

▼ Art

Hurts and Skins

Nicola Samori's rereadings of Old Master oils are a revelation

BY R.C. BAKER

Gazing at Italian painter Nicola Samori's new work might bring to mind Auden's famous opening from "Musée des Beaux Arts": "About suffering, they were never wrong, the Old Masters."

Think of Michelangelo's self-portrait in his *Last Judgment* fresco — a rubbery visage staring blankly out from drooping, flayed flesh, representative of the martyrdom of St. Bartholomew. Painters from time immemorial have felt a kinship with the human body, particularly when working in oil, which dries like skin and seals the viscera of their compositions underneath. (You can see an exaggerated version of this effect when a flexible scab develops over the liquid contents of an old can of house paint.)

Samori bases much of his work on Renaissance imagery and brings classical aplomb to his figures. But having been born in 1977, he is separated from that world by the revolutions and revelations of modernism. The camera took away the necessity for painting to represent human beings and their events, and soon thereafter abstract art liberated raw color and form from any narrative demands. Yet no less a paragon of abstraction than Willem de Kooning declared, "Flesh is the reason oil paint was invented," because painters know that their medium, lithe and organic, can never be completely divorced from the meat of existence.

So study the face in Samori's *D'Oria* (2014), an oil painting on wood based on a 16th-century portrait by Sebastiano del Piombo of the celebrated Genoese admiral Andrea Doria. In his updated version, Samori allowed the top layer of paint to congeal over the viscous layers beneath and then gently tugged, perhaps with a flat hand, upon that painted face, creating in the surface actual ripples that eerily echo wrinkles in the depiction of Doria's neck.

For the original portrait of Doria, Sebastiano appropriated Michelangelo's showstopping gesture of God's finger extended toward Adam and took it a step further by rotating the hand outward, as if the esteemed admiral had some essential spark to impart to the viewer. A half-millennium later, Samori has zeroed in on that divinely inspired digit and destroyed



Courtesy of Ana Cristea Gallery

***D'Oria* (2014) pulls new textures from a Renaissance classic.**

the illusion of his own painted representation by having Doria's finger drag a blue furrow through the picture plane, with labia of red pigment erupting on either side. Samori has said, "Before a new painting comes into being, an old one has to die"; here he plays the role of creator by transmuting a dark, staid portrait into a haunting, conceptual hybrid.

A pair of smaller works hanging side by side traverses the life of Jesus in veils of pigment. In *Orrery*, Christ's deposed body is engulfed in a halo of what might be clear plastic, a modern evocation of a being who entered humanity's consciousness when he (briefly) lost his own. Even more impassioned is *The Golden Child*, in which the Madonna is riven with gray blotches and white scratches, and the future Lord incarnated as gouts of gray and yellow paint. "It is amazing," Samori has explained, "how strong the feeling is that an intact form triggers the instant it is shattered. It happens with our body, it happens with objects, and it also happens with the history of art."

Francis Bacon, who worked during a time when abstract painting was even more dominant than it is today, once said that his paintings were "an attempt to bring the figurative thing up onto the nervous system more violently and more poignantly."

Similarly, Samori brings to paint what martyrdom supposedly affords the faithful: On the far shore of injury, suffering, and death comes something thrillingly beautiful.

Nicola Samori: 'Begotten, Not Made'

Ana Cristea Gallery
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