

CARMEN CICERO

FANTASIST

If “phantasy activity, being rooted in the instincts, is...their mental corollary,” as the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein writes,¹ then Carmen Cicero’s fantastic images are raw with instinct. It first appears, barely tamed by form, in his abstract expressionist paintings. It is evident in their stark rather forceful lines and the interplay of black and white, emblematic of the conflict between the life and death instincts—a primitive, ceaseless drama which, as Klein says, is implicated in every fantasy. There is a primordial immediacy and emotional majesty to Cicero’s abstractions, confirming their expressive depth. *Abstraction*, 1954, is an explosive flurry of spontaneous brushstrokes, while *Near Tibidabo*, 1958, and *Odredek*, 1959, are bizarre constructions of lines. In the *Kiss* line becomes outline, demarking odd structures, at odds with one another, and in *Untitled*, 1955, quick lines and painterly marks interact in a strangely shaped void.

All these “instinctive” works seem subliminally figurative, as though their energy was being

channeled into a form not yet familiar enough to be named as human but still bodily enough to be experienced as human in principle, however grotesque the body may seem. It certainly looks grotesque in *Untitled*, while *Near Tibidabo* and *Odredek* can be read as bizarre confluences of body parts, horrifically mangled and compressed by fantasy. Is it a crucifixion or orgy—mating of animal and human?—we are witnessing, however abstracted, distorted, flattened? They are masterpieces of ambiguity, indeed, linear tours de force, in which *horror vacui*—the surrounding black emptiness—is almost filled with the innerving if morbid lines. There seem to be more normal—less nightmarish—figures in *Abstraction* and *The Kiss* (the upper half of a male figure in the former, the lower half of a female figure in the latter?), but they remain elusive inferences rather than firm representations. There is an air of tragic urgency about Cicero’s abstract expressions, but the actors in the drama are less evident than its bleakness. Suffering is furiously conveyed,

but it has no human context.

That context is supplied in the sixties, when Cicero turned to figuration. The tortured ambivalence of Cicero’s abstract works now has a human setting. Again and again Cicero pictures human conflict—figures in conflict with one another, whether that conflict takes sexual or more broadly social form. He in effect embeds the life and death instincts in human form, imaginatively objectifying their conflict in violent fantasies.

The man and woman in *The Exit of E-S*, 1962, are not as obviously at war as the man and woman in the *Battle of the Sexes*, 1972, but their relationship is not exactly harmonious. The man faces away from the woman, looking at a kind of *mapa mundi*: an enigmatic abstract painting, implicitly that of the inner cosmos—a primordial landscape, its horizon separating a murky orange sky and a clear blue ocean, spotted with eccentrically shaped black islands—as the halos of bright color that frame it suggest. The man is facing a choice between the spiritual work of art and the

flesh and blood woman. The choice is also conveyed by the difference between the upper half of the picture, plunged in darkness, and the yellow lower half, where the bright colors of the concentric rings repeat in rectangular form. The circular and rectangular structures have more coherence than the flattened figures, overlaid with networks of lines that suggest the lines of their bodies. These figures, at once expressionistic and cubist in style, are also divided between dark and light areas. The woman is more black than white, the man more white—and blue, the color of the sky and thus a symbol of spirituality. He is presumably a higher being than she is. But he is also clearly at odds with himself. He is self-estranged, as well as alienated from the woman. She also is divided against herself, and far from comfortable with the man. The sharp contrasts that pervade the picture—not only those of light and dark, but also of curve and angle—convey its inner violence that is, its unresolved contradictions.