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The World of Cosimo Cavallaro

Cosimo Cavallaro, *No England/No Amsterdam II*, Real Art Ways Gallery, Hartford (Connecticut). May 17 - July 6, 1997

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THE WORLD OF COSIMO CAVALLARO

Cosimo Cavallaro, *No England/No Amsterdam II*, Real Art Ways Gallery, Hartford (Connecticut). May 17 - July 6, 1997



Cosimo Cavallaro, *Birth # 6*, 364 x 455 cm. Courtesy Sarah Schussel, New York.

Cosimo Cavallaro is a latter day magician who dredges the narrative of his own life for events and emotions to transform into art works, pulling out of his psyche, like so many rabbits from a hat, idiosyncratic, sexually-charged, often strangely skewed objects. His return to making art came about two years ago, after the death of a friend's father; for him, it was an extremely critical moment as his thoughts veered towards his own father, fixed on his unresolved anger.

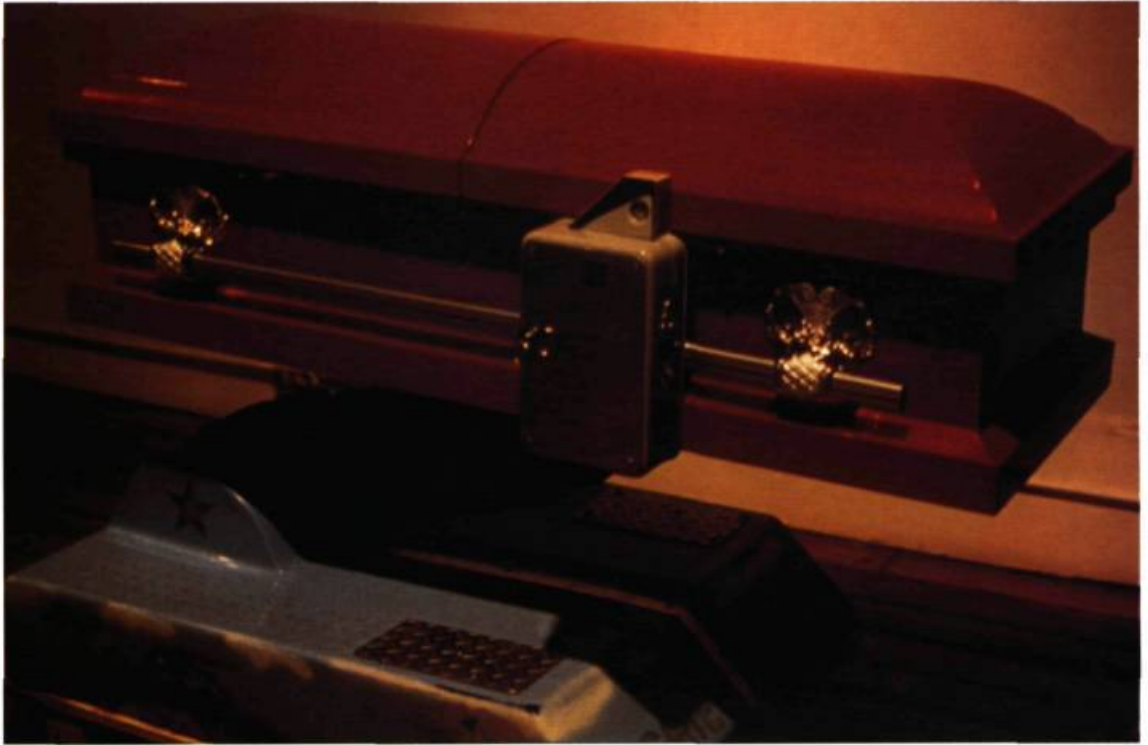
Soon after, he spent an intense but ultimately "blissful" week locked up in his studio, alone, stripped down, rolling around in paint. Streaked black, dripping white, he wrapped himself in great sheets of canvas, transferring the wet colors from his body to the cloth, trying to go further and further backward, "deeper into the darkness", full of rage towards his father. Later, he "washed up, went out and bought some red paint and gauze" and finished the paintings (he wasn't sure what they were when he started).

They became the Birth series, a suite of six raw canvases that were monumental in scale; installed together, they were engulfing, almost suffocating. He tied them at

the upper corners with rope, while the rest of the unstretched fabric fell downward, dropping to the floor in folds, its configuration suggesting, at times, a crucifixion, a sagging, tortured body hanging from its distended arms.

The works recall a host of related images and associations, from the Marquis de Sade to Luis Buñuel, from Rembrandt to Julian Schnabel, from theatre backdrops to the Shroud of Turin. Some of these sheets were slashed open, out of which poked barbed wire or thin, spiked branches; another spilled out knotted gauze soaked in red pigment that resembled entrails. The last painting in the sequence was cut by a horizontal/vertical line which was stitched up, "healed", the violence in abatement, violations appeased, catharsis achieved, for the moment. He was finished with all that, he said.

But the anger flared again; one day, he nailed a small, fat, white pillow to a square of wood, beginning what would be another series. He slashed into the pillows, hammering them with nails, binding them in coils of barbed wire, stretching them apart with metal clamps, burning them but the most disturbing arrangement was a pillow slit down the middle flanked by two outspread bird



Cosimo Cavallaro, *Kiddie Ride*. Courtesy Sarah Schussel, New York.

wings which he wanted placed on the floor, to be looked at from above. It was the most brutal, the most mutilated and also the most poignant image, the wings stilled, stiff, flight impossible.

Cavallaro equated these pillows to sleep, when the body seemed to be dead but the mind was hyperactive, bursting with dreams, with thoughts. He was thinking of his infancy, he said, when he made them, when he was unable to articulate his thoughts and feelings, when he was at the mercy of his father. Similarly, he made a series of looped and twisted sculptures of rubber tubing, maquettes for pieces he conceived as room-sized. He fabricated one of them in steel, which he called *Knot*, an image for the tangled site of feelings.

Always restless, he looked for other images : coffins became interesting. He built one of black rubber and filled it with white styrofoam chips, lining the lid in little plastic roses. Inside, he laid a naked female figure, inflatable, with blond ringlets, luscious cherry lips, erect, almost phallic breasts, its sex exposed, a surrogate for the dead, for death, glazed in the sheen of pulp fiction, of cheap dreams, of cultural lies and projections.

Still intrigued, he assembled a smaller coffin, one for a child. Metallic red, it glittered invitingly like Dorothy's ruby shoes from the *Wizard of Oz*, balanced on top of a sky-blue base (usually furnished with a painted horse for a child's 25-cent ride) which drove the coffin up and down. Cavallaro liked the irony of the juxtaposition.

He then took a number of photographs that vacillated between the pornographic, the voyeuristic and the matter-of-fact. Installed as a grid, it consisted of close-ups of different parts of a woman's body : soles of feet, breasts, buttocks, genitalia with the face noticeably missing. Writing single words and phrases on them, he said that words —

even the clichés of religion and culture — become more meaningful when written on a body; " the meaning of the words change when they are worn ".

The railing he attached to the child's coffin led to his most recent project, a group of clear tubes affixed to the wall at the height of railings. He constructs them from three tubes joined together end-to-end, leaving the middle section empty. The other two are filled : coal and cotton in one instance; small objects in another — small rubber Disney figures, dollhousesized clocks, a miniature Absolut bottle, a crumbled dollar or assorted rosaries, crucifixes, religious cards, plastic saints. The sharp, fractured shadows these toys and accessories cast are ominous, sending out a warning of menace in the seemingly innocuous emblems of religion and pop culture.

At the moment, he is working on spiral tubes filled with human waste, a perhaps more direct social commentary. He is also thinking about barriers — stanchions, turnstiles — and how they affect people, how they alter and redefine space physically and what kinds of psychological transformations occur as people pass through them, going from one side to the other and back again.

Cosimo Cavallaro is making himself a world of fetishistic objects, autobiographical signs and symbols that are both transgressive and innocent, worldly and naive, cobbled together out of his monologue with himself, his trips to the interior. What he retrieves in this process — conscious and unconscious — is his art, evidence of both his progress and escape.

LILLY WEI