

As the Image Advances

“A brush with death, some years ago, has left him calmer, but more likely to swerve off on unexpected tangents.”

—Bruce Chatwin on Howard Hodgkin¹

Recently I watched John Scott unroll the big Napoleon in Spain in preparation for his exhibit in the Solo Projects section at ARCO 08, the contemporary art fair in Madrid. It was a large canvas 131 inches high and 107 inches wide. The figure was imposing as it lay there in its horizontality. One rarely has the opportunity to see work of this calibre away from the walls. The shift in perspective took me totally by surprise. Everything seemed different from what I had observed in other drawings hanging on walls. It caused me to seriously question the dominance of verticality. Scott was on the floor on all fours conducting the procedure. He was both excited and anxious. He knew what was there, but it was as if he were not sure if the Commander had really arrived. Yet, there he was. Bit by bit the image made its appearance. The first trace of his presence was the upper peak of his three-cornered hat. According to Scott, the hat was designed in that shape in order to be easily recognizable from the distance as the Commander was on the approach. He thought that this icon of authority would quickly be spotted by the Spaniards who had seen it in the heads of the Guardia Civil. Then the head appeared. Oh! The sockets were empty and there was no mouth. Scott seemed unfazed by that.

The Napoleonic conquering of territory began to occur with the strength of the image, which, by now, was half-exposed: a three-cornered hat, a head without eyes and a long body encased in a kind of shroud. There was a warlike domination to this figure. As the unrolling continued we could see the big coat enveloping the body which seemed present and absent at the same time. One could easily be convinced that there was nothing under that imposing garment. Something horrific, un-nameable, un-graspable, began to be distilled from the image, particularly at the end as the canvas was fully unrolled. Ortega y Gasset

in speaking about Velazquez, pointed out that “the appearance of a thing is its apparition, that moment of reality which consists of its direct presentation to us.”² I noticed that there was no grounding to the figure. There was something very disturbing about standing in proximity to this unmoored, recumbent giant. As a portrait in contrast, Scott seemed totally grounded and at home in the face of all this. It was clear that he was in familiar territory. He was accustomed to deal with these personages, to render them present. Empty sockets didn’t disturb him either. He knew what to do. He told me that deliberately he had left the drawing unfinished. His intention was to add some words, but only after arriving in Spain. Text often is a significant component in his work. He said that no mouth was necessary. The commander didn’t have to speak at all. His orders didn’t need to be articulated. He was capable of directing an entire army with his gaze.

With a few interventions from Scott, the eyes of the Commander were set towards the territory to be conquered. According to him, this territory was not only bound to space, but was also linked to time. The Commander was not only after geography; he had set himself out to conquer time beyond physical borders: history, the past, the present, the future. Clearly the gaze of the Commander was directed toward something more distant than any external world.

In an act of transfiguration of the commonplace—to use a phrase coined by Danto³—Scott transformed the grounds of the ARCO Projects into his own studio. Napoleon had set himself out to conquer territory, but so had the artist. In inhabiting that territory and in transforming the conditions of time and space, Scott began to work. What followed was an endless switching between closeness and distance. He quickly made himself at home over the surface of the half-complete drawing, imprinting his fingertips, his footsteps, leaving traces of himself throughout the piece, marking his territory.

He was engaged in an activity which occurred somewhere between the present and the future. That is how Scott conquered time and place, by harnessing an image out of what refused to be imagined.

The drawing came to life in our presence. I had the privilege of witnessing the mutative process. My attention was drawn towards the piercing gaze of the Commander. I got lost in the tyranny of this image. At that moment a thought occurred to me: I realized that art cannot point to what has never existed unless it first shows what does exist. Scott's voice interrupted my reverie as he said, "I thought I'd complete the ground on arrival to Spanish soil." He was working on a semicircle under the Commander's feet, as if he were standing at the edge of the planet. Scott's desire to link the completion of the drawing with his arrival in Spain seemed to me a way of breaking into the world, and granting a view which was above and beyond our images. It was his way of exposing a different reading of the world.

Scott is an artist who draws. He works really fast. For his drawings he releases chunks of pastels and oils, creating figures that he then treats as plastic forms. He sets to work on them. His drawing and re-drawing leave marks on the surface which are never entirely removed. They become blurred and covered again. It is through these layers that his images take on the power that they possess. There is a certain transparency to the different layers. Everything remains visible, even when a new layer is added on. There is a kind of time travel that occurs in these mutating drawings. They are current events with the capacity to condense time. In each of them there is a strong sense of impenetrability, a sense of darkness, a slippage of the signified. The process generates a new kind of space. They are truly spontaneous gestures. His images appear from an immediacy that matches the content and the structure of a thought.

Is this drawing different from others? What is so uncanny about this drawing? The image simultaneously conveys the Napoleon we all know and would recognize in the street, and the other Napoleon, the one without a mouth, the un-speakable, un-nameable. There is power in this image. It is a power which is controlled, mastered, turned into courage. It isn't just violence. On the other hand

this figure embodies such a large sense of vulnerability. It confronts us with the fact that an image never stands alone. There is always a relation to other images, mirror images, virtual images. Scott has the capacity to give a face to the numinous.⁴

Looking back at the antecedents of this Napoleon, I can tell that from early on Scott could see what was intolerable in things. I can see that Scott has painted a portrait of himself as a warrior, always evoking the dust of the battle. He has ventured outside of what is familiar in a system where drawing and thinking are synonymous. As someone who works a great deal he is a solitary figure. But his is not just any solitude. It is a solitude full of projects, a creative solitude. From the depths of this solitude come these images.

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¹ Chatwin, Bruce. Howard Hodgkin in *What Am I Doing Here*. USA: Viking, 1989. pp 70.

² Ortega y Gasset, Jose. *Velazquez, Goya and the Dehumanization of Art*, trans. Alexis Brown. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1972. pp 99.

³ Danto, Arthur C. *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace. A Philosophy of Art*. USA: Harvard, 1981.

⁴ Otto, Rudolph. *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, trans. John W. Harvey. USA: Oxford University Press, 1958.