

Magritte's Hat, 1999, floats in a rather dreamy, idyllic landscape—a picture postcard perfect nature. In *Satan Takes a Holiday*, 1999, a man parks his convertible in a similar, if darker landscape—it seems to be sunset, and there are rocks on the country road and along one side of it. In another work a small airplane flies through a forest of giant, dead trees, following a stream with stones that seem to make a path. The shadows are long and dense for all the bright moonlight. In *Going Home*, 1999, a figure—is it Mr. Ghost, dressed in the black of death?—walks alone on a sidewalk made of slabs of stone. An old stone wall is behind him, and behind it are two factory buildings that also seem made of stone. The peculiarly archaic, old-fashioned scene is completely gray, except for the fragments of green that flank the factory buildings, and the black sky, lightened by the factory smoke and clouds, which are almost indistinguishable. We are on the edge of town, and leaving it. *The Bookkeeper*, 1998, is also a nightscene. The car the bookkeeper drives is pitch black, the road unpaved, the trees on one side of it seem dead. Lacking outside lights, the bookkeeper keeps the inside lights on, as he better do, not only to see, but to feel alive. It is clearly later than he thinks, and he may have lost his way. Like all the other figures, he has been humbled by circumstances beyond his control.

But *Christ Appears in Ohio*, 1999, is all light and color, as befits the occasion of the Resurrection. The figure of Christ is borrowed from Grünewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece*, the clouds are yellow streaks of incandescent light, the green all but overwhelming. Abandoned gesture has turned to careful stippling, and an isolated country house confirms the pastoral privacy of the setting. We are in heaven, in principle if not in fact. In the marvelous *Green River*, 1992-99, Cicero pictures heaven on earth: fertile green water flows through a desolate, stony landscape, bringing the pine trees to vibrant life. Some have been cut down, but more will always remain. Light emanates from the green trees, forming a kind of protective aura around them. They stand out against the violet gray, their radiant green subliminally in harmony with the radiant yellow of the sky. Life will be renewed despite death. The dry river bed will again flow with the water of life, turning the desert into a garden of paradise.

What are Cicero's new fantasies about? His paintings have lost their expressionistic fierceness and become surreal dreamscapes. They are hallucinatory and focused rather than reckless, emotionally and physically. And, as I have said, they are no longer focused on relationships, but on the self, sometimes in symbolic form (hat, car, airplane). Satan takes a holiday, death walks by, and the

resurrected Christ appears: it is a narrative of the self waiting for death, aware of death, in the presence of death, and hoping for the best—for salvation. Anticipating death, Satan repents, the bookkeeper is terrified, the car seems lost in the wilderness, the airplane looks small in the dark forest of depression, as Dante called it, in the valley of the shadow of death, as the Old Testament calls it. The path of life—the country road, the stream, and finally, in the Christ picture, a footpath—leads to death and, hopefully, to salvation—to heaven, where the grass is always green. Why wouldn't Christ appear in a meadow in Ohio, if heaven is a meadow, in which the season is always spring or summer, as Jan van Eyck suggested in the *Ghent Altarpiece*? If Satan turns to Christ, then we know the season has changed. Mr. Ghost—Death—has come to town, but Christ lives in the countryside. The “folksy,” clumsy look of Cicero's new work—the image of Christ looks as though it was clipped from an illustration and copied by a folk artist or child—is deceptive. It puts a coat of humor on the skeleton of eschatology. Cicero keeps his good humor in the face of death—a noble attitude, much preferable to stoicism. The heroics of the abstract expressionist paintings have been replaced by the heroism of the individual alone with death, and heroically defying it with humor.

It is a remarkable career: from dead serious abstract paintings, fraught with existential drama—the self enacting its deepest emotions in the arena of the painting, as Harold Rosenberg called it—through tragicomic images of human relationships at their most raw, and back to the existential drama of the self, now facing the end of its life with good humor. Good humor is rare enough, but so is an authentic sense of tragedy, with or without color. Carmen Cicero's works have been appreciated for their wit and humor, but not for their seriousness—their existential earnestness, insight, and courage—and visual sophistication. They tell the story of his journey through life with a charm that belies their conviction.

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Note
¹Melanie Klein, “The Origins of Transference” (1952), *Envy and Gratitude and Other Works 1946-1963* (New York: Free Press, 1975), p. 58.