

Satyrs

Roger Fenton (1819-1869) is a key figure in the history of photography at large, but, in particular, of photography as a form of artistic expression, rather than a means of pure documentation. Founder and first secretary of the Photographic Society (established in 1853 and later to become the Royal Photographic Society), he had initially trained as a painter and thus composed his photographic images with the eye of an artist. In 1854, Fenton spent three and a half months in Balaklava, photographing the Crimean War, producing more than 350 large format negatives, some of which were turned into woodblocks and published in the *Illustrated London News*.

It is these images, to which Marco Calí finds himself drawn and which he has used as the starting point for his series *Satyrs*, as well as for some smaller paintings – all oil on paper, with no underdrawing – of isolated standing figures, themselves further inspired by altarpiece fragments. Calí's work expresses his underlying interest in outline, form and the suggestion of depth and Fenton's images therefore appeal on numerous levels.

Firstly, there is the enigma of conflicting shadows: those cast naturally by the sun versus those imposed by Fenton's flash. Then there is the way in which the photographer would often burn the tops of his images to obliterate unwanted elements, emphasize certain figures or create areas of brightness. Both of these aspects add a level of abstraction to the images, something which Calí extrapolates in his experimentation with light and shadow. His breaking down of areas of the composition into geometric patterns and shapes, and his addition of strong outlines in white or black, works to foreground certain facets, manipulating the depth and, in a sense, reversing the flattening of the scene inflicted by the camera. He deliberately opts to retain Fenton's contradictory shadows, enjoying the ensuing intrigue and implicit artistic and interpretative license.

Compositionally, Fenton's works engage Calí for their very deliberate central placing of figures on horse – or, indeed, camel – back. Men are seen seated alone – isolated, displaying power, sexual prowess and legitimacy – and, for Calí, resembling satyrs. Women, however, are always accompanied by a man. The subject matter has further political – and within this also personal – resonances for Calí, who himself hails from Genoa, a city with its own colonial history and once part of the Kingdom of Piedmont-Sardinia, which, during the Crimean War, joined with France and Britain to send half its army to fight Russia. In turn, this helped path the way to Italian unification (*Risorgimento*), as representatives from the kingdom were permitted to attend the peace conference at the end of the war and bring up this issue to other European powers. In a sense then, Calí sees exploring the subject matter of the Crimean War as a way of exploring his roots – and ethnic identity in general. References to this are scattered liberally throughout his work, with images of contemporary coins from all countries concerned; elements of Islamic abstraction; and the addition of gilding –

crescents, slivers of light and shadows – relating to medieval Byzantine or Russian icons and book illumination.

The mid 19th century was a period of innovation and change, where the nascent art of photography and the established technique of painting were reciprocally influential. The early 21st century is an equally pivotal moment, with digital photography and the ability to Photoshop images increasingly usurping traditional methods. Calí describes painting as ‘an alchemical process, a kind of magical realism that creates the image in our eyes’. This process necessarily runs in parallel to both the chemical and digital image-making magic of photography and Calí’s work draws on aspects from all three disciplines, merging elements and questioning where abstraction begins. His complex yet playfully experimental paintings work with layers of meaning to create a unique exploration of depth, form and truth; a serious reflection (both literal and metaphorical) with historical resonance.

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