

Red Mannheim I (2010)

Oil on canvas
405 x 300 cm

Exhibited: St. Paul's Cathedral, London UK Summer 2010

Background

Red Mannheim I features an image of the eviscerated *Mannhem Altar* by Paul Egell. The sole surviving fragment of this still imposing Bavarian Rococo altarpiece is now housed at the Bode Museum in Berlin. Its beauty and its savage history captured Alexander's imagination.

The *Mannheim Altar* (1739-41) was the chef-d'oeuvre of the German court sculptor Johann Paul Egell (1691-1752). It was commissioned for the Jesuit Church of St. Ignatius and Franz Xavier, a prominent Late-Baroque church in Mannheim, southwest Germany. In Egell's Mannheim Altar, Christ's Crucifixion simultaneously evokes Adam's Fall, in the traditional manner of devotional art, where episodes from the Old Testament typologically prefigure their regenerative correlatives in the New Testament. As John Donne wrote in his last sickness,

*We think that Paradise and Calvary,
Christ's Cross, and Adam's tree, stood in one place;
Look Lord, and find both Adams met in me;
As the first Adam's sweat surrounds my face,
May the last Adam's blood my soul embrace.*
(Hymn to God my God in my sickness)

Egell's crucified Christ is mourned by the three Maries, and two male figures, but also by two putti, identifiably male and female, Adam and Eve as infants, weeping at the fall of Man.

At the end of nineteenth century, Egell's carved and gilded altar was bought by the Kaiser-Freidrich Museum (now, the Bode Museum) in Berlin. In late 1941/2, its figures were lifted from the supporting wooden entablature and removed. Its *disiecta membra*, these disjointed limbs, were transported with other prime German artworks to the impregnable reinforced concrete bunker, built by the Nazis in Vollkspark Friedrichschain, for safe keeping. Most of Egell's masterpiece was lost in the fall of Berlin, probably destroyed by fire in the Allied bombing, or looted by the conquering Red Army. A wishful hope persists that its scattered limbs may yet be found, reunited, and the broken made whole. A resurrected crucifixion.

All that remains, however, is the mourning pair, the weeping infants – the exquisite fragment now celebrated in Alexander's *Red Mannheim I*.

Mark Alexander's Artwork

Red Mannheim I consist of 9 panels, oil on canvas, all in black and visceral red. One of its striking features is a shadow of the cross and the suggestion of a human figure. A photograph of Egell's original creation tells us that this shape is the outline of 3 women, the Virgin Mary, Mary of Magdalene, and the third Mary, wife of Clopas. In Alexander's handling they appear as black-and-red

negatives.

Negation is a familiar concept in Alexander's practice. In *The Blacker Gachet* series (2005-6), he withdrew all the colours from Vincent van Gogh's *Portrait of Dr. Gachet* (1890) to create a cinderly-black portrait encased in a baronial, Darth Vaderesque Dutch frame. Alexander's idea of negation, derived from Apophatic theology, was further developed in his *Via Negativa* series (2008-9). Here he took on van Gogh's *Sunflowers* (1888), replacing their yellow blooms and creamy backgrounds by stark black on white. Sunflowers, whose heads follow the sun, are time-honoured symbol of devotion and loyalty. Their glorious golden petals are associated with happiness in inherited Dutch folk-culture. In this joyous spirit van Gogh welcomed Paul Gauguin to his Yellow House, filled with masses of sunflower paintings. Alexander's black blooms, conversely, are encased in brut frames recalling the modernist sculpture, *Coloana Infinitului (the Column of the Infinite)* (1938) by Constantin Brâncuși, whose scalloped edges, alternating green and black surfaces, echo the primitive colouring of Pablo Picasso's African Period(1906-9).

The Fall of man, the only motif surviving from the figures depicted on Egell's *Mannheim Altar*, is represented, most unusually, by putti, in Alexander's view, representing Adam and Eve as infants in their fallen innocence. Adam is still naked, a serpent crawling across his belly, while the visibly distraught Eve is crying and childishly lifting her improvised drapery, to reveal her flesh. Adam, Eve, and the concept of original sin, with all its latent sexuality, fascinated Alexander and have become a recurring theme in his oeuvre.

As Alexander explains; "... I was more interested in how this elaborate rococo had been mostly erased leaving some sort of sexual negative, really an image of pagan sexuality. In the Bode Museum in Berlin the altarpiece is hung so (high) that it seems to float on the wall, an ever-ascending icon. It seemed to be an extremely primitive scene. Christ had gone, and taken his cross and mourners with him. The only figures left were the distraught cherubs in the bottom corner - representing Adam and Eve. So in a way all we're left with is Original Sin, a black hole and this phallic negative (the prominently phallic decorative boss under the surviving plinth). I got the colour (red) from the Pina Bausch production of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*...The dancers came on wearing some sort of absorbent, flimsy pink material. As they perspired the pink was saturated into red and it ended up sopping, clinging. It was incredibly sexual. I think I've managed to replicate that colour in the *Red mannheim*. God had left the building."

And in his own words: "... I think it looks more powerful now than when it was this rather cute rococo work. What's happened to it has made it more powerful, more primitive. It's interesting how history and time act on things – the altarpiece in this way is a palimpsest. Through the disasters of the 20th century we can still see the 18th century and, I think, a lot more than that."

Thoughts

From T.S.Eliot's *Little Gidding, Four Quartets* (1942)

Ash on an old man's sleeve

Is all the ash the burnt roses leave.

Dust in the air suspended

Marks the place where a story ended.

*Dust inbreathed was a house -
The wall, the wainscot and the mouse.
The death of hope and despair,
 This is the death of air.*

Elliot's *Little Gidding* was written at the time of London's Blitz. Its images of twentieth century apocalypse evoke the history of the Mannheim Altar, as well as the Altar's own double apocalypse, the Fall of Adam, and the crucifixion.

Red Mannheim is Alexander's fiery Little Gidding - it is about the unity of past, present, and future. It is about purgation and renewal.

*The dove descending breaks the air
With flame of incandescent terror
Of which the tongues declare
The one discharge from sin and error.
The only hope, or else despair
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre -
To be redeemed from fire by fire. (ibid.)*

External links

- <http://www.markalexanderart.com/2010/08/red-mannheim-i/>
- <http://www.markalexanderart.com/2010/07/mark-alexander-blog/>
- Turn to Red: <http://gawragbag.blogspot.co.uk/2010/06/turn-to-red-mark-alexander-at-st-pauls.html>
- Fugitiveink: <http://fugitiveink.wordpress.com/2010/07/02/mark-alexanders-red-mannheim-at-st-pauls-cathedral/>
- Review on Church Times: <http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2010/13-august/reviews/visual-arts/altarpiece-in-the-burning-fiery-furnace>
- Artslant : <http://www.artslant.com/lon/events/show/96438-red-mannheim>

References

Donne, John, Poem of John Donne, vol.1, E.K.Chambers, ed.

Eliot, T.S., *Four Quartets*, (1942)

Philosophy in a Time of Terror: Dialogues with Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida, ed. by Borradori, Giovanna (2003)

Caputo, John D., *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (2006)