vials. In the coming week, as he sets about to make his work, Costa empties the contents of the vials onto sheets of Mylar vellum, spreads it out into a pool, places a second sheet of vellum over the substance, presses the two sheets together and then begins the work.

But Costa does not pick up an implement and draw, he flattens out his hands and pushes and pulls at the blood caught between the two sheets of vellum. In each piece he will explore the ways in which blood pools or bubbles under the vellum bucklings, or as it dries, the way the blood crystallizes into remarkable capillary patterns that seem to microscopically unravel the mystery of its status as the very thing (along with genes) that carry the lines of connection from father to son, person to person, people to people. At other times, Costa will press and push as to nearly evacuate the center of the work, and pressure the blood down and out to the point of its disintegration in space.

He works a single “drawing” for days while the blood still remains fluid and, after he is done with working on these pieces, and the blood has begun to coagulate, Costa will hang them up, and watch them dry – and change, yet remain the same. However he proceeds in his art, Costa nonetheless transposes similar feelings about mortality, identity, and survival in all varieties of his body of work.

Costa’s art is apparently a physical art then: or is it? In just a short period of time, he has turned out a series of “drawings:” all with an apparently uniform appearance. But looked at more closely, one finds different tonalities and temperatures and varying explorations of different elements within the unique art he has undertaken.

The imagery resulting from this work has an uncanny tendency to resemble a wide range of natural phenomenon from recent images of galactic and stellar photographs to minimal monochromes.

Currently Costa has three sub categories of art within one body of work. The first set of eight or so images are marked by their newness and what might be called their “freshness.” They are his latest lettings. These works are characterized by a warm presence. In some, bright raw pockets of blood seem to still ooze and flow below the surface. Other works have the smoother, denser appearance of enlarged glimpses into samples under a microscope: a rich capillary action breaks down but somehow enriches the warm feeling of the blood. In other of these works Costa has allowed the edges of the two pressed vellums to

separate and at the point where what is stuck together and comes apart one catches sight of the power of blood – a sticky, stained, splattery, viscous presence is suggested.

In this particular direction of the current body of work, Costa's new works are most directly related to the earlier blood work that he created in the early 1990s. In that work, in particular in "33 drawings from the 33rd year" Costa displayed blood, drawn daily for 33 days consecutively, on small sheets of glass, elsewhere, in very large hand blown glass vials alone, and art that appeared to be slides of blood tests presented in quasi-medical context was so dramatic that an overwhelming concern over health, and life and death issues – a fear of health, a concern if the blood was contaminated or not – was the operative idea that kept one's relation to the art brittle, slightly squeamish, and on the edge. In this work from 1993, which was characterized in general by this more clinical presentation of blood, Costa's work more directly related to the sanguine splattering of art history from Herman Nitsch's mysterious orgies in the 1960s, to Marc Quinn's sculpture made from frozen blood in the 1990s, as well as AIDS-related art such as Barton Bene's shrines containing HIV blood, and Ron Athley's HIV-related performances in the mid 1990s. There was a certain fear of blood, or a fear of death, embodied in the work. Between 1993 and 1999, the paradigm of the "culture of blood" shifted from fear of contamination, to hope for the science of replication and cloning and the mapping of the human genome.

As much as the artist understates the sanguine element of his art, Costa also speaks prophetically about the fact that he is in his work, that is, his DNA is actually in his work, and that each work is the carrier of his genetic code and could, in some future day, after his death even, be studied to determine either something about his life or the health of his great grandchildren, or some day conceivably be used to recycle the artist himself. Having shifted the paradigm, Costa's new work is more mature and optimistic, and has moved beyond the glass slide to seek out again a place for blood within a living genre of art, such as "drawings:" – (drawing blood, drawing an image, making a drawing).

The new blood work, while it relates to recent art, oddly enough, as it involves vellum, a material stained with or containing or absorbing blood, finds more precise parallels to the feminist work which has dealt with menstrual blood and taboos against that kind of blood flow: including Carolee Schneeman's notable Interior Scroll performance of 1975, Gina Pane's self-mutilations in the 1970s, even Mary Kelly's Postpartum Document (including stains made by her infant child), and others (incidentally, the monthly pacing of Costa's bloodletting remind one that in ancient cultures men were ritualistically expected to partake in the pain of childbirth by means of various bloodlettings; one wonders if Costa also projects the idea of different sort of fatherhood in his art). While the warmer, redder, fresher body of work, then, is certainly the most bloody of Costa's new work, it is also the most "sanguine" (in the sense of meaning alive, optimistic), and is in general a more mellow and resolved blood art than the work Costa created in the early 1990s.

That Costa's fresh red works also still seem warm and active also lends them to a relation to a whole body of lore within the Catholic church which falls under the rubric of "Eucharist miracles." In most such incidents/miracles, a host, desecrated or not, is seen to bleed, and most often, and conveniently bleeds on vestments, cloths, or corporals that are then preserved on altars for the faithful to periodically adore.

One would not want to make too much of this connection, and there are different degrees of the miraculous in this lore (in Lanciano, Italy, in the 8th century, a host transformed into a piece of bloody flesh, preserved, living, even after (See note); in Ferrara, in the 11th century, blood simply spurted from a host; in Daroca, Spain, 1239, hosts hid from the Saracen invaders spurted blood onto cloths and a corporal which were then held sacred in the church; another corporal is visible over the Cathedral of Orvieto, and then there is the bloody cloth wrapped around hosts in Offida, Italy as well), but this lore does offer a relation. Most miracle cloths which are a staple in churches, also, of course, derive, copycat style, from the heavyweights in the field: the sudarium of our Lord, the veron icon of his blood and sweat-stained facial imprint, obtained by St. Veronica of Turin – again, while one worries that to relate Costa's vellum ciborium of blood to the Shroud would seem simply a cliché, a distant relation nonetheless reverberates, if ever so slightly, in the work. In Costa's fresh, warm works especially, the presence of the artist in the art, in an immediate way, brings a whole other history, outside of art, alive in the work. In general, then, Costa's discussion of the work contains a strange synthesis of scientific observation and faith, and the inferences suggested by different ways of talking about life beyond life – immortality, cloning, and eternal life; in art, in life, and in heaven – all whisper around Costa's most bright and fresh art.

But in addition to the warm red suite of works there is another suite, which are whiter, drier, and emptier. In this work, gravity dominates every other consideration. In this work especially Costa's means of "drawing:" pressing his hands down, pushing the blood out to the margins of the vellum, leaving only evacuated traces of a field of struggle, dominates. In these works, the lighter spaces dominate over the darker spaces, the air, or the pressed together sheets of vellum with the air squeezed out, rules over the blood. The blood is so marginalized that one begins to think of life after one is gone, the time of one's absence, one thinks of states of decomposition, after the blood has evaporated and no longer exists. In these works, there is no form, in fact, Costa's hands obliterate form, annihilating any formal grasp of the work.

One thinks of disintegrating history, garments, flags, documents, papers, knowledge and lore; one goes even further, into the world of stone and sand, art is replaced by archeology, or to the fossilized remains of early life forms. Costa surrounds his raw material in a world of concern over the whirlwind of time that runs from dust to dust and ashes to ashes. A more wistful mortality, overreaching eons and epochs, overlaps this suite of work. It is another tone entirely, yet captured by the same simple methodology. Here too, the effect of

time on the work, and the fact that time has passed in and around the work, calls into question Costa's claim, so patently acceptable when looking upon the fresh works, seems less plausible, when remarked about this work. But is true just the same: it is as if the materiality of the work, by containing transformative decay within it, appears to belie its original quality, tries mightily to undo itself, when in fact of course we know that the DNA is still there, and this type of work only more surprisingly, with the drama of a far fetched forensic unearthing of new evidence meriting the reopening of an obscure case, brings us back to the living present.

In his blood work, then, Pietro Costa straddles history and art history, religion and science, past, present and future: by a simple act of bloodletting, begun in a breakthrough moment under pressure at the beginning of the 1990s, Costa undertook a new way of making art. And now he has explored his limited practice in such a searching way that he has come up with, thus far, a wide range of tonalities and semiotic dispositions, which have, as I have tried to sketch out, uncovered a world of interpretation, at the intersection of histories, that look forward and back at once. In that too then – by transforming his materials and his outlook – Costa is also an artist moved by the millennium to seek out a new future for art – and history as represented in other art forms or artwork – where the intensely personal and the most broadly cultural, the most refined and artistic and most clinical and actual, the most optimistic prophecy and the most lugubrious memento mori – are at last one.

*Cruz, Joan Carroll. *Eucharistic Miracles and Eucharistic Phenomena in the Lives of Saints*. Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, Inc., 1987.

*Taylor, Brandon. *Avant-Garde and After: Rethinking Art Now*. New York: Prentice Hall Inc., 1995.

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