

Aby Warburg's Bilderatlas of Memory

0. Warburg's "Journey Through Memory"

The life of Aby Warburg (Hamburg, 1866–1929) was one of adventure, passion, and tragedy, a life that was both committed and even heroic. Born into a Jewish family, after earning his doctoral thesis on the mythological paintings of Botticelli – for which he visited Florence several times – Warburg travelled to America to explore the teachings of the Amerindians of New Mexico.

Once back in Hamburg he continued his studies, declining official positions, because he had only one obsession, which was to refine his vast library of books – which he never ceased to grow and reorder. He did the same with his writings, the fruit of lengthy peregrinations between images and sources – whether it was the beloved canvases of Botticelli or the tapestries of Burgundy, whether Flemish portraiture or Florentine engravings – everything was condensed into a single, voluminous album packed with notes and words that his students and listeners were lucky enough to receive – in distilled form – in the course of the lectures he gave.

Even when mental illness forced him to retreat to a psychiatric clinic for six years – while outside the First World War raged, and Germany was gearing itself for the National Socialist cleansing – he found fertile ground for reflection. And to show that he was cured, in 1923 he gave a "farewell speech" to the doctors and patients of the sanatorium based on the "serpent ritual", a theme he had developed in light of his experiences with the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico.

By the time he emerged from confinement, his pupil Fritz Saxl had prepared a network of scholars eager to welcome him, having transformed his library, together with his Bilderatlas (Atlas of Images) containing all his routes of research, iconography, and theoretical outpourings – which Saxl had miraculously saved en bloc from the Nazis and smuggled by ship to England on the night of 13 December 1933 – into a fully-fledged research organisation that took the name of the Warburg Institute, London.

In the Hamburg cemetery, the tombstone of Aby Warburg and his wife Mary is carved with the word "MNEMOSYNE", the Greek goddess of memory.

Along with his Bilderatlas so patiently, manically compiled over the course of a lifetime in a bid to relate the history of visual expression in the entire Mediterranean area – that inscription is a reminder of how the cultural tradition of the West is the outcome of magical, logical fluctuations between the Mediterranean basin and Northern Europe. The very opening pages of the Bilderatlas contain three tables whose imagery announces the unique declination of man's relationship with the cosmos around him, from early astrological superstition to the modern-day technological conquest of the sky itself.

1. Capturing the Uncanny

I like to think that during their lifetime, artists do little else but compose and articulate their own personal Bilderatlas: weaving the iconic and conceptual plots of their individual Mnemosyne. In a continuous cross-reference of references and memories, the artist stages a theatre of gestures and rituals that comprise both the surface and the depth of their creation: a representation of their era, a condensation of a particular way of seeing and perceiving space and time, a compilation of relationships and dialogues, of willpower and destiny. After all, artworks are merely a pathway through the chaos of life and mystery of the world toward order – however unsolved and prone to chance and error – but nevertheless some kind of order between earth and sky that brings meaning to one's existence.

Because after all, even today, the human memory offers a broad spectrum whereby an artist may reach celestial heights or sink into the bowels of the earth, creating works that mirror it, even when such works betray themselves.

And each creation is in turn generated by its own atlas of images: it does not arise from nowhere, nor does it grow from nothing, but translates a personal datum, an intimate event: in itself it potentially contains all the images that up to that point the artist has seen and absorbed by osmosis during his meanderings through the world.

A legacy composed of small, grand gestures.

Potentially, a story with out end.

And one such story is currently unfolding at the Galleria Marignana Arte in Venice, where various works of art especially created for this exhibition are deftly arranged in choral fashion on the walls and rooms of the gallery, weaving an elegy of a bygone era that offers a paean for a visionary future: each work is the product of its era, but encapsulates the one yet to come.

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Accompanying the works – forming a delightful Bilderatlas that would doubtless have fascinated Aby Warburg – are objects of varying dimensions, gifts and artefacts, very private mementos and hitherto undisclosed icons that each artist chose to put on exhibit as a means of enabling the public to glimpse their intimate path of memories and rituals, personal obsessions and omissions. Examples include a stone worn smooth by time, an old tumbler that time itself seems to drink from; fragments of a discontinued speech, freeze-frame images.

Put on display like this, these mnemonic objects become jarring elements that trigger memories we can identify with, because even if they do not directly belong to us, we recognise their origin and import, meaning and mystery.

Like memory, the exhibition is therefore capricious and bizarre, channelling us through a journey that lies open to infinite possibilities of memory and vision.

2. Image Hunters & Gatherers

Artists spend their entire lives gathering fragments of the stories they come across, weaving and repurposing them as images that generate yet further stories, like so many forebears and progeny of their own era.

Arranged alongside each other in this way, some of them seem related, others diverging. Like brothers and sisters sharing a kindred yet different family memory.

Investigating the metaphysics of everyday life are Verónica Vázquez, Maurizio Pellegrin, and Lorenzo Passi.

The first of these three artists (b. 1970, Treinta y Tres, Uruguay) rummages through landfills and rescues from the oblivion of physical and mental removal (i.e., social and political) such discarded items as looms and assorted machinery, remains, and work-tools, above all those of female labour, endowing them with an aesthetic dignity that perhaps they never had. She creates intricate overlapping meshes and reticular structures, which become imaginary grids, narrative “pigeon-holes” to file away stories that spill out of the drawers of memory; her preferred objects are old books containing distant chronicles lost in the mists of time, but which the artist re-calls as the interweaving of remote words that still carry meaning in their echoes of past tales.

Maurizio Pellegrin (b. 1956, Venice, Italy) exhibits one of his works in black: a square from which emerge wooden extensions steeped in memory, which the artist both conceals and reveals through the application of paint the colour of pitch, creating a kind of “blackboard” of knowledge that still awaits to be fixed in time and in space; the number “5” stencilled on this tablet laden with unstable knowledge stands out amid the tars of time, and challenges the form embracing it. This distilled work of alchemy is a trove of novel relational formulas between things and the Cosmos, between the concrete and the aleatory, an approach echoed by his inclusion of a specific object of memory, a Soweï mask designed by the Mende people of Sierra Leone: this ritual headdress hides the face of the wearer, whose role is to challenge whomever presides over the rite of passage to maturity in order to evaluate whether the initiate has passed the test. Such an object would surely have aroused Warburg’s interest.

For his part, Lorenzo Passi (b. 1985, Venice, Italy) turns memory liquid and feverish, forging and transforming it, guided by that which remains and has been saved from oblivion, such as his grandmother’s tumbler, inscribed with her name, now a memorial from which her offspring drink and remember, even as her features and words recede in their memory and the intricate scales of time continue to deliver the weight of the past. The works of these three different artists start with something that already exists – and will surely outlive their creative act – excavating the very texture of matter to relate the conjunctions that bind earthly reality and mystery, the works of man and the unfathomable mechanisms of the Cosmos.

Exploring this link through the act of metamorphosis between permanence and evanescence are the artists Silvia Infranco and Sophie Ko. The former (1982, Belluno, Italy) kneads and rolls out her material like dough, explores and ramifies whatever memory has managed to retain, be it in the rigorous arrangement of the dried vegetation, or in the fluidity of wax paste, or in the smudges and gaps of paint left on the canvas or board, in a continuous flux between surface and layer, matter and iconic potential. With her work *Tracciato* on exhibit here, Infranco absorbs and re-presents the processes undergone by organic matter over time, generating a magical, olfactory object that prompts reactions and triggers memories in the observer: whoever gets close enough to smell the moss will be reminded of dank woodland and their first forays into nature, or of piecing together the family crèche for Christmas, and much more.

Taking a different approach is Sophie Ko (b. 1981, Tbilisi, Georgia), who thrives on powders and pigments, which she compresses or layers by hand, thickening here and interrupting there, her works

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shielded in glass cases that reflect the transience of life: viewing her works we examine ourselves as we delve into the gashes and wounds of circumstance. Gold as the icon of all icons: space is suspended, time is frozen and becomes fluidly eternal. Her object is the stone: she welcomes and condenses it as the mineral expression of memory. Stones become worn, change form over time, yet are always present, with their despotic materialisation of timelessness. They imbue time with geography. Elsewhere, we have Quayola and also Giulio Malinverni (b. 1994, Vercelli, Italy), whose visionary scenes are created with brushes, oil paints and canvases: despite adopting the tools of the old masters, Malinverni deconstructs the paradigms of narrative and offers a window on an imaginary celestial world, in which myth and memory collide. His vision combines the masked *Commedia* with classic easel painting, merges popular folk-tales with the tradition of the *veduta*. His object of affection is a gold-leaf surround that frames what is invisible but nonetheless imaginary and imaginable. Albeit from the perspective of a technological painter, to some extent the output of Quayola (b. 1982, Rome, Italy) takes a similar approach, though in his case he works with new media, which are presumed to be inured to the thorny issue of tradition and aesthetics: the three works included in this exhibition comprise engravings after paintings respectively by Botticelli, Correggio, and Titian that relate the story of Judith and Holofernes. Using algorithms, Quayola offers a personal de-composition and re-composition of this powerful sacred image, reworking its semantics and offering an iconological stratification of the past that catapults us into the contemporary world, thanks to the emotionally “frozen” vector of new technologies. The result is the potential – both aesthetic and meaningful – that these three new images, filaments and connecting ganglia generated by an algorithm, aptly render the idea of this iconic image of rebellion and violence, and allow us to face it without preformed ideas. The blank slate is already rich in new beauty, potentially full of meaning and implications. Amidst this locus of expansion and condensation we also find the very storage device that serves as Quayola’s memorial, namely his computer’s hard disk. A work-tool, but also the tabernacle of his research and visions.

How to Write About Memory?

For some time, the Portuguese artist João Louro (b. 1963, Lisbon, Portugal) has been working on the covers of certain renowned books which over the decades have represented phases of social and narrative rupture and revolution in the panorama of political, ideological, genre, and artistic literature: for this exhibition, he offers his take on one of the last books to be banned by the Catholic Church, namely Simone De Beauvoir’s *Le Deuxième Sexe* (*The Second Sex*). For this feat Louro uses a rough canvas for each of the two volumes (*Facts and Myths*, *Lived Experience*): at the end of the 1940s the author – considered one of the founders of feminist thought emerging from the ranks of French Existentialism – explored the complex system of female submission through a systematic analysis that involves a range of academic disciplines. With this in mind, Louro’s take on this revolutionary historical process involves blow-ups of the original covers of the two volumes of the book, his aim being to distil the propulsive impact of De Beauvoir’s ideas; through his visual analysis of the typeface, Louro invites the viewer to reassess the design and colours used to frame the words of the book’s title, to engage with a struggle that has never ceased, whatever the actors then and now, and acknowledge that equality of the sexes transits first and foremost through the meanings we attribute to our daily language.

The “memorial” device that Louro has chosen to exhibit together with these two works pivots on the one-dollar bill. “A personal object,” he observes, “in the sense that it represents a pivotal moment in my career and personal life.” This very dollar was the upshot of an important project in which the artist participated in 2005, namely “InSite – Art Practices in the Public Domain in San Diego”, which exposed the the dynamics of money-laundering in the cross-border relations between San Diego (USA) and Tijuana (Mexico).

Adopting the automobile as a metaphor and repeatedly exploring its symbolic value in today’s economies, the project began with the retrieval of a European car discarded in a Tijuana landfill and its transformation into a “jewel” of sorts, thanks to a coating of gold-leaf paint. After converting this hunk of scrap into a gilded sculpture, the automobile (*The Jewel*) was exhibited and auctioned in San Diego. The money raised in the auction was donated to a Tijuana elementary school, and its students were challenged to intervene on the one-dollar bills of the pay-out, using them as a basis for their own designs. Thanks to this intervention, the money acquired another life of its own, equally complex in the field of symbolic value, in order to recycle itself once again and re-enter the North American economy.

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In this way, the neatly boxed one-dollar bill on display here acquires particular significance because by chance it turned up in the artist's hands a few weeks later amongst his change when he paid for a coffee at a service station.

Meanwhile, the present writer is performing much the same operation by entrusting to words the task of describing an exhibition which in turn endeavours to offer a plural narrative – stories of pain and love, intense, but as light as breath, capricious and bizarre like the memory that attempts through the work of art – and thereby to pin down the gestures and thoughts, actions and objects of the everyday. Small, private treasures that offer a way to climb or descend, and to reunite mankind with life and the Cosmos, to the Earth and beyond. A means of endowing it all to future generations.