

Humanistic Expressions

By Donald Kuspit in John Jay College Gallery Exhibition Catalogue, 1999

Despo Magoni's portraits are among the most existentially intense and introspective in twentieth century art. They are part of a tradition of psychological portraiture that can be traced back to *New Sachlichkeit*, and that in general is Germanic, as the portraits of Albrecht Durer and Hans Holbein indicate. This North European tradition reaches a climax in the self-portraits of Rembrandt, and it is to these that Magoni's portraits have a special affinity, both by reason of their insight into human suffering and dynamic execution. But Magoni and traditional portraiture part company in a certain decisive way: where traditional portraits tend to present the individual as autonomous and ahistorical, however socially located—costume usually functions as an index of status and, more broadly, of class and position—Magoni portrays social victims. They suffer but their suffering is caused by the world, and is emblematic of the nightmare of history, as James Joyce called it. Thus, the agony of Magoni's figures is existential, but it is also a criticism of society. Magoni's portraits show us what the art historian Max J. Friedlander called "the heightening of self-consciousness" inseparable from the authentic portrait, but they also indicate man's inhumanity to man in the modern world, and as such are a protest against it.

Magoni's portraits also differ from traditional portraiture—and for that matter most modern portraiture—in their radically expressionistic character. The portrait is stripped to its fundamentals—it is often but a raw head, dramatically rendered in bold gestures. Several of the figures have the same scream—the death rattle of the psyche, as it were—Edvard Munch's famous figure on the pier. But the individuals in *People in the News*, *Johannesburg's Children*, 1977, *Portrait in Panic*, 1984, and *Pawn No. 8*, 1992 seem even more disturbed than Munch's. The same experience of emotional annihilation—psychic death, as the psychoanalyst Michael Eigen calls it—is represented, but I venture to say Magoni's screaming figures are even in greater duress than Munch's, for they are not only victims of themselves but of world history. If existentialism is a philosophy of extreme situations, as has been said, then the extreme situation of Magoni's figures is public as well as personal. The head in *People in the News*, *Johannesburg's Children* is front page news, as its appearance on the front page of the *New York Times* suggests, not only an image of private suffering. Thus Magoni's portraits extend expressionistic portraiture into new territory. If there is any twentieth century precedent for them, it is Oskar Kokoschka's "screaming images" as the critic Bernhard Diebold called them—Kokoschka himself described them as "a silence broken by a cry"—but Magoni's images scream because of social reality not only because of existential anguish. Magoni's portraits are something new: social expressionism—radical humanistic expressionism, one might say, by reason of its seamless integration of sociopolitical horror and emotional depth.

The portraits in this exhibition, which spans more than three decades, fall into three groups. First there are early realistic works of the sixties. From the start, Magoni

had an eye for character, as the 1962 *Study* indicates. With intuitive ease, Magoni instantly grasps the essentials of the woman's emotional identity—the core of her selfhood—and conveys it through a nuanced articulation of her face. Her downward slanting eyes and tight lips emotionally correlate. The angularity of her face contrasts with the flow of her hair, perfectly conveying her tension. Her melancholy becomes more explicit in Magoni's 1965 *Portrait of Costa*. He poses, head resting on his hand—his fist seems to be clenched—in the classic posture of melancholy. Even more telling of his mood is the way his face is split into dark and light sections, which are not reconciled. The blunt contrast echoes in the tension between his black hair and light blue shirt, as well as between his right arm and the shadow that surrounds it. Magoni's gestures are already boldly expressionistic—turbulent, dense, passionate—but the figure still holds together, however much it remains at odds with itself—frozen in self-contradiction. These portraits are important for what they reveal of the human condition but they do not yet tell us about the human condition in modern society.

In the second group of portraits, mostly from the seventies, the figure becomes at once more abstract and more expressionistic—more of an expressive symbol and less of a particular person. It is on the verge of losing its individuality, and altogether dissolving in agony. At the same time, it is clearly a social expression, as Magoni's titles indicate. Each head becomes a portrait of catastrophe, in which individual and social suffering are indistinguishable. These works might be understood as “conceptual portraits”, in the sense that the concept behind the portrait is conveyed by its title, which is socially relevant, while its emotional import is conveyed by its distortion, which seismographically registers its suffering. It is as though the malformed figure embodies the social nightmare signaled by the title. The figure has been so completely shaped by this nightmare that has become nothing but a social symbol. At the same time, in showing the irrationality of society in its own irrational shape, the figure retains, however ironically, some vestige of humanity and individuality, and even dignity.

Perhaps the touchstone work of this second group of this social expressionist portraits is *Woman in Blue*, 1974, in which the figure has completely lost its face—not only its individuality, but even its social identity. Its tilted head suggests its helplessness and vulnerability. Anonymous in a void, the blue woman epitomizes the nothingness to which life is in danger of being reduced by society's indifference as well as violence. This indifference, which reduces human beings to manageable ciphers, is registered in *The Passport*, 1976, a portrait of Magoni's son, incorporating the information usually provided in a passport. But Magoni takes ironic artistic license with the information, personalizing it, as though to outwit the ordinary reduction of human beings to standard categories. Thus, George Constantacopoulos's profession is listed as “dreamer”, his date of birth as “accidental”, and his eye color is “very beautiful.” Magoni will not get him up to the world. Her tender poetry in effect rescues him from a fate worse than death—the living death of being reduced to anonymous data, that is, of being administered by a cold society.

The figures in *Cyprus: Days of Wrath*, 1976, *Death Watch in Salt Lake City*, 1977, and the various *People in the News* portraits, 1977-78, are only rescued by their suffering, even as that suffering registers their social helplessness. They seem to

want to protest their wretched situation—some of the faces seem on the verge of anger—but they all succumb to it. *Death Watch in Salt Lake City* portrays a murderer who had been sentenced to death, but his execution has been postponed numerous times because of protests against the death sentence. In despair, he finally wished to die, as the words that go through his mind—Magoni shows them—indicate. Soren Kierkegaard described despair as the “sickness unto death,” and it is this sickness unto death that we see over and over in Magoni’s social expressionistic portraits. Indeed, many of the figures seem more like ghosts—the dead come back to haunt and accuse the living—than living people. In *The World*, and *Johannesburg’s Children*, all part of the *People in the News* series, this haunting ghostlike quality is conveyed by the chalky whiteness of their skin. The lines that mark it seem like bandages—they seem to hide rather than heal their wounds—and the figures stare at us as through across the unfathomable distance of death. They seem to have risen from the grave, in which they can find no rest, but can hardly be said to have been resurrected and spiritually transfigured. They belong to an underworld of suffering from which there is no escape.



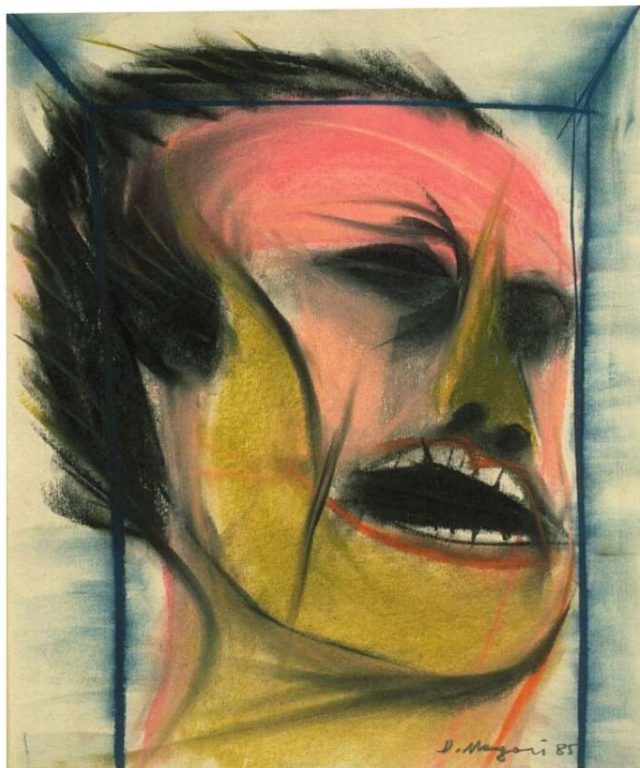
Death Watch in Salt Lake City, charcoal on paper,
25 x 18 inches, 1977

Magoni’s startling group portraits—*People in the News*, 1977, *In the Valley of Silence*, 1979, *Echoes from the Past Are Always Present*, *Self-Portrait*, both 1980, and *Valor No. 1* and *No. 7*, both 1982—are perhaps her most dramatic, intense, damning social expressionistic portraits. Head follows head, all in various states of disintegration, some marked by blood, other crossed by lines that seem to signal anonymous external powers. Indeed, the anonymity of the power that persecutes these tortured heads is the secret behind their own anonymity.

Magoni has said that the *People in the News* series refers to a *New York Times* column about “glamorous people who had power.” She wants “to give faces to those other, the anonymous people, faceless people who also made the news.” Clearly she has done so, and shown that their unglamorous, tormented faces—and perhaps the whole point of glamor is to deny the reality of inner torment and the social crimes of the powerful—are much more human than the faces of the glamorous people who had power. These powerful people hide their suffering and inner face, as Michael Eigen calls it, behind their glamor, in effect the aura of their power. But Magoni in effect strips their glamor from them, showing their inner faces, their tormented vulnerability: the anonymity of her unglamorous, powerless “faceless faces” ironically mirrors the inner anonymity of glamorous, powerful people. The secret of Magoni’s portraits is that they are the portraits of the inner faces of the powerful. She has shown us the portrait that Dorian Gray kept hidden in the attic.



*Echoes from the Past are Always Present #1, mixed media
and collage on paper, 17 x 23 inches, 1980*



The Screaming Box #10, pastel on paper, 17 x 14 inches, 1985

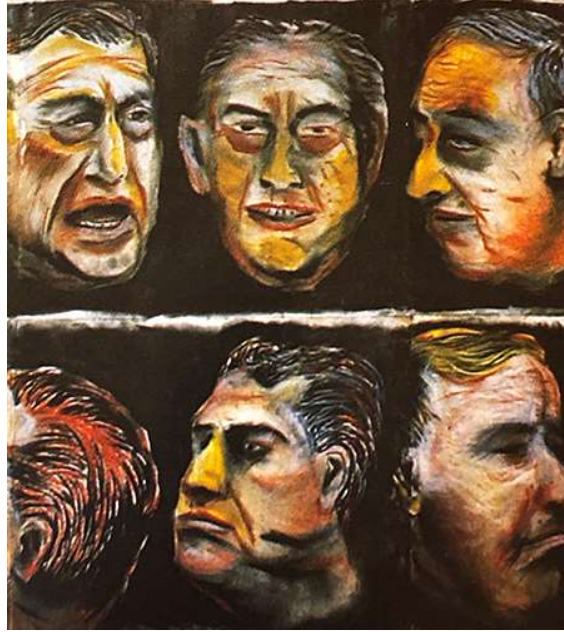
In her second group of portraits, Magoni enlists cubist fragmentation and expressionistic fury in the service of poignant social statement. News photographs are transformed into powerful expressionistic images. Her visionary portraits are harsh, but also empathic-enraged, yet also strangely sublime, for the figures are like prickly cacti in the desert of history, holding their own and offering some human nourishment even as they reflect its inhumanity. In the third group of portraits, begun in the mid - 1980's and continuing to the present day, Magoni produces a more conspicuously socially situated or resonant portraiture. Social situation is implicit in the second group of portraits, but it is subsumed, to my mind, by expressionistic urgency. In the second group, faces register more as emotional physiognomies than social physiologies.

In the third group of portraits a kind of balance is struck between social relevance and expressionistic dynamics. Each is given its due, confirming the validity of the other. If *Portrait in Panic* and *The Knife Thrower's Assistant*, both 1984, as well as the *Screaming Box* No.4 and No. 10, both 1985, are the climax of Magoni's "pure" expressionistic portraiture, then the various works that deal with *Pandora*, *the Sphinx* and *Scheherazade* are explicitly social in import. They may not exactly be feminist, but they clearly deal with traditional problems associated with women as the archaic mythological characters involved suggest. *Pandora's Box*, 1987 clearly refers to the evils that woman released into the world (however much hope was left at the bottom of the box). The snake that wraps itself around the men—it is the same from the

Garden of Eden as well as the snake that strangled Laocoon and his sons—seems to symbolize these evils. The Sphinx also is an ominous symbol of woman's power for the worse, as the story of Oedipus's relationship with her indicates. (Psychoanalysis interprets the Sphinx as the seductive, destructive mother). And of course Scheherazade kept herself alive by telling stories for a thousand and one nights, which is perhaps the way Magoni thinks of her artistic self and her narrative imagery. All these works deal with difficult relationships in which men have physical power over women, but women have emotional power over men. *In Pawn* No. 7, and No. 8, both 1992 woman in effect turns the table on man. The male figures are in physical as well as emotional agony—the latter two are particularly troubled—implicitly as a result of woman's power over them. *Men's Power Talk*, which Magoni mocks in a 1997-98 work (part of *The Thousand and One Nights* series)—one of her strongest group portraits—is no match for *Scheherazade's Guises*, 1996, a very subtle group portrait, suggesting the hidden strength of women, in contrast to men's overt display of power.



In the Valley of Silence, oil pastel on paper mounted on a linen sheet, 96¼ x 67½ inches, 1979, Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, Rethymno, Greece



*Power Talk (detail), mixed media on paper, 55 x 82 inches,
1998, Museum of Contemporary Art of Crete, Rethymno, Greece*

Magoni's portraits have a mythological dimension, which gives them an added resonance. They are mythological statements about victimization and survival. In the Valley of Silence, for example, she deals with the Mexican version of the Icarus myth, involving ten Icaruses, all conceived of as warriors of creativity who were captured and not allowed to dream. That is, their imaginations would be silenced—they would not be allowed to fly. They were victims, if also survivors, however ambiguously. (One recalls Magoni's description of her son as a "dreamer.") Magoni's female heroines are also clearly mythological. Virtually all her portraits, however lifelike, are clearly larger than life and dreamlike—mythological embodiments of the primordial instincts, involving the unresolvable, enigmatic tension between life and death instincts. Indeed, it is the instructiveness as well as social conscience of Magoni's portraits that give them a unique mythopoetic presence.