

A double being needs no other mate—
So Seraphita-Seraphitus lives:
Self-wedded angel, armed in self-delight,
Hermaphrodite of heaven, looking down
On the defeat of our divided love.

Natalie C. Barney

These images, by the master printmaker and performance artist Francis Copello, function on various levels. They are virtuoso examples of the printmaker's art, combining a number of different techniques and dazzling the viewer with their expressionistic colors. But they also tell a story. As the title puts it, they are "a pantomime about a ballerina playing for mentally disabled patients" at the Bronx Vocational Rehabilitation Center. Of course, this is no common dancer, it is Casta Diva, who is also Francis Copello. We have, then, prints, narration and autobiography. We also have an ironic commentary on mental illness, sexual identity and art.

Casta Diva is a work about outsiders and the triumph of fantasy. The very idea of a journey via a dreary subway to a remote "rehabilitation center" in the Bronx is symbolic. Like Orpheus, the artist descends into the underworld and arrives at a place populated with those who live apart from society. Colors are dark and anguished, but then, incredibly, Copello assumes the persona of a ballerina with an operatic name. In the prints, there is now bright color and glitter. Based on actual photographs (by Ivan della Tana) the images reveal an audience delighting in the performer's fantasy and he in their appreciation. This appreciation is that of a group of people who are not easily impressed. But the idea of someone becoming a beautiful woman and dancing for an invisible prince does impress. Through fantasy, through art, madness is overcome, grim reality is left behind. Artist and audience share in a spectacle that the rest of the world can only envy.

Through his cross-dressing, his shamanistic transformation, Copello makes a further statement. He is both man and woman, an androgynous being: the new human. This new human has begun to make his/her appearance on Earth, both in art and in life, in great part due to the sexual revolution of the last decades of the twentieth century. But the androgyne has really always lurked beneath the surface in works of the imagination. The Mona Lisa may well be Leonardo in drag, as Duchamp points out in the irreverent L.H.O.O.Q. Duchamp went one step further by inventing a similar alter ego, Rose Sèlavy, and having himself photographed in this guise. In French, Rose Sèlavy is both an anagram and a pun. The name contains the expressions "that's life" and "eros is life". Rose is a camp sister of Casta Diva (whose name, from the opera Norma, means chaste goddess) and also of the mustachioed Mona Lisa in L.H.O.O.Q. All three deal in puns and ironies and subvert the pretences of "high" culture.

Ultimately, the new human will have the sensitivity and respect for him/herself and others that a spiritually hermaphroditic viewpoint allows. Casta Diva may take a final bow in the Bronx, remove the makeup, and step into the subway for a journey back to a reality where there are no waiting princes, but for a moment she is prophetic.

Giulio V. Blanc