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by Lisa Turvey

Angelo Filomeno

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Whether it's a sign of inspiration or of exhaustion, the past decade has witnessed the annexing of various cottage industries by a number of contemporary artists, spawning craft-based practices that are now cottage industries in their own right. Two prominent strains, glassblowing and work that incorporates some kind of sewing, can justifiably lay claim to Angelo Filomeno, and, judging from the group exhibitions listed on his CV, have. But while the Italian-born, New York-based artist comes by these pedigrees more honestly (his mother was a dressmaker, his father a blacksmith, and he began apprenticing with a tailor at age seven) and more seriously (he was employed as a theatrical costumer and completed a residency at Washington State's Pilchuck Glass School, cofounded by Dale Chihuly) than many, his sights are more expansively set. In the past few years, Filomeno's exquisitely wrought renderings of the macabre cited Albrecht Dürer's memento mori explicitly and Damien Hirst's bejeweled skulls implicitly. "The marquis and a bearded dominatrix with a cake in the oven," his second solo exhibition at Galerie Lelong, expanded his Eros-Thanatos repertoire, adding Surrealist icons, philosophical archetypes, and homespun abjection to the referential mix.

With Filomeno's preferred recent palette of black and silver augmented by an intense goldenrod that coated one wall and appeared in several compositions, this was a tight, slick, kick-down-the-doors show whose glittery excess felt like a precession throwback. Its centerpiece,

By the Side of the Last Ocean Ready for Sunset, 2008–2009, comprised a long, mirrored table upon which rested, in clusters, dozens of handblown glass objects, each more symbolically superannuated than the next—a bone, a bullwhip, a chalice, primitive-looking tools, and no fewer than eight skulls, some patinated a diamantine silver and one appended with a Dalí-like lobster. The setup is equal parts dissecting table, natural history display, torture chamber, hookah lounge, and demented *Last Supper*, its divergent forms and allusions corralled only by a uniform obsidian sheen.

As arresting, if less allegorically fraught (relievedly so), were a pair of what Filomeno calls his "embroidery paintings": patches of silk shantung and satin in chartreuse and gold sewn together in mandalas and stretched over large linen panels. Technical masterpieces, both

feature a stitched emblem at the center that, when noticed, breaches the design's meditative associations and abstract harmonies alike—a skull in *Dream of Flies (Yellow, Black)*, 2010, and a concentric ring of roaches in *Dream of Flies (Yellow)*, 2010. Such ruptures are starker in the three "Laughing Philosopher" images of 2010, fields of inky silk, their moiré patterning reminiscent of wood grain, onto each of which is threaded a decaying head, its bulging eye sockets, rotting flesh, and crustaceous protuberances limned in ornate, silken gold handiwork worthy of haute couture.

Filomeno's combination of morbid imagery and luxe materials is paradoxically the source of his work's fascination and its potential shortcoming: Alongside the interesting cognitive toggle it demands emerges a certain anxiety, as if the artist were trying to justify his precious, old-world methods with heavy-hitting themes; he simultaneously courts the decorative (several surfaces are flecked with crystals) and seems to need to account for it. The resultant tension is most pronounced in his sculptures: *Rapture of the Skin*, 2010, a horned, masked bust of leather and hematite, comes across less as an evocation of s/m than an illustration of it. I found myself wondering what Filomeno's practice would look

like if he gave himself over fully to abstraction, or selected less overdetermined subjects, or further pared down his means. In this sense, seven small works, comprising the series "Days of Pain," 2009, were among the show's most promising. Panels of humble black burlap—taken from sacks used to transport olives—embroidered, in black, with a single head (some skull-like, others resembling aboriginal masks), they channel focus on Filomeno's extraordinary craftsmanship, testaments to the notion that restrained suggestion can carry as much force as extravagant gesture.

—Lisa Turvey

Angelo Filomeno, *Laughing Philosopher (frontal)*, 2010, embroidery on silk shantung stretched over linen, 100 x 51".

