

Quiet Musings: Pietro Fortuna and Glory

by Lauren Dyer Amazeen

“None of us can ever retrieve that innocence before all theory when art knew no need to justify itself, when one did not ask of a work of art what it said . . .” Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation

Pietro Fortuna’s latest series of grand installations titled *Glory* are quiet pieces, restrained, and perched to reveal a glimpse of something that we are invited to observe and perceive or, what Pietro might refer to as *to witness*. The artist allows the work to remain silent, not asserting an imposed meaning. Taking his art away from an idealisation, Pietro approaches the act of creating an artwork basically as a reflection . . . an encounter. Pietro believes that the term *original* refers to the work, while *authentic* refers to the author. It is only from their encounter that the exemplary emerges. “I prefer to think of the freedom of the *exemplary*, that is, of the encounter between the original and the authentic.” The viewer also becomes active in this process . . . in an attempt to bear witness to that which can exist without any illusions and dogmatic baggage. And here, it is all right to question, to doubt. As the artist relates, “What is life without a question mark? It is the underlying impetus. It is not narrative, metaphorical – it is existential.”

Conceived as a series of diverse exhibitions, *Glory* stems partly from the artist’s reflections on the concepts of *good, sharing and common space*. For his *Glory I*, exhibited and performed in Glasgow at Tramway in August 2010, Pietro devised an immersive environment within the cavernous Tramway space. He constructed this installation through the long process of meticulously layering thousands of large cardboard sheets in an abundance of configurations. The artist positioned the large soft brown cardboard sculptures around the space giving ample space, or intervals, between each one, and mounting some up and attached to the walls around the space, at different levels. Viewing the vast space as a whole, this installation appears architectural, like the model of a cityscape. As the viewer approaches these cardboard monuments, the eye is drawn more and more to the details and texture of the simple cardboard. Patterns begin to emerge along the edges of the material. The intricate designs of the layered cardboard articulate the constructions. This commonplace material which one might take for granted otherwise, is perceived differently when placed in this situation. The material has its own dignity. Pietro takes care to relate the integrity of the objects he creates. The aesthetic of this material, soft brown paper, takes hold, surprisingly. The gaze continues to move back and forth between the ornate and large scale. Pietro is concerned however, with “leaving one’s gaze in the balance between the perception of the single portions and the image of the whole body that appears to cancel them.” For Pietro, a certain type of Vertigo occurs during this process, “as the world twirls from taking in the greatness of the whole and grasping the minute.”

At the centre of this elegant installation, Pietro built a piazza, a platform constructed by the artist as a place where diverse groups from the local communities were invited to gather. Here, during a short residency, the artist built conversations around the process of constructing his surrounding installation. The piazza within the installation

might represent that place in between, where time is suspended – to give the mind a rest from defining it all. . . the artist can offer a quiet place without any pressure from or referral to the past or the future. Through his practice, Pietro creates scenarios to illuminate something inherent in our humanity . . . a constructive view, one might say, of our shared distance. The installation could be seen to frame what he calls “the distance that exists between us.” For Pietro that distance is something we all share. The key here is *sharing* a natural *distance* – as opposed to being bound by a dogmatic union. Pietro turns the idea of bonding inside out with his new works.

Pietro feels a sense of responsibility not to impose or project meaning on the objects he creates. For Pietro, “Things live in ignorance of themselves – they are just there – Look at things as they are . . . still.” Yet the tension of their existence is not absent. Graham Harmon’s object oriented philosophy comes to mind here. A bit of a renegade in philosophical circles, Harmon cites “I will defend a weird realism. This model features a world packed full of ghostly real objects signaling to each other from inscrutable depths, unable to touch one another fully. . . My claim is that two entities influence one another only by meeting on the interior of a third, where they exist side-by-side until something happens that allows them to interact.”

*Fragile souls,
Ungovernable figures
Neither knows the
wounds of the other.”
Pietro Fortuna*

Glory II, the tears of the angel, was exhibited at ARCO, Rome, in June 2011. The installation was positioned in the space directionally like a medieval church. Here the artist played with the notion of religion and of history. The large work stood formidably at an angle in the entryway of the public space. Yet it was gentle. There was something familiar yet mysterious about this structure. Text was written on one section of the structure, “*Fragile souls, Ungovernable figures, neither knows the wounds of the other.*” Here, again, he refers to a shared distance. By disorienting our perception, he invites us to ponder the “now” which he feels has become somehow sabotaged through society. “Instead of focusing on the present, we oscillate between the ancient and the novelty. Thus experiencing a lost present.” For Pietro, there must be an opportunity to experience the present. Through his works the artist seeks to frame what we can perceive as a real moment, “as opposed to the truth or reality which we have imposed on the world and are echoing or contradicting.” That moment is a responsibility for the artist. The poet William Carlos Williams explains his own desire to capture the “immediacy” of experience: “It is an identifiable thing, and its characteristic, its chief character is that it is sure, all of a piece and . . . instant and perfect: it comes, it is there, and it vanishes. But I have seen it, clearly. I have seen it.”

“Content is a glimpse of something, an encounter like a flash. It’s very tiny - very tiny, content.”

Willem De Kooning

Using the title *Glory* triggers a wealth of expectations and interpretations. Pietro's works, however, confound language. Although the artist explores the concepts of certain words throughout his work, the inspiration is found by delving back further than the contemporary usage of these words. Three words employed rigorously by the artist are *Witness*, *Good*, *Glory*. *To Witness* is defined as to give, to testify, to have knowledge of, from a personal experience or observation. It is to behold. With the *Glory* series there is time to behold – through his installations the artist has created a space for this to take place. Entering the space, there is awareness by the viewer of becoming a participant in the ritual of observing and percipience. It is a sensual interaction. *Good* can be defined as a gift, welfare or benefit, which holds virtue . . . as in an action for the *common good*. Through these installations, the artist has created a common or shared space for just that purpose . . . a common good. The word *glory* can be defined as brightness, with the emphasis not on the outward effect of the brilliance so much as its inner character. *Glory* in this sense is rare – rendered purifying and clear. The usage in this sense is modest. It is not the widespread usage we hear everyday in our contemporary media ranting on about the glory rewarded to victorious conquerors – described so aptly by Shakespeare when he wrote, “Glory is like a circle in the water, which never ceases to enlarge itself, til, by broad spreading it disperse to naught.” Pietro's works reflects a meaning more humble and original. The word *glory* here is more likely refined, as that instance when the light of the sun shines on the freed man, or an instance of enlightenment.

The language put forward in the context of Pietro's practice might seem at first immediately familiar, referencing religious doctrines. When asked if there is a conflict with the direct religious connotation of his work, Pietro responds that religious meanings are already so embedded in language, that to try to disclaim them is null. Emmanuel Swedenborg wrote in his *Arcana Cœlestia*, “Glory is the intelligence and wisdom thence derived, which appear as light, and before the angels as the resplendence of light.” Although religious by nature, this usage of the word *glory* does hold some resonance in the context of Pietro's *Glory*. In truth though, the “language” reflected in Pietro's work is more likely to have emerged from an ancient path of knowledge developed continually through the realms of the mystical, quietly. Now, here, in a brief moment, it is revealed as the breath of the work itself.