

# THE THREEPENNY REVIEW

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Via delle Ombre

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Source: *The Threepenny Review*, No. 117 (SPRING 2009), p. 20

Published by: [Threepenny Review](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25651024>

Accessed: 22/06/2014 04:26

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strange, unpredictable, self-renewing power to transmit a way of seeing to the hand allows exceptional artists (check this against Bonnard and Picasso or Bacon and Freud) to stay fresh even while migrating to recurrent subjects. Morandi had his preferred motifs virtually from the beginning. Even when he was teasing out Metaphysical Painting in the late 'teens, he wasn't as interested in the darkly comic situational conundrums of De Chirico as in spectral angularities—mirrors, boards, boxes—and hard-edged curvilinear objects that look carved from wood. By the late 1920s he was well on his own way, adapting formal inquiry to the daily feeling for material reality. His touch becomes more fleshily rotund, more florid and liquid. He pursues continuity, especially apparent in his skeletal sleight-of-hand drawings. An exquisite group of these ran concurrently with the Met show at the Italian Cultural Institute. Their stark pursuit of completeness made me gasp—they graph inquisitiveness. Each is an existential autograph. The paintings narrate a day-to-day meditation on seeing and feeling. The still lifes become hermetic chambers so complete that we forget about everything that's been left out. His narrow gauge of subjects pressured him into ways of staying fresh and surprising himself (and us). He allowed dust in the studio to accumulate on his magician's kit of objects—one visitor said the dust unified all those different shapes. Photographs of the objects show the chased, weathered surfaces that the action of his brush imitates. He undermined their sameness not just by re-staging arrangements. He painted his boxes and canisters, he filled glass containers with pigment, he had tin utensils made to order, all so that he could keep creating occasions for surprise and disclosing endless difference in apparent likenesses: "The important thing," he said, "is to touch the core, the essence of things."

The table top in a Morandi is a field of change, and nature, which Morandi (like his hero Cézanne) insisted was his true subject, wobbles with change, is smeared by it. ("I think that to express what's in nature, that is, the visible world, is the thing that most interests me.") In a 1953 still life in the Phillips Collection, there's no platform, only an imagined surface where objects appear. In the front rank, yellow and brown Ovaltine cans stand next to a white-faced box that wears a sidewise stripe identical to the brown that outlines the Ovaltine tin. Behind them squats a tight twosome: a vase of which we see only the torqued grooved neck, and a nearly invisible Prussian-blue canister. But the marvel of the picture is the wolf's-head shadow next to the brown box like spoor streaked behind the gossipy little crowd of objects. The following year he made a sly picture where the flat tops of similar vases and boxes *are* the horizon line of the table's upper edge.

In Morandi's harmonics of uncertainty, everything lives in provisional greetings: the emergent forms greet us and his hand greets them in a space where these correspondences coalesce into the marvelous and the uncanny, those conditions claimed by surrealism that Morandi kidnapped and applied in a completely opposite mood—quietude and unrest instead of brassiness and

iconic exaggeration. Sometimes the paintings literally greet or beckon each other. The Met paired two pictures that feature boxes and a tin pitcher shaped like a knight's visor. One reverses the direction of the pitcher's pointed beak so that the pictures stare each other down. The wit of the installation is possible because the wit inheres in the method. "The important thing is to communicate the images and sentiments that the visible world awakens in us." Francesco Paolo Ingraio, one of his major collectors, says this: "Morandi's poetry is a poetry of quotidian feelings, but the dailiness of them—day after day—conveys a sense of the eternal. In Morandi's pictures the empty space between two objects takes on a figurative value. This is '*pittura-pittura*.'" That is, "painting-painting," the way we speak of a movie-movie, or poetry-poetry like Stevens's or William Carlos Williams's, a practice that brings us the richness and completeness of what's irreducible in an art, what Stevens called "the mind in the act of finding / What will suffice."

The most mysterious work is the watercolors of the 1950s and 1960s. They depict an almost-ness of matter, a phantasmagorical life of things. All that is solid in his familiar canisters and bottles melts into marine-layer air—they become atmospheres, exhalations. He's preoccupied not with liquidity and consistency but with what's aspirated. He makes us see the ghost of a thing *in* a thing, as if he's painting dark matter's hues, a thing's negative existence. The watercolors marry the support as the pictures do not. The suffusion, the binding of color, form, and ground is so total and consonant that he creates a floating world as particular and identifiable as Rothko's huge canvases, but without Rothko's titanism. Morandi is the least histrionic or presumptuous of great artists. His paintings don't exercise the kind of attack so critical in Picasso or Miró or Pollock, and in the watercolors you feel he's simply condensing vapors on the blank support, not applying anything to it.

Morandi's art has everything to do with teasing out problems specific to the art, but one of its essential, sustaining pleasures is its comprehensive candor of presence (the studio paraphernalia expand and contract in a complex choreography of architectural or structural possibilities) blended with a humility that's not reticence at all but something mighty and self-contained. Whether landscape, flowers, or still life, nothing stood still for him: his feeling for nature, as he would say, is momentarily arrested in a condition of change, and that condition, that instability, is what Morandi paints. Look long enough and the re-appearing paraffin lamps, shells, Tin Man hats, and the rest begin to feel like company. They were his company certainly, and they feel like they're keeping us (and themselves) company. And the great ones, where the harmonies are achieved not by consistency but by different volatilities and speeds and degrees of formality and mood-swings all held within one frame, have the reliability and the fastness in our mental lives of a Corot or a Chardin. Their presence says: Recognize us, know us in order to know yourself.□

## Via delle Ombre

On most days, the sun wakes me.  
Even on dark days, there's a lot of light in the mornings—  
thin lines where the blinds don't come together.  
It's morning—I open my eyes.  
And every morning I see again how dirty this place is, how grim.  
So I'm never late for work—this isn't a place to spend time in,  
watching the dirt pile up as the sun brightens.

During the day at work, I forget about it.  
I think about work: getting colored beads into plastic vials.  
When I get home at dusk, the room is shadowy—  
the shadow of the bureau covers the bare floor.  
It's telling me whoever lives here is doomed.

When I'm in moods like that,  
I go to a bar, watch sports on television.

Sometimes I talk to the owner.  
He says moods don't mean anything—  
the shadows mean night is coming, not that daylight will never return.  
He tells me to move the bureau; I'll get different shadows, maybe  
a different diagnosis.

If we're alone, he turns down the volume of the television.  
The players keep crashing into each other  
but all we hear are our own voices.

If there's no game, he'll pick a film.  
It's the same thing—the sound stays off, so there's only images.  
When the film's over, we compare notes, to see if we both saw the same story.  
Sometimes we spend hours watching this junk.

When I walk home, it's night. You can't see for once how shabby the houses are.  
The film is in my head: I tell myself I'm following the path of the hero.

The hero ventures out—that's dawn.  
When he's gone, the camera collects pictures of other things.  
When he gets back, it already knows everything there is to know,  
just from watching the room.

There's no shadows now.  
Inside the room, it's dark; the night air is cool.  
In summer, you can smell the orange blossoms.  
If there's wind, one tree will do it—you don't need the whole orchard.

I do what the hero does.  
He opens the window. He has his reunion with the earth.

—Louise Glück