

Pecore, Sculpture, and Modernism

What are we to make of Karen Diefenbach's sheep? They are, in her words, "strange looking and ancient"—and perhaps even mournful, enigmatic as bearers of meaning. Diefenbach produced many of them, increasing in size, over more than a decade. How do they fit into her development as an artist? And what does her representational approach to the imagery have to do with modernism?

When I wrote about Karen's drawings in 1996 for an exhibition in San Francisco, I had only recently been introduced to her work, and my exposure was limited to the subjects of the writing assignment. Nonetheless, I soon discerned something that separated her from other promising artists I had encountered: "The key to the appeal and significance of this engaging group of works is in their intimacy. They are personal, direct manifestations of the artist's own experience...the markers of sensual awareness. The drawings are entirely and deeply autobiographical." What I wrote back in 1996 applies equally to the current work.

These works, the sculptures and the paintings, reinforce one another. They constitute a family, not just of imagery but of artistic knowledge. This "community" of images is aesthetic, therefore about appearance, but also intellectual. Diefenbach's use of Italy and those, for her, entirely compelling, features of landscape and culture is thoughtfully directed to what she cares about in a much broader artistic sense. She is concerned with the ways art can direct our senses and our thinking to an examination of who we are as individuals and, finally, to what we should give attention in our singular journey through life. She does not claim that this aim is realized; but I am inclined to think that she is very close to her goal. And these sculptures play a signal role in the present accomplishment and the future promise.

The *Pecore* first appeared in Diefenbach's work some years ago, but as a less commanding presence. *From the Farmhouse # 18* of 1996 (fig. xx) presents the sheep moving in line but somehow independent of one another, visible through the artist's window at a rented farm house in the steep hills above Camaiore in Tuscany. The shepherd is watching as the herd meanders slowly down the hill. They do not look like ordinary sheep, and part of that is a dignity that they somehow, inexplicably, display. Perhaps that is the ancient part. The drawing is only 4 ½ by 16 inches, quite small, and so carefully rendered, the moment recorded, that Diefenbach's embrace of the subject is conveyed completely. The seduction by—her complete surrender to—Italy and the Renaissance is evident in the loving care devoted to her apparently irresistible new subjects. This drawing is not a preliminary sketch. It is a fully realized work of art. From such drawings to the larger-than-life-size

bronze castings of sheep, the basic idea of what Diefenbach determinedly seeks from her subjects is evident. She sees these picturesque Italian countryside subjects as means to an end. And that is where the work becomes important.

This assessment makes the progression of idea and form well worth consideration. How did the sheep motif shift from being merely another delightful element in a view from the farmhouse window to the main role as carrier of the meaning and purpose of Diefenbach's art? One way to judge the change is by scale—the sculpture started with modest bas reliefs (in the tradition of Donatello's Quattrocento *rilievo schiacciato*) and then, reversing the process of flattening sculpture, gave volume to the two-dimensional drawings and paintings. Small castings and subsequent medium-sized transitional works (maquettes) grew to full-sized representations. According to the artist, "There was a time that for me that the sheep sculptures needed to be small. Now I am excited about the larger forms. They seem to portray more clearly a moment. I imagine the life-size sheep in nature...isolated in a small field or near an olive tree. I like them also in pairs, where the negative space between them becomes a language about silence and shared ritual. There is a sense of slow movement, like the titles that are reinforced in the different postures."

When viewed along with the beautiful and sensitive depictions of trees, the importance of seasons and moments—stopped in time but therefore reminders of the inexorable passage of time—these carefully observed souvenirs of Italy are powerful metaphors for our lives. If we also look closely, if we pay attention, this art suggests what we all must face, come to terms with, but also what we can, for all that, enjoy along the way. The moments are simply pauses in this unavoidable Grand Tour that is life. Both come to an end. Diefenbach does not obsess about the inevitable or the finality of the end of the journey. Her concern is that we persevere in our endeavor to draw the most from it. *Adagietto, Pecora Study* (fig. xx) is a mixed-media translation of sculptural volume back into flat art. This study has an extraordinary dignity within its stark simplicity, and it is tempting to see in it the artist's relationship to her subject. There is a sense of timelessness, of being locked into the moment—time as the central and inescapable element of the human condition. With this philosophical concern, the work transcends the quotidian countryside associations that provide the sources for the imagery.

Diefenbach's explanatory comments tell much more than how she arrives at formal and compositional solutions, including selection of medium, to what is—whether sculpture or painting—a pictorial and representational problem. What becomes clear is that she is concerned far more about accessing fundamental human experiences and concerns than

about the successful depiction of elements specific to a locale. That is the business of the *plein air* landscape and genre painting that describes the look, the truth according to the eye, of nature's topography with its incidental details. But the truer sense of place, with all its evocative natural and historical markers intact and present, is her entry point. For her, at this time, the area around Lucca is the preferred point of departure. She then helps the viewer to look in a way that enhances receptivity and connects the eye to the imagination and, therefore, beyond that to the senses and emotions. She is clear in her artistic intention and philosophical/artistic objectives:

“I care much more about the work depicting a feeling than being realistic in a representational sense. I like the animal or tree to be familiar and accessible so that the viewer may go on to ponder the metaphorical issues. I also love the sense of line in the sheep and in the trees. And I feel free to exaggerate or abstract that for the poetry.”

At this point Karen Diefenbach displays her modernist training, convictions, and self-conception. Her work, refined and carefully executed as it may be, is fundamentally opposed to representational landscape, where the depiction is the ends not the means. And her goal is certainly is not animal portraiture. My observation is that her best art is highly personal, and the landscape and the sheep—all the representational elements—are stand-ins for human experience. They are non-specific and non-referential; they are containers for ideas, a hallmark of modernism... The artist makes this absolutely clear: “The sheep are really a blank canvas suitable for what *I* [emphasis mine] want to say. It is the moment, not just the sheep. A meditation on time. They also provide me a group and individual metaphor for survival: in their dignity, the acceptance of their simple rituals, and the cycles of the years.”

As a final comment upon this refreshing and exciting work by Karen Diefenbach, I am inclined to thank her for her desire to clarify her own artistic and communicative goals, which is evident in her titling the works, whether sheep or trees. The artist generously provides meaning in these titles: the names of the recent sheep are drawn from music notation. The purpose is to describe a mood. *Adagio*: a slow movement. *Nobile*: with nobility. *Pensoroso*: an important one for Diefenbach, thoughtfully. As she says, “The names of the sheep are important to me, they underline the quiet grace in their natural movements—like the slow, thoughtful, movements in symphonic music.” Presumably, Diefenbach understands this emotive connection between art and music, something that provides the pre-modernist validity of Symbolist art. The correspondences between nature, music, and painting all but define this aspect of the modern experience through the union of the arts.

In my opinion, Karen Diefenbach is among those artists who navigate successfully the complicated course that leads from modernism to post-modernism beyond to a personal artistic statement based on the lessons learned from both. In this she is a contemporary modernist, carrying with her both tradition and the expressive innovations that washed over the 20th century and carry through to this day. For example, *Silente II* (fig. xx) is a beautiful reductive abstraction, whatever the subject and the personal meaning it is intended to carry. Despite its minimalist formalism, the painting has a powerful emotional impact associated with Symbolist art. What we encounter here is abstraction put into the service of feelings as well as ideas, as in the paintings of Mark Rothko or, much earlier, Odilon Redon. The work of both resonates for Diefenbach. Among her other heroes and influences are Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Masaccio—in each case for the flattened space and abstract qualities in their work. And among her more recent inspirations are Giacometti, David Hockney, Frank Auerbach, Agnes Martin, and Gerhard Richter.

But above all Karen's work has, taken in its entirety, a distinct and defining mood. Mood may well be the key term to understanding the Italian series. It is pensive, even sad. It suggests pause and reflection. Not exactly Matisse's famous description of art as a comfortable armchair to calm the mind. There is less comfort in Karen's vision, but her art provides a different kind of armchair, a place for reflection—an opportunity to pause and consider the possible meanings of one's life and how best to live it.

And finally, for the trees, Diefenbach has selected descriptive Italian words. Each refers to the passage of time, the annual cycle of seasons—and the repetition, a cycle that becomes shorter as the years pass. A moment taken and preserved from this predictably changing face of nature. *Nebbia*: fog. *Nevicata*: snow storm. *Temporale*: storm. And then, maybe most important for her work, *La Pausa*: the pause. Her world, the one she hopes her art can make available to us, is fundamentally reflective and meditative. In the modern world, we seldom pause long enough to reflect upon our lives. And we all too often avoid thinking about what really matters within this temporal reality, our mortality. This reminder seems to be Karen Diefenbach's artistic project. But the wonder of it all is that it can be so thoughtfully serious and so beautiful at the same time.

Paul J. Karlstrom © August 2010

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