

“La Camilla”
Paintings by **Charles Laib Bitton**
Opening: 07.09.24
Exhibition: 09.09.24 - 05.10.24

What are we to make of the title of Bitton’s Edenic installation, “*La Camilla*”? Perhaps the title considers the historical significances of the name “*Camilla*” – derived from the Latin referring to the priest’s helper or assistant during religious ceremonies. Perhaps Camilla is simply the name of the model who assisted the artist in the creation of this series? Or perhaps the key to understanding the artist’s work lies somewhere in between.

The viewer is first greeted by a single clothed portrait in the foyer. Upon stepping into the main room, one discovers the heart of the exhibition. The space consists of six demi-nude portraits of the same size, two still life paintings (one of flowers and another of fruit), and a large central canvas featuring three nude figures. These paintings are supplemented by a large window opening up onto a hilly Tuscan landscape, while a natural soundscape provides the soundtrack to the exhibition.

The artist deliberately chose to present the works in the very same space in which both the model posed and the works were created. With this in mind, the experience of the installation reads like a mutualistic symbiosis between the paintings and their environment. As viewers, we are immersed in this series by walking the same floor and listening to the same sounds experienced by the model and artist, the air humming with the act of creation. Here, we are experiencing the works before they transition into the outside world.

While we move through this room, the distant sounds of birds and crickets accompany us. Plunged into a daze between the Edenic qualities of the works and the heat of summer, we may lose our bearings. Does this natural soundscape come from the paintings themselves or do these ambient murmurs come from the physical world beyond the window? While the paintings seem infused by this verdant soundscape, Bitton’s palette too has been influenced by the very same landscape that brought us these sounds.

There appears to be a strong monastic quality to these works. The paintings are free from any extraneous features, unnecessary objects and even

clothes. Apart from the nudity, the setting of the central work, “*Three Figures in Space*”, could be read as a priest’s bedroom – minimally furnished in the monastic style: a single bed, a chair, a humble space. But the parallels extend beyond monastic aesthetics and into the practice of both priest and artist.

In the same way that a priest goes to the *Madonna* repeatedly, the artist returns to the same model with a similar renewed reverence. The return to the *Madonna* and the model helps both priest and artist to unlock greater illuminations in their respective practices.

Religious echoes resound throughout the installation, not only through the monastic aesthetics and practice, but clearly in the Edenic mood of the series. This mood shimmers through the palette at once earthy, with its green and terracotta tones, yet ethereal through the use of silver in the artist’s priming.

While Camilla could be seen as the artist’s depiction of Eve, at which point in the story of the garden of Eden are we situated? Have we already fallen from innocence, burdened by judgement and self-consciousness? Or are we pre-fall, as naked and unburdened as Camilla herself?

This body of work with its reflective painterly qualities compels us to examine our own relationship to nudity and self-consciousness.

It is worth mentioning that after the original sin in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, all flowers are removed from the garden of Eden as punishment. Bitton, however, seems to reaffirm his pursuit of a restored Eden within the installation room by purposefully including his still life, “*Small Vase with Flowers*”.

But what of the second still life, “*Fruits on a Table*”? It would be all too easy to say that the fruits symbolise the forbidden fruit that Eve plucked and ate, “whose mortal taste brought death into the world, and all our woe, with loss of Eden.” And yet, while Eve is entranced by that fatal apple our Camilla appears unconcerned. She seems to exist harmoniously in the space amongst the flowers and fruits,

undisturbed and un-tempted. Milton's pre-fall Eden is described as a "delicious paradise [...] [with its] verdurous wall [and][...] godliest trees laden with fairest fruit [...] of golden hue." We might even see that same luminescent quality that Milton speaks of bouncing off the apples in the artist's work. By bringing flowers and fruit back into the space amongst the demi-nudes, the artist fortifies his vision of a pre-fall innocence.

Although Bitton uses a single model as a point of departure for these pieces, she takes on a variety of different forms within this series. Much like the silver priming used by the artist, she is somewhat fluid, reflecting a mercurial quality. Like a silvery moon dictating the tides, she is feminine yet cool, changeable yet powerful. She is Camilla, the priest's helper, the artist's helper. She is Madonna. She is Venus. She is Eve in her purity and nakedness before the fall.

Much like her subjectivity, Camilla's gaze is difficult to define. While focused on the viewer, her gaze remains unconcerned with the viewer's response. She does not seem to be pleading with or asking the viewer for anything. She remains unfazed. In fact, Camilla appears so indifferent to her own nudity that we, as viewers, are destabilised.

However, Bitton makes a point of showing us that there are no differences in Camilla's gaze, inside or outside, clothed or unclothed, pre-fall or post-fall. Perhaps, in Camilla's indifference, the artist holds up a mirror to the viewer. Although Camilla is the one who is nude, we may feel instead that it is us who have been stripped out of our clothes. If we are laid bare, perhaps it is by her unshakeable gaze, rather than her nudity.

In "*La Camilla*", the interplay between the artist's monastic influences, the nude model, and the immersive environment invites us to question our perceptions of innocence and self-consciousness. As we navigate this space, we confront our own reflections and assumptions about nudity and purity, challenged by Camilla's elusive yet unabashedly direct gaze. The installation blurs the lines between sacred and secular, pre-fall and post-fall, suggesting that perhaps the true essence of purity lies not in the subject's state but in our own capacity to see beyond societal constructs.

Claire Simonis