The Nude Pianist: A Novel: Chapter 47

by Daniel Harris

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Press Conference, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York City

—Mr. Martinelli, can you explain how you developed your painting technique? How did you arrive at the style and technique you used in these *Atmospheres* paintings?

—Well, that's a big question, replied Francesco. [*Scattered laughter among the assembled press corps.*] Let me begin by saying there was a period when I didn't paint on canvas at all, but during that time I thought a lot about painting. I was no longer happy painting wild abstract, surreal paintings. I wanted pure paint to do the talking, not fantastic flights of imagination. I also was not interested in the optical tricks of the OpArt movement. I went back to Paul Klee's lectures on color. I studied all the Rothko paintings I could find. What emerged are these paintings. It was an engaging and thorough study of color and painting.

—Was there something that triggered this change? asked a woman from *Art In America*.

—Ah … I don't know if I would call it a trigger, but around the time I was thinking these thoughts, I was listening to a lot of music. As some of you know, the great virtuoso pianist, Michiko and I were partners for seven years. She taught me much about the power of a single pitch and how it is shaped by dynamics, articulation, duration and register. Following Paul Klee's example, I began experimenting

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with watercolors. I have with me a sketchbook with examples of my color tests and experiments from that time.

Francesco opens a large sketchbook and holds it up for the audience to see.

—On the left-hand page, you see two colored circles. In reality, the two colors are made up of dozens of small nearly identical colors, but their values are slightly different. This technique I call color-modulation, which you can think of as variation on a color. Notice how these variations give action to the shape. Maybe action is the wrong word, perhaps a sense of direction is better, because if I turn this upside down, notice how the picture changes. Now the red ball that had been on top and happily floating above the green ball now seems to be trying to escape the green ball. A picture capturing a carefree moment instantly becomes a painting of menace. This is pure emotion in paint.

—Excuse me, Mr. Martinelli, interrupted a man with a heavy German accent, but I trust you know that Paul Klee was almost equally a musician as he was a painter.

—Yes, thank you, said Francesco, barely missing a beat. Now if you direct your attention to the *Atmospheres* painting behind me, you'll see many examples of color-modulation. For instance here you can see the same interaction between a rich crimson red and sea foam green. What I've done is create a painting the way a composer creates a musical composition. I build small subtle interactions between colors much like a composer builds melody and meaning from the notes he chooses.

—Mr. Martinelli, said a petite blond woman in a dark green suit, your colors are so wonderful. I am tempted to lick some of them they are so delicious. They must taste divine. Can you give us some insight into how you prepare your palette?

—Please don't lick the paint, said Francesco, laughing with the group. The colors may look delicious, but they are not good for your health. But to answer your question, I formulate all my paints. They are oil paint, but I grind and blend my colors to the requirements of each painting. The technique is as old as oil paint, but my formula of

binders and carriers is different for each application. The reason I make my own paints is to have exactly the colors I have planned. While labor intensive, it is cheaper than purchasing good oil paint in the quantities I needed for this project.

Francesco scans the room for more questions.

—Yes, the woman in the yellow dress, you have a question?

—What size brushes to do use? When I examined the surfaces of these paintings, it looked like you use very small brushes for a canvas that is over twenty feet wide and twelve feet tall.

—Good question. I'm afraid if I give you the answer you'll think I'm crazy. But, I'll risk it. To prepare the canvas, I apply enough gesso to make a very solid surface. It usually takes ten or twelve layers of gesso. I lightly sand between the layers of gesso. I like a very ridged surface. I use a six-inch brush. Then I apply a thin layer of ultramarine blue with— of all horrors—a roller. Then I map the entire surface with colored chalk. I do this mapping so that I can paint areas with similar colors using the same palette. Of course, I have mapped out the painting well before I begin the process. For the actual painting, I typically use numbers 8, 10, and 12 filbert brushes and complete the highlights with number 2 and 4 round brushes. For those of you who don't know brush sizes, a number 12 filbert is about a half-inch wide, while a round number 2 brush is about an eighth inch coming to a single hair point.

There is a murmur among the assembled. Few can believe the amount of work involved. The sheer quantity of concentrated labor is outside anyone's experience.

—That's impressive, said a fat man from *Der Spiegel* sitting in the front row. Can you tell us how long it takes you to paint one of these *Atmosphere* paintings?

—Well, first, you should know that I do not have any assistants. I do all the work myself. I work from six in the morning until ten at night. I usually take Sunday off. But if things are going well, I'll work seven days a week. When I say Sunday off, I mean that's when I grind pigments, prepare canvases and paint, food shop and prepare for the coming week. For me, painting is my life. My happiest days

are working alone in my atelier. I love the solitude, but I am not alone, my tools and materials are my friends. My beautiful Maine Coon cat, Bounder is terrific company. He's a big talker. [*Laughter*.]

—So, how long does it take you to paint one of these canvases? asked the fat man again.

—Another tough question, said Francesco, coughing into his hand. I began painting this series in June 1975, and there are sixteen paintings. I would guess about a month each. If you figure I'm painting seventy-two hours a week, that's 288 hours a month, give or take. So a good estimate is around 300 hours.

Maria Monsanto walks up to Francesco.

—One more question and then we will have to end the session. I believe Mr. Jacob Loeb from the *New York Times* has a question.

—Thank you, Maria, said Loeb, standing. This question is for you, Maria. Tell us what attracted you to Martinelli's work.

—That's easy; he's a brilliant artist. Initially, I contemplated a show of his earlier work, but when I visited his studio and saw these paintings, I knew they were my show. I worked hard to convince Francesco that he could finish the project and that I could hang them at the Whitney. He was not convinced, but I trust he is convinced now that we are standing in a gallery full of *Atmospheres*.

—I might add, said Francesco, that Maria is a saint and a genius in her own right. I'm not a natural team player. As a matter-of-fact, I'm a very ornery guy to have around.

—Could I ask one vital question, asked Elaine Aster, who was sitting off to the side of the group.

—Of course, Elaine, said Francesco. May I introduce Elaine Aster, who discovered me back in 1968.

—Thank you, Francesco. You've said you consider all sixteen paintings as one large canvas with sixteen parts. Is this true?

—Glad you asked that. Absolutely. As nice as each part is, I would hate to see the ensemble broken up. I know that limits its potential sale, but that's how I conceived them and how I'd like them to remain.

—Thank you for coming, everyone, said Maria. The gallery will remain open for another hour so you may examine the paintings.

There was sustained applause from the assembled press and friends.

—You must be exhausted, Francesco, said Maria.

—Exhausted is an understatement, replied Francesco. I'm ready to collapse. I'm surprised I didn't fall asleep standing in front of the group.

—Nice jacket, said Dan Sarras, putting his hand on Francesco's shoulder. You did a good job. I'm proud of you.

—Thanks, Dan. Do you know Maria Monsanto, the curator of my show?

—No, I haven't had the pleasure.

—Maria, this is Dan Sarras. He's my new dealer. He also handles Anatoly Gringovitch. Maria is a resident curator here at the Whitney and a famous art historian.

—Pleased to meet you, said Sarras, extending his hand.

—I've heard about you, said Maria, shaking Sarras's hand. You represent two of the best artists working today.

—Wouldn't have it any other way, said Sarras. Is there some place the three of us can talk in private?

—We can go to my office, downstairs on the first floor.

—Let's go, I don't have much time, said Sarras.

After arranging themselves in Maria's cramped office, Sarras broke the news.

—Now this is not confirmed yet, but I'm 95% positive that the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou wants to mount this show in November of 1978. Isabella Sanitizzare has been arranging most of the details. Honoré Boncourt, the curator of contemporary painting, will be here tomorrow for the Sunday evening preview. I have other business, but Isabella will be here. Frank, you have to be on your best behavior. Don't promise anything, let Isabella do all the talking if it comes to that.

—Am I going to have to pay to ship these paintings to Paris? asked Frank. That could cost a bundle.

—Frank, I'm your dealer now. The frogs will cover the shipping and insurance. We've pretty much settled on getting you a FF150, 000 fee. That's about $25,000, Frank. In addition, they are offering a per diem in Paris of a thousand dollars a week for the duration of the show. Of course, you will have to be available for gallery talks, seminars, and educational demonstrations, but Paris in winter is not as bad as advertised.

—Francesco, that's an amazing arrangement, said Maria. I'm so happy for you.

—Maria, there's something in this for you, too, continued Sarras. They want to translate your catalog and add an essay by one of their experts. I'm sure they will want you to attend the opening. I don't know the politics at the Whitney, but your board of directors will have to approve the sharing of the catalog since they are the copyright holders.

—They have a pretty liberal policy about those things, said Maria. I'm almost a native French speaker, so I can assist with the translation. My doctorate is from the Sorbonne.

—Well, until we sign all the papers and contracts, mums the word. Only Isabella, the French and the three of us are privy to this news. The French will want to make the announcement, so no loose lips. Do I make myself clear?

—How can I thank you, Dan, said Frank. I can't believe it, another showing of *Atmospheres*. Unbelievable.

—Well, believe it, said Sarras

—Yes, said Maria. I'm so excited for Francesco. Finally, he has some good fortune.

—Now that he has a real dealer and agent, I expect his fortunes to improve exponentially. Frank, you look like hell. Bedtime for you, amigo. Can I give you a lift home? I have to stop by Anatoly's house.

—I would love that, said a weary Frank. What time tomorrow Maria?

—The event starts at six. I'm planning on being here at five-thirty. You should arrive no later than six-thirty.

—Right. Good night, Maria, and thank you for everything, said Frank. I apologize for being such a beast, but now we can all relax. A new phase in our lives begins tomorrow.

Frank bent over and gave Maria a kiss on the cheek. She pushed her cheek into his lips.

—It was nice to meet you, Mr. Sarras. What wonderful news you've brought. Thank you for all you've done for Francesco and me, said Maria still feeling the heat of Francesco's kiss.

—My pleasure, Maria, said Sarras, shaking Maria's hand. Until next time. Come on, Frank. It's three blocks to the car.

To be continued.