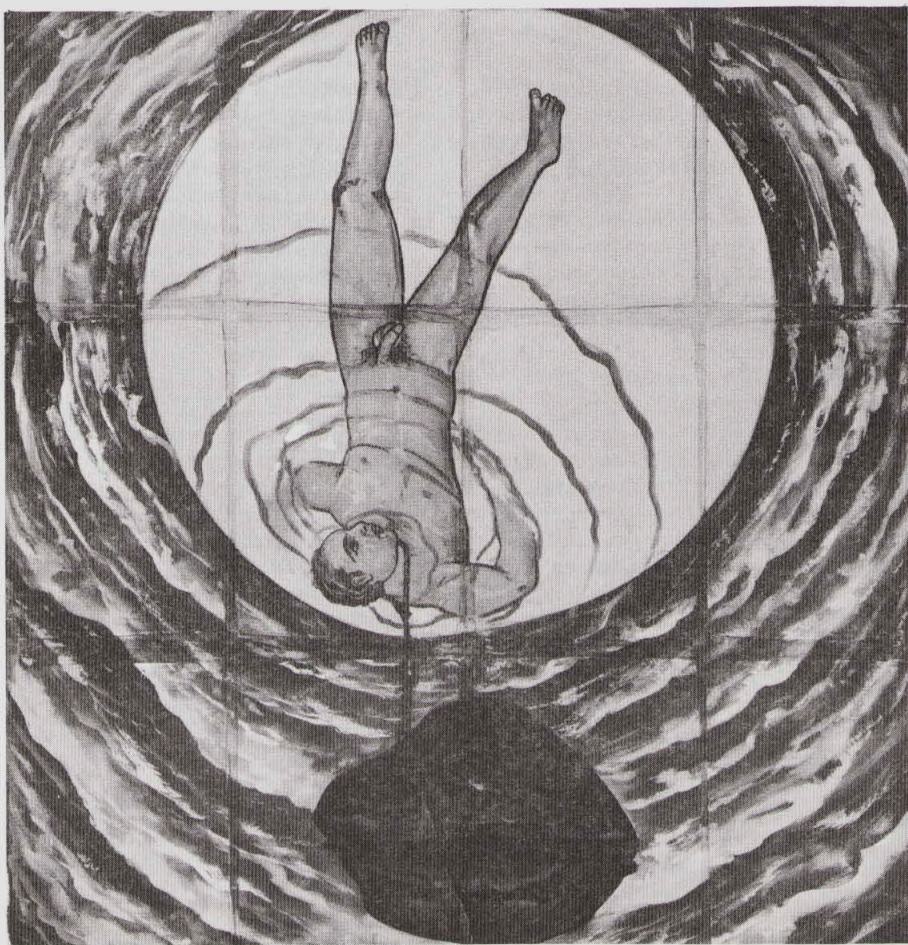


Moon, 1980



MATRIX is supported in part
by a grant from the National
Endowment for the Arts, a
Federal Agency.

It has been centuries since mythical and allegorical themes played a prominent role in art. In the last decade, however, a number of artists in America and Europe have begun again to explore such subjects. They have been variously labeled, including New Imagists, Primary Imagists, and Neo-Primitivists. Many differences exist between the individuals, but crucial is a renewed engagement to subject matter. Among the most notable of the artists is Francesco Clemente, a young Italian, who has created the series of powerful images on view in MATRIX. (Other artists of a similar persuasion shown here in MATRIX Hartford include Neil Jenney in 1975 and Jon Borofsky in 1976).

The titles of the paintings in MATRIX connote large to cosmic topics: Moon, Sun, Earth, Rain, Hunger. Given the fact that such subjects hold a paramount position in most legendary systems of thought, the meanings of Clemente's paintings are graspable. A Michelangelesque Adam is sent plummeting from the heavens to earth in Moon, his fate determined by gravity. The theme has implications of the Fall from Grace, as the figure uselessly bends his head against the yoke taking him to his future, terrestrial life.

Humanity discovers an age-old dichotomy on earth: the contrast between its inherent nature and the paraphernalia of civilization. In Hunger, the primitive, maddened urge to eat animal flesh is shown taking place at a conventional table. The implements of eating prove dispensable or a hindrance, however; the glass is overturned and the dish is inadequate for the purpose at hand. In this painting and throughout the series Clemente contrasts cosmically continuous, circular forms with the imper-

fect rectilinearity characteristic of human life.

Once committed to an implement, a bowl, human ingenuity develops. A figure of multiple ethnicity, perhaps an Everyman, reverses the bowl for use as a military helmet in Earth. The figure's ability to manipulate his surroundings results in his being shown atop a globe, in command of his situation.

Natural phenomena are co-opted by civilization in Sun. That is, the sun is mimicked by a Van Gogh-like painting, and fire and heat are the province of a cigarette. Clemente transcribes the sensual experience of sleeping in the glow of the sun to a setting created by the accoutrements of civilization.

Once more fully nude, humanity in the form of an androgynous, Leonardesque figure embraces nature. It drops the umbrella, an appurtenance of civilization, in order to bathe in the conciliating rain. Thus a cycle of life is present in Clemente's paintings, from the Fall to Absolution.

Humanity's relationship to its nature and to the cosmos is Clemente's subject. His outlook is basically religious and his conception Italian. He contrasts heroic and grand aspects of humanity with humanist and vulnerable sides. Curiously, in other work Clemente has never been quite so precise or dogmatic about his subject matter. He is usually abstruse, mysterious, symbolic or personal. Self-portraits, erotica and perversity occur; allegory too is sometimes present. But the images here are fundamentally neither allegorical nor symbolic. Rather, he creates an imaginary space in which mythic personages act. The paintings at Hartford give the religious-philosophical underpinning of Clemente's art and thought.

Clemente's willingness to

be free in his approach to subject matter is echoed by his technique. This series consists of tempera on sheets of handmade paper, attached to cloth. At other times he has done photography, mosaic, book illustration and fresco; he is at ease, too, introducing words into his images. His drawing style also varies wildly, between the childlike and elegant. In the paintings discussed here, there is an assuredness of line aligned to a seemingly primitivistic approach. The result is a bold, compelling quality about the work.

A part of Clemente's inspiration comes from far beyond Italy, in India. He lives approximately half of each year in the remote town of Madras, and has taught himself Hindi and Sanskrit in connection with his study of Buddhism. The series in MATRIX was produced during his 1980 sojourn in Madras. He lives the rest of the year in Rome. Francesco Clemente was born in Naples in 1952.

Mark Rosenthal
Curator of Collections
University Art Museum
Berkeley, California
July, 1981

PLEASE NOTE: Francesco Clemente will deliver an informal MATRIX Afternoon Lecture on Sunday afternoon, April 18, 1982 at 2:00 p.m. The public is cordially invited.

Works in MATRIX:

Rain, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth, 95" x 94".

Earth, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth, 92" x 96".

Moon, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth, 91" x 96" 3/4".

Sun, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth, 91" x 95".

Hunger, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth, 93 1/2" x 96 1/2".

All works are lent by
Sperone Westwater Fischer,
New York City.

Special thanks to Connie Lewallen, Curator of MATRIX Berkeley, for organizing this exhibition.

Selected one-person exhibitions:

Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome '75, '76, '80; Gian Enzo Sperone, Turin '75, '79; art & project, Amsterdam '78, '80; Paul Maenz, Cologne '78, '79; Padiglione d'arte Contemporanea di Milano, Italy '80 (cat. pub.); Sperone Westwater Fischer, NY '80, '81; Museum van Hedendaagse Kunst, Ghent '81; University Art Museum, Berkeley, CA '81 (travelled to California State University Art Gallery, Long Beach, CA '81 and Wadsworth Atheneum '82).

Selected group exhibitions:

XII Biennale, Sao Paulo, Brazil '75 (cat. pub.); Musee d'Art Moderne, Paris, X Biennale de Paris '77; Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicolo de Maria, Luigi Ontani, Mimmo Paladino, Ernesto Tatafiore, Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland '80 (traveling exhibition, cat. pub.); Venice Biennale, Aperto '80; West-kunst, Reinhallen der Kölner Messe, Cologne, Germany '81; Figures: Forms and Expressions, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY '81.

Selected bibliography about Clemente (see also catalogues listed under exhibitions):

Ammann, Jean-Christophe. "Espansivo-Eccessivo" Domus, vol. 593 (April '79), p. 45.

Bonito Oliva, Achille. "The Italian Trans-Avantgarde," Flash Art, no. 92-93 (October - November '79), p. 17+.

Bonito Oliva, Achille. "The Bewildered Image," Flash Art, no. 96-97 (March-April '80), p. 32+.

Ammann, Jean-Christophe (editor). Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicola de Maria, Luigi Ontani, Mimmo Paladino, Ernesto Tatafiore. Kunsthalle, Basel, 1980.

Larson, Kay. "Bad Boys at Large! The Three C's Take on New York," The Village Voice, vol. 25, no. 38 (September 17 '80), p. 35+.

Lawson, Thomas. "Chia, Clemente and Cucchi," Flash Art, no. 100 (November '80), p. 43.

Bonito Oliva, Achille. "Francesco Clemente," Domus vol. 613 (January '81), p. 52+.

de Ak, Edit. "A Chameleon in a State of Grace," Artforum, vol. 19, no. 6 (February '81), p. 36+.

Martin, Henry. "The Italian Art Scene," Art News, vol. 80, no.3 (March '81).

Larson, Kay. "Francesco Clemente: Obsessed — and Repelled — by the Past," Art News, vol. 80, no. 5 (May '81), p. 76.

Levin, Kim. "The Miniature Marauder," The Village Voice, vol. 26, no. 21 (May 20 '81), p. 90.

Kramer, Hilton. "Art: Expressionism from Italy Arrives," The New York Times, Friday, June 5 '81, p. C19.

Lolis, Merope. "Francesco Clemente," Arts Magazine vol. 56, no. 1 (September '81), p. 23.

Perrone, Jeff. "Boy Do I Love Art or What," Arts Magazine, vol. 56, no. 1 (September '81), p. 72+.

Blau, Douglas. "Francesco Clemente," Flash Art, no. 104, (October-November '81) p. 54.

White, Robin. "Francesco Clemente" [interview with the artist], View, vol. 3, no. 6, November '81 (Point Publications, Oakland).