

FrameWork 3/20

Danny O'Quinn on Sandra Meigs

"Between us and reality are our feelings"—Svetlana Alexievich

Saturday, March 21. It is International Puppetry Day. Social distancing has lost its vaguely oxymoronic connotations. We are resuscitating strategies for transmitting affect across space, through objects, without words. Because of course we have been through this and done this all before. The Italians singing arias collectively on their balconies have known all along how to reach into the core of others when those others are distant or gone. In times of danger the fetish not the commodity reemerges as a method for communication and remembrance: our objects, especially those imbued with intimate attachments, live among us. And the eloquent stillness of painting does what it has always done, stopping time, opening a temporal loop while our sensuous, rational, and emotional experiences dynamically reset themselves.



One week ago I spent time with Sandra Meigs's "The Little Lost Operas"—a series of small diorama-like paintings that incorporate fragments of clothing and crude little puppets to invoke vaguely operatic scenarios. Some paintings use scraps of dresses and scarves for curtains. The puppets--fashioned from wood, clay, bits of cloth and string—have the uncanny qualities of old, handmade dolls, but here they hover in front of the picture plane as the emotional fulcrum in no missing narratives. My favourite from the painting "Ghost" is a scrunched up pair of old underwear with a face drawn on. Nothing is new. Bodies, now gone, have rubbed and been rubbed through these fibres. The scenarios are all vaguely identifiable. Both the scenes and the materials exude desire and abjection, those parts of life we cling to as the most irresolvably human. Opera, fetish-like puppets and scraps of cloth, and painting all converge here in ways that make you laugh and I suspect if we give them time they will also make you cry. Laughing and crying you know it's the same release.

We are all poised on that razor-edge right now but of course that's not at all new either. Sandra Meigs was making these before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic but the state of dis-ease and emotional tribulation they inhabit is endemic to the operatic scenario itself. Much of the canon of 19th century opera was composed and performed with the spectre of multiple cholera pandemics lurking in the back of everyone's minds. It wasn't until Berg's *Lulu* and Britten's *Death in Venice* that cholera's presence was made explicit, but the disease was quite literally everywhere throughout the nineteenth century. Opera involves congregation and we all know how that feels right now. Imagine what it felt like at a time when there was no real sense of mitigation or treatment. Linda and Michael Hutcheon have shown that nineteenth and early twentieth century opera thematized contagion and often used it as an allegory for all manner of social anxieties, but I'm interested in how opera's formal strategies for activating and engaging with passion constitute a form of historical reckoning with a highly embodied sense of crisis.ⁱ As Lauren Berlant argues, "Crisis is not exceptional to history or consciousness but a process embedded in the ordinary that unfolds in stories about navigating what's overwhelming".ⁱⁱ That navigation involves a careful attention to form and genre for as she states "Affect's saturation of form can communicate the conditions under which a historical moment appears as a visceral moment, assessing the way a thing that is happening finds its genre".ⁱⁱⁱ In response to any early draft of this text my friend Ella said, "a pair of crumpled old underwear turned into the face of a lover is a harbinger for the face of the world."

So let us imagine some unnamed Italian on a balcony somewhere singing the same aria from *The Barber of Seville* that was sung at the opening of Meigs's show. They weren't connected by the various technologies through which we are desperately trying to simulate intimacy. But both singers would have been activating, whether they knew it or not, a visceral history, a set of affective dispositions that had found their form in Rossini's aria, and that had been incorporated into the cultural memory. What is so remarkable is that this transmission of the history of emotion operates below the level of conscious knowledge. You don't need to know the operatic repertoire for the timbre of the singer's voice to catch you, just as you don't need to recognize the operatic scenes Meigs has staged in the gallery. Within the liveness of song it is the voice that moves us; Meigs supplements the stillness of painting with the emotional associations of used clothing and the fetishistic elements of puppetry to mediate between our present experience of dis-ease and that which is always already forgotten. Importantly some of the fabric flutters in the breeze produced by carefully installed fans thus subtly reinforcing that painting and time constantly push and pull on one another. As the title for the show implies these are the forgotten scenarios that we have known all along. I would venture that perhaps the most unsettling and affecting aspect of our current situation and Meigs's paintings is that we are looking at an amplification and acceleration of our perilous everyday lives. Love and fear and grief had been there all along and now we are all struggling to slow things down so that we can give them form. Working prior to the urgency of the pandemic, but strangely engaging with its distant precursors (not just cholera but also AIDS), Meigs has given form to these emotions. For the memories and feelings elicited by that stained and stretched out pair of underwear hovering in front of its lush blue backdrop I am profoundly grateful in part because it has reminded me of the indomitable force of the everyday, of the intensity of life lived.

ⁱ Linda Hutcheon and Michael Hutcheon, *Opera: Desire, Disease, Death* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1996).

ⁱⁱ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke Univ. Press, 2011), 10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 16.