

## Anxious Painting: Some Notes on the Work of Despo Magoni

By Raúl Zamudio, New York City, January 2022

Painting has gone through many permutations throughout its inception not only regarding styles both historical and personal and the myriad contexts they arise from, but those who engage in it today have grappled with what the literary scholar Harold Bloom called the “anxiety of influence.” Some painters are self-cognizant of this inevitable engagement with their predecessors and have confronted it with aplomb by reconfiguring it into something their own including, to name just a few: Glenn Brown and his aqueous surfaces that feign the tactility of Frank Auerbach; Jenny Saville and her monumental close-ups of the human form that riff on Lucien Freud; Neo Rauch and his ciphering of Socialist Realism and Surrealism; Lisa Yuskavage and her critical, feminist caricaturing of the female nude from the Rococo to today; and Cecily Brown and her corporealization of Willem de Kooning. The contemporary painter Despo Magoni also transforms historical influences in her work, but in her case it’s Expressionism as it appeared in its modernist guise at the turn of the century and its postmodern resurgence in the late 1970s and ‘80s as Neo-Expressionism.



*Kosovo: the Disasters of War #9, acrylic on paper, 17 x 25 inches, 1996*

Magoni’s métier entails a broad purview of formal tropes associated with early twentieth-century Expressionism but also freely borrows from sources that imbue it with a contemporary sensibility. In her *Kosovo: Disasters of War* series (1996), for example, there is a powerful use of contrasting colors that are visually arresting in materializing its horrific subject matter. Her palette is ostensibly aggressive and akin to that of Emil Nolde or Edvard Munch yet is extended into other registers that subsume aesthetics not

associated with Expressionism but to modes of visuality ubiquitous today. *Kosovo: The Disasters of War* is so saturated with yellow that it is almost too harsh to view but also elegant and refined at the same time; this chromatic startlement that optically mesmerizes any viewer that encounters it, also alludes to recent visual technologies such as the digitally enhancing, high-res Internet-based design applications like Adobe, for instance. Color, for Magoni, is pushed to its limits in its ability to convey emotion and catharsis; its intensity situates it within Expressionism and its dispersed pedigree, however because Magoni is also drawing from contemporary visual culture, Neo-Expressionism equally becomes a genre in her artistic, review mirror. Many artists associated with the latter style including the Italian Transvanguardia or the Germans Georg Baselitz or Anselm Kiefer were not so attuned to other facets of visual culture within their artistic milieu, and mostly drew from what was directly or indirectly related to painting and its history. It's true that Kiefer's aesthetic was more expansive than his Neo-Expressionist peers in his use of extraneous materials such as straw, flowers, and broken glass affixed to his paintings making them more haptic and even sculptural. Magoni, too, incorporates collaged material in some of her works that sets her apart from Expressionists and most Neo-Expressionists, even those with similar compositional strategies including Kiefer, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Julian Schnabel who also used discard and detritus including, respectively regarding the latter two, doors, windows, and plates.



*About Men (People in the News series), charcoal, pencil & oil pastel  
on NY Times pages pasted on a linen sheet, 64½ x 86 inches, 1978*

In Magoni's *People in the News* (1977-78), painting entails a kind of mark-making symbiosis with the foundations on which those marks appear. Rather than using canvas or paper, Magoni employs various full-length pages from the New York Times. The

newspaper pulp sandwiched between paint and linen sheet is palimpsestic, and her expressive, painterly articulations interact with its surface to where it's difficult to ascertain the dominance of one element over the other. Unlike Basquiat's use of doors in which their prominence tends to disequilibrate what is painted over them, and Schnabel's plates often seem formally gratuitous, Magoni's dialectics of readymade periodicals and brushstrokes, color, and figuration are metonymic and consequently polyvalent. On the one hand, they evince the aesthetic tell-tale signs of Expressionism in their brutal and abrasive albeit confident lines and animated palette; and on the other, by including newspapers for their linguistic and semiotic potential, Magoni rewrites the contours of Neo-Expressionism for a twenty-first century context of a world suffocated with information overload. While each figure in *People in the News* dialogically engages with its periodical counterpart from disparate sections of the *New York Times* highlighting travel or business or culture, they are not unlike phantasms that analogously ooze their way out of the text like an apparition, or an archetype from the collective unconscious, or even the eerie ectoplasm evoked at seances. What decenters these hauntingly, ghostly manifestations yet adds layers of complexity to them, are their seemingly nonchalant titles that deftly conflate word and image, and prose and the pictorial while underscoring Magoni's visually, poetic imaginary: *Weather Forecast* (1977), *Jobs, Housing, Crime, Federal Money* (1977), *Buy a Rubens for \$ 3 Million* (1977). The interplay between text and figuration in these works is further complicated by Magoni's brushstrokes that border on the calligraphic. This language/image reciprocity that is absent in Expressionism but evinced most emphatically in Basquiat, manifests in other mixed media works executed in series including *The Cosmos* (2005-09) and *Shakespeare and the Snake* (2016).



*The Merchant of Venice #1 (Shakespeare and the Snake series), mixed media and collage on paper, 12 x 9 inches, 2016, private collection, Greece*

Both series highlight Magoni's distinguished aesthetic that gives a nod to both Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism but updates those genres into a contemporary framework. *Shakespeare and the Snake* consists of collaged materials too and her own written words excised from the Bard's canonical plays. However, the interaction of the text/image dichotomy is differentiated than *People in the News*. Whereas *People in the News* entails large single sheets of newspaper, *Shakespeare and the Snake* is defined by excerpts from diverse hardcopy; a further distinction resides in her sinuous lines that are sensuous rather than painterly aggressivity that marks *People in the News*. Mark-making in *Cosmos* contrasts with either of these through its heterogeneous applications that reveals an economy of means that is paradoxically variegated in deploying negative space to great advantage. In *Musica Universalis #2* (2005), the pictorial field is ostensibly inundated with horizontal brushstrokes punctuated here and there with diagonals; these mostly darkly hued forms are offset or balanced by undertones making negative space as compositionally crucial as its other. These, in turn, or topped with collaged elements making the individuated passages rhythmic with each other yet coming together to form a larger, visual gestalt of optical exuberance. While *Musica Universalis #2* exemplifies a kind horror vacui or kenophobia, another work in the series takes an ostensibly opposite formal modus operandi. *Sky Watch #2* (2005), for example, one could mistakenly call this a monochromatic work; and though it certainly fits that designation in consisting of black marks across a white background with very minute and almost indiscernible bits of pasted paper, Magoni's ability to extract maximum effect from a reduced palette, highlights the artist's formal and conceptual ingenuity.



*Musica Universalis #2, mixed media and collage on paper, 42 X 69 inches, 2005*

In this humble exegesis of only a few examples of an ample corpus of work, it is evident that Despo Magoni has drawn from many different styles with Expressionism and Neo-Expressionism being her aesthetic sine qua non that she has transformed into something uniquely her own. Taking Harold Bloom to task, the past for Despo Magoni is

not something to be artistically anxious about; but her art and more specifically painting for her remains a life and death commitment by which she deals with the social and political anxieties that existentially mark the human condition since homo sapiens learned to walk upright. It is an urgent artform that mirrors the beauty, the ugliness, the joy, and trauma of being alive. In doing so, we can say it's a kind of uneasy artistic practice, or, if you will, anxious painting.