

Danzando con Borromini

In Renaissance and Baroque Italy just as veils commonly clothed the body, so drapes and all manner of hangings and awnings clothed streets and buildings for festivals and processions. There were even specialists who draped churches with scarlet cloths, tapestries and banners. In this way public spaces were temporarily transformed. The sway of the robes and vestments of nobles and clergy, together with the gentler movement of hangings and the fluttering of pennants, turn architecture into event. Blurring hard and fast distinctions between animate bodies and inanimate things, veils and drapes invite imaginative projection; both in sacred ritual and erotic imagination they conjure fantasy. When stirred by movement, cloths extend animate presence into a field of energy beyond the boundaries of the corporeal.

It was in seventeenth-century Rome that sculptors – most famously Bernini – realized the expressive agency and theatrical potential of drapery with unprecedented daring. But when Liz Rideal, an artist who has long engaged with cloth as material and metaphor, took up a residency in Rome, it was not these virtuoso works that she sought to emulate. Instead she infiltrated the spaces created by Baroque architects, discovering there an arena for her own performance. Rather than competing she entered into partnership and thereby renewed the event of our bodily encounter with architecture. Her favourite partner in this ‘dance’ was the rival of Bernini, Francesco Borromini. Celebrated and sometimes criticized by his contemporaries for his ‘chimerical’ structures, his buildings present a strange fusion of architecture and sculpture. ‘Drama is inherent’, Rudolf Wittkower observed, ‘in the way that the motifs unfold, expand and contract; in the way that movement surges upwards and comes to rest’.

Today the visitor to Rome may feel exhilarated by Borromini’s churches and palaces but also estranged by spaces made to stage events that no longer have meaning, spaces we enter as spectators not participants. Rideal’s series of artworks entitled *Danzando con Borromini* respond to the Baroque genius by intervening in a manner that invites participation in the present moment. Her interventions are at once surreptitious and celebratory. Throwing up chiffons as light as air, she appropriates the grandeur and energy of the Baroque, undoing its rhetoric and rendering it as immediate as breath, as intimate as a veil wrapped around the body. Ritual is reinvented, opened to dreams, to memories and feelings. And by the same gesture the veil is unwrapped, released within the body that is the building to perform arias and crescendos; in gauzy violets, greens, pinks and reds, the veils suggest *coloratura* made visible; sound can pass through them. Typically, the architectural vessels that Rideal prefers – whether exterior or interior – are curved and relatively contained. In spaces topped by domes, on spiraling staircases, in a narrow colonnade or tightly framed courtyards, the dance of tissue is performed within the embrace of the encircling body.

If the veil of chiffon was once wrapped around the body, here the physical body has departed leaving only the trace or chimera of its presence, or perhaps just its skin, its chrysalis of colour, a body without organs. ‘The departed’ is both a common euphemism for the dead and a term for someone who has just left the stage. In historic art drapery is one of the motors of narrative, signaling where a figure has come from and where it is heading towards; by contrast Rideal’s chiffons hover mysteriously without destination. They suspend the movement from and towards. Like spirits released from the body they are free. Their presence is as temporal as music, yet the photographic artwork endures. Their energy brings to mind a passage by Merleau-Ponty, where he writes. ‘The painter “takes his body with him,” says Valéry... It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings. To understand these transubstantiations we must go back to the working, actual body – not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.’

In daily life this constant intertwining of vision and movement passes largely unregistered by the conscious mind. Rideal’s artwork, in partnership with Borromini’s buildings, realizes

this intertwining, 'transubstantiating' architecture into pictorial image. Yet we may also view these pictures as sculptures occupying volumes, softly turning and folding in air, meshing light with colour, and holding time suspended in the pleats and twists of fabric. In these mobile sculptures, Rideal has invented an equivalent to the fountains of Baroque Rome, cascading and rippling not with water but with colour. Like the fountains they pulse with life. Whereas seventeenth-century Baroque proclaims power and ostentation, Rideal's restaging of the Baroque brings into being something at once more inward and more open, as close to the body as breath, as free and universal as air.

Paul Hills