
ARCUE


Inside Front Cover

DOUG

ARGUE

Scattered Rhymes

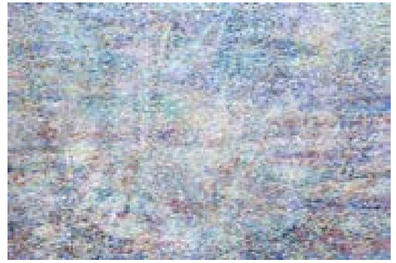
5 MAY – 30 SEPTEMBER, 2015

Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo, Venice, Italy

CALLE, 2015. Oil on canvas
91 x 280 inches (231.1 x 711.2 cm)

MOTHER TONGUE, 2015. Oil on canvas
69 x 90¼ inches (175.2 x 229.2 cm)

COSA MENTALE, 2015. Oil on canvas
107 x 160 inches (271.8 x 406.4 cm)



TIME AND TIME AGAIN, 2015. Oil on canvas
89 x 134½ inches (226 x 341.6 cm)

Foreword

DOUG ARGUE'S 2015 EXHIBITION, *Scattered Rhymes* in the *magazzino* of Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo in Venice marks the debut of Save Venice as an advocate of contemporary art. An American organization dedicated to the preservation of Venice's artistic and architectural heritage, Save Venice's decision to sponsor an artist in a satellite *Biennale* show reflects our commitment to Venice as a living city of art and how the past informs the present.

All of the arts, old and new, are connected, and the body of work that Argue has created for this exhibition underscores this fact. The city of Venice and the Renaissance Venetian masters play a major role in Argue's creative process, and his use of space, light, and color are indebted to the guiding hands of Titian and Tintoretto. The large scale of his paintings echoes the grand format of the narrative paintings that adorn Venetian government buildings and confraternity meeting houses. Like the works of the Venetian masters who inspired him, Argue's paintings are site-specific, taking their surroundings into consideration from their inception.

Many of the works that have had a lasting impact on Argue are beneficiaries of Save Venice's conservation efforts over the years. Argue's *Time and Time Again* owes a direct debt to Titian's *Pietà*, while the decorative effect of the brick wall in *Cosa Mentale* evokes the façade of the Doge's Palace in Titian's *Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (1534–38). Titian's masterpiece was restored by Save Venice in 2012, along with the Sala dell'Albergo, the room where it has been installed since its creation. Indeed, the unified effect of Argue's installation evokes the effect of the nine canvases in Carpaccio's *St. Ursula Cycle* (1488–95), a current Save Venice restoration project.

The site of *Scattered Rhymes* resonates especially closely with Save Venice since our decision to move our Venetian headquarters to the third floor of the same Palazzo. Our space will include the newly established Rosand Library and Study Center, housing the library of the late Save Venice board member and preeminent art historian, David Rosand. Conservation files and photographs documenting fifty years of restoration projects will round out the picture of Save Venice's dedication to both education and restoration.

Save Venice is proud of its vital role in preserving this extraordinary city and enriching its current cultural identity by sponsoring Doug Argue's exhibition. Encouraging the synergy between Old Masters and New Masters, like Argue, will ensure that Venice continues to play a vibrant and essential role in the arts well into the twenty-first century, and beyond.

MATTHEW WHITE
Chairman of the Board of Directors

SAVE VENICE INC.

Introduzione

RIME SPARSE, *LA MOSTRA DI DOUG ARGUE, ospitata quest'anno nel* magazzino *di Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo a Venezia, segna il debutto di Save Venice come sostenitore dell'arte contemporanea. Save Venice è un ente americano che si occupa attivamente di preservare il patrimonio artistico e architettonico veneziano; la nostra decisione di sponsorizzare un artista in una mostra satellite della Biennale riflette la nostra dedizione a Venezia come città d'arte vivente e dimostra quanto il passato sia di ispirazione per il presente.*

Tutte le forme d'arte, vecchie e nuove, sono collegate l'una all'altra, e le opere che Argue ha creato per questa mostra sottolineano questo fatto. La città di Venezia e i maestri veneziani del Rinascimento svolgono un ruolo importante nel processo creativo di Argue, e il suo utilizzo dello spazio, della luce e del colore deve molto alle mani ispiratrici di Tiziano e Tintoretto. Le grandi dimensioni dei suoi dipinti riprendono il formato imponente dei dipinti narrativi che abbelliscono gli edifici pubblici di Venezia e le sedi delle confraternite. Come le opere dei maestri veneziani che l'hanno ispirato, i dipinti di Argue sono pensati appositamente per lo spazio espositivo, in quanto l'ambiente che li circonderà viene considerato attentamente fin dall'inizio del processo creativo.

Molte delle opere che hanno avuto un impatto duraturo su Argue hanno beneficiato dei lavori di restauro finanziati da Save Venice nel corso degli anni. Non c'è dubbio che l'opera Time and Time Again *di Argue sia stata direttamente ispirata dalla* Pietà *di Tiziano, mentre l'effetto decorativo del muro di mattoni in* Cosa Mentale *rievoca la facciata del Palazzo Ducale nella* Presentazione della Vergine al Tempio *(1534–38) dello stesso artista. Questo capolavoro è stato restaurato da Save Venice nel 2012, insieme alla Sala dell'Albergo, il luogo per il quale è stato concepito e dove è da sempre conservato. E' altrettanto vero che l'effetto unificato dell'installazione di Argue serve a ricreare l'effetto dei nove teleri del* Ciclo di Sant'Orsola *(1488–95) di Carpaccio, del cui progetto di restauro si sta attualmente occupando Save Venice.*

Lo spazio espositivo della mostra Rime Sparse *è in piena sintonia con Save Venice, vista la decisione di trasferire il nostro quartier generale veneziano al terzo piano dello stesso Palazzo. Nella nostra nuova sede ci sarà anche la Rosand Library and Study Center (Biblioteca e Centro Studi Rosand) di recente istituzione, che ospita la biblioteca del compianto professor David Rosand, membro del Consiglio di Amministrazione di Save Venice e autorevole storico dell'arte. Archivi e fotografie di restauri, a testimonianza di cinquant'anni di progetti di conservazione, completeranno il quadro dell'impegno di Save Venice a favore dell'istruzione e del restauro.*

Save Venice è orgogliosa di svolgere un ruolo vitale nel preservare questa straordinaria città e nell'arricchire la sua attuale identità culturale con la sponsorizzazione della mostra di Doug Argue. Promuovendo la sinergia tra i Vecchi Maestri e i Nuovi Maestri, come Argue, si farà in modo che Venezia continui ad avere un ruolo vibrante ed essenziale nelle arti per tutto il ventunesimo secolo ed oltre.

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CALLE, 2015. Oil on canvas, 91 x 280 inches (231.1 x 711.2 cm)

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Doug Argue in Venice: *Scattered Rhymes*

MARY E. FRANK

Jacopo Tintoretto, *Crucifixion*, 1565. Oil on canvas, 211 x 482 inches (536 x 1,224 cm). Scuola Grande di San Rocco, Venice

DOUG ARGUE WAS TWENTY-FOUR YEARS OLD when he visited Venice for the first time. Seeing Tintoretto's *Crucifixion*, 1565, in the Scuola Grande di San Rocco changed his way of seeing the world and making art. Now, almost thirty years later, on the occasion of the 2015 *Venice Biennale*, Argue is exhibiting his work in the city that has been a continuing inspiration for him. The following essay will set the exhibition into the historical context of Renaissance Venice, providing a backdrop that is fundamental to fully appreciating the paintings that comprise Argue's *Scattered Rhymes*.

The *Crucifixion* by Tintoretto (Jacopo Robusti, 1518–94) measures 17 by 40 feet. It is all encompassing and all consuming, both in scale and narrative—the Crucifixion is a subject that demands and warrants such scale. As Argue remembers the experience, "It had never occurred to me to do large-scale paintings until I visited Venice. The scale of Tintoretto's paintings surrounded me, pushing the painted images to the edges of my field of vision, and then into my peripheral vision past the picture plane and out into the world, only to be brought back into focus with a single detail: a hand or a leaf, wonderfully painted. Tintoretto made a generous gift, giving me something I could use to make my own."

Narrative paintings like Tintoretto's *Crucifixion* have a long and glorious history in Renaissance Venice. Cycles of narrative paintings were commissioned by the members of a confraternity or *scuola*, a secular organization dedicated to performing pious acts. Each confraternity had a chapter house, decorated by the leading artists of the day. The tradition began at the turn of the fifteenth century, with the delightfully detailed works of Vittore Carpaccio, Giovanni Mansueti, and Gentile Bellini, whose canvases tell complicated stories of the lives of saints

Gentile Bellini, *Procession in the Piazza San Marco*, 1496. Oil on canvas, 144 x 293 inches (367 x 745 cm). Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

and the fate of their relics, elaborated with minute details of daily life and populated with portraits of the men who commissioned them. Bellini's *Procession in the Piazza San Marco*, 1496, is a fitting example of this genre. In the foreground, the members of the Confraternity of San Giovanni Evangelista lead a procession honoring their most treasured possession: a relic of the True Cross, enshrined in a crystal cross-shaped reliquary covered by a canopy, at the very center of the composition. The middle ground—the Piazza—is animated with a variety of details of daily life: groups of onlookers, other smaller processions, and the odd passerby. The background is a document of architectural history, including the distinctive diamond-shaped brickwork of the Doge's Palace; the bell tower before the construction of the Loggetta at its base; and most important, the only surviving record of the façade of the Basilica of San Marco at the end of the fifteenth century.

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio, 1485–1576), the master of sixteenth-century Venetian painting and Tintoretto's close contemporary, also gave Argue gifts, this time of color and technique. Titian was known for the spontaneity of his brushwork and later in life his *pittura di macchia*, a style comprised of broken brushwork and thick impasto, in which the motion of the artist's hand and brush remain palpable.

Giorgio Vasari (1511–74), Florentine author of *Lives of the Artists*, the first comprehensive and authoritative collection of biographies of Renaissance artists, despaired at Titian's spontaneous use of color to create form (*colorito*), as opposed to the more deliberate use of contour to delineate form (*disegno*). He bemoaned the fact that Venetians insisted on "painting with colors only, without doing the study of drawing on paper, which was the true and best method of working, and the true

design."[1] Vasari believed that Venetian painters would never equal other Italians who instead carefully planned out their compositions in preparatory drawings—virtual road maps followed at the expense of the spontaneity that enlivens and distinguishes Venetian painting.

It is precisely the spontaneity of *colorito* that Argue takes from Titian, noting, "The freedom to use the act of painting to create the image, not being restrained to work within a strict line drawing, but rather giving dominance to light over line, gives my work energy that derives from spontaneity and its associated risk."

Argue's exhibition in Venice takes its name from the opening line of Petrarch's *Rime Sparse* or *Scattered Rhymes*, a collection of sonnets that the lyric poet accumulated over a period of forty-seven years. Written in the Italian vernacular, Petrarch (1304–74) used the Latin working title *Rerum vulgarium fragmenta*, or "fragments of matters in common speech." Indeed, the collection of sonnets has been described as, "sketching out a powerful story without following the conventions of narrative."[2] The same can be said of Argue's paintings, which adopt the grand scale of Venetian narrative painting but create their own conventions of storytelling.

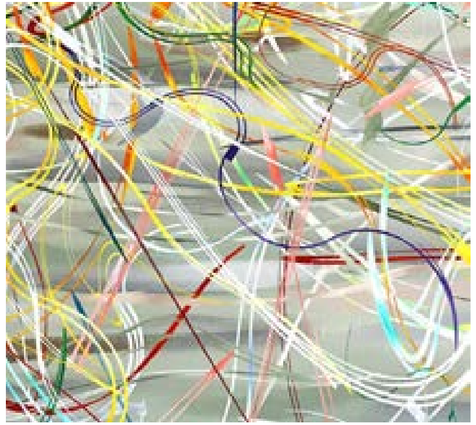
Fragments and rhymes have punctuated Argue's work for years. Literally scattered across the surface of the paintings, Argue breaks literary passages down into individual letters, elongating and abstracting them before painstakingly cutting them out. He then stencils them on to the painted canvas, allowing the patterns to sketch out the story. Without narrative subject matter to organize the canvas, the artist lets the surface organize itself into waves of color and pattern, energized by the letters. The result is as mesmerizing in its particularity as a detail-filled painting by Carpaccio.

The source of the scattered words and letters is different in every painting. In *Catch My Drift* of 2012, a watery world creates the backdrop for letters from *Moby-Dick*. No, we don't know which

Catch My Drift, 2012. Oil on canvas, 112 x 160 inches (284.5 x 406.4 cm)

passage, and trying to assemble a word, much less a passage from the letters emanating from the center of the canvas is a daunting challenge. Argue does not follow the conventions of narrative but he certainly creates an engrossing story.

The Palazzo where Argue chose to exhibit was known to sixteenth-century Venetians as "Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo *near the Carità*" in order to distinguish it from another Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo on the other side of the city in Cannaregio. The Carità was a complex of buildings that would become the Gallerie dell' Accademia, home to many of the works that are the source of



Catch My Drift, 2012 (detail)

Argue's Venetian inspiration. (Today the name Polignac has been added to the name of the Palazzo, in recognition of the family who has owned it for over a century.)

The exhibition space is a *magazzino*, or storage room. Contrary to popular belief, these rooms were not used to store the inventory of the noble merchants who lived in the Palazzo, but rather as we would use a basement: for storing extra dry goods, out-of-service boats and their accoutrements, and the various detritus that life creates and demands be kept.[3] The walls are bare brick; the ceiling's beams are exposed. The floor is wooden. There are two entrances: one from the *calle*, a dark narrow alley that leads off the main thoroughfare, and another from the sunlit courtyard of the Palazzo, steps away from the water entrance on the Grand Canal. The *magazzino* is a completely utilitarian space, unlikely to detract from the site-specific paintings being shown there.

Argue leads us into his exhibition through a real *calle* and onto his own *Calle*, 2015 [pp. 8–9] which runs parallel to the alleyway outside. A monumental painting, the largest in the room, *Calle* reminds us of Argue's debt to Tintoretto, but this is an intergalactic *calle*—a trajectory through the stars and the universe. It is composed of countless droplets of paint, applied to a horizontal canvas. *Calle* is truly all encompassing, enveloping the viewer, drawing our vision out into the world only to pull us back in with tiny letters and intimate whispers of complete words spelling "consolation."

The walls of the *calle* outside are lined with brick, just like the walls of the *magazzino*. Bricks are the building blocks of Venice: crumbling, dusty, brick walls that maintain just enough flexibility to endure the gentle shifts of time and tide that are an inevitable part of life in Venice. But this is not the glorified brickwork on the façade of the Doge's Palace as it appears in Bellini's grand painting—this is the everyday brickwork that is the backdrop of daily life in Venice.

Argue has painted a portrait of the citizens of Venice: hundreds of individual bricks. Like the stately confraternity members, portrayed in solid rows, wearing their identical robes, *Cosa Mentale*, 2015 [p. 23] captures the character of the material foundation of the city. A cascade of white letters falls gently in front of the painted brick wall, like the dust shed by the bricks outside after a hard freeze. These abstracted letters vivify the canvas, evoking the appearance of Venice in a snowstorm. Like snow-flakes, no two letters are alike.

The text that Argue deconstructs here is from Vasari's *Lives of the Artists*. There is a synchronicity and irony in the fact that the

Untitled (Chickens), 1994 (detail)

Untitled (Chickens), 1994. Oil on canvas, 144 x 216 inches (365.7 x 548.6 cm). Cafesjian Center for the Arts, Armenia

building block of so much of what we think we know about Renaissance artists' lives is tumbling down in front of a solid brick wall, at the hands of an artist dedicated to Titian's *colorito*.

Cosa Mentale is the latest chapter in an exploration of repeated forms that Argue has been pursuing for years. He selects an ordinary object—a chicken, a book, or a brick, places it in its usual context and portrays it repetitively on his trademark large-scale canvases. The process forces the viewer to think about the object in more detail, to contemplate it more carefully than might otherwise happen. An early foray into this approach is *Untitled (Chickens)*, 1994. It shows row upon row of chickens in their pens, receding into a perfect Albertian vanishing point. Each chicken looks different, but each is the same in its quotidian fate of becoming a faceless dot in the distance. The "Chicken Painting" lived in Minneapolis at the Weisman Art Museum for many years, where it was a favorite among visitors. The work now resides in the Cafesjian Center for the Arts in Armenia, where the birds' unique anonymity endures.

Library of Babel, 1997, explores the similarity and diversity of books. In contrast to the orderly bricks and chicken pens, there are no shelves on which to organize these books—rather they are stacked and propped across the picture plane, helter-skelter, but stable enough to remain in place. It is not tempting to pull one from the mass to read for fear that they would all come tumbling down, burying you in Babel.

Library of Babel, 1997. Oil on canvas, 144 x 264 inches (365.7 x 670.5 cm)

The common element to these paintings—of bricks, chickens, and books—is their ability to suggest layers of meaning with ordinary objects. The longer we look at something mundane, the more we see.

The final two paintings in *Scattered* Rhymes are much more subtle, relying on a palimpsest for meaning and dimension. The concept of a palimpsest originated with medieval manuscripts that were subsequently overwritten but still bore a trace of their original content. The word has come to mean anything that is reused or altered but still hints of its earlier identity. Venice is a city of palimpsests. The façade of the Basilica of San Marco was clad with marble and decorated with columns imported from Constantinople after Venice's victory there during the Fourth Crusade in 1204. Indeed, in the fifteenth century the Palazzo Contarini was built over an existing medieval palace, of which a few traces remained. These are but two of many examples of how layers of meaning are indigenous to Venice, a city where we should always look to see what lies beneath the surface.

According to the biographer Marco Boschini (1613–78), Titian would establish the rudiments of his compositions and then turn his paintings to face the wall. He would leave them this way, sometimes for months, before returning to them. As a result, when Titian's paintings are conserved and X-rayed, our modern techniques become time machines, carrying us back into the artist's creative process. One of the most dramatic examples of this is Titian's *Venus with a Mirror*, c. 1555 [p. 18]. X-rays reveal an entirely different composition beneath this iconic painting. Titian originally oriented the canvas horizontally and painted a portrait

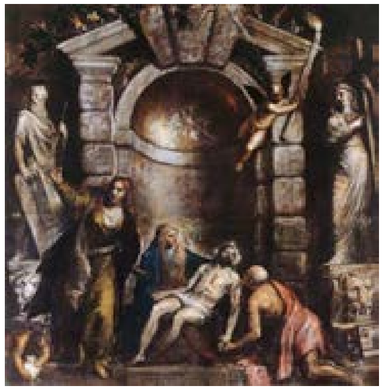
Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*, c.1555. Oil on canvas, 49 x 41 inches (124.5 x 104.1 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC
RIGHT: Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*. Composite X-ray of the painting. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

of a couple. The man wears a coat, luxuriously trimmed in fur—the same red coat that Venus has draped around her hips. We cannot make out the identity of the portrait ghosts; all we know is that Titian liked the painted passage of the fur so well that he brought it forward to the completed work—which incidentally, remained in his studio until his death, years after he completed it.

Titian's *Pietà*, c.1575, was his last painting. Left unfinished at his death in 1576, this work is the pinnacle of the master's late style, a manifestation of Venetian *colorito* and *pittura di macchia*. An X-ray of the *Pietà* reveals how the artist worked and reworked the arrangement of the central figures directly on the canvas without any premeditated drawing. There is also an indication of the shadowy presence of a male face and a figure lying sleeping, completely obscured in the final work, suggesting that the canvas may have originally held an entirely different composition, as in the *Venus with a Mirror*.[4]

In the lower right corner of the *Pietà* is a small painting, propped up against the base of the lion's head supporting the figure of Helespont. It shows two men kneeling, their hands raised in prayer to the Madonna with Christ across her lap: a pietà within the *Pietà*. The men are identified as Titian and his son Orazio, to whom Titian bequeathed his workshop. X-rays also reveal that there were originally three figures in the ex-voto painting; the third, painted out, was presumably Titian's other son Pomponio, who fell out of favor with his father and was taken out of his will. The *Pietà* is truly a document of the end of Titian's life, a palimpsest of changing emotions.

Argue makes this palimpsest his own in *Time and Time Again*, 2015 [p.21] collapsing time and space into a shimmering blue surface that looks like the lagoon on a clear summer's day. Closer inspection reveals ghostly shadows that appear momentarily and then vanish when we try to see them clearly. What we are glimpsing is an homage to Titian. Argue copied the *Pietà* and then turned the canvas upside down, echoing Titian's change of orientation with the Venus. He then obscured the underpainting, leaving a secret visible only to the initiated, like the red fur-trimmed coat. Waves of glimmering brushstrokes wash over the *Pietà*, in *Time and Time Again*, obscuring and



Titian, *Pietà*, c.1575. Oil on canvas, 149 x 136½ inches (378 x 347 cm). Gallerie dell'Accademia, Venice

Doug Argue, *Time and Time Again*, 2015 (detail of underpainting).

revealing, seducing the viewer with what lies beneath. A few letters appear, from Vasari and Petrarch—true scattered rhymes. The watery world of this painting balances the shadowy nuance of *Calle* on the adjacent wall just as the Grand Canal illuminates the courtyard of the Palazzo outside.

Opposite *Time and Time Again*, Argue indulges in another Titianesque exercise in building on existing work. In this case he took a blue painting that was hanging in his studio and painted over it, leaving only a few traces of the original behind, including a few letters that emerge like a true palimpsest. Future conservators will have their work cut out for them with *Mother Tongue*, 2015 [p.11] one of the artist's most recent paintings, whose title reminds us, once again, that Petrarch wrote his *Scattered Rhymes* in the vernacular Italian rather than in Latin, making them more accessible to readers. Yet, when he described Venice, a city that he loved, he used the Latin, calling it *mundus alter*, that is, another world. Doug Argue has embraced that world and translated it into the vernacular of painting today, creating rhyme and reason on a grand scale with a depth of meaning that does justice to his forebears.

NOTES

1. Giorgio Vasari, *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, trans. Gaston du C. de Vere (New York: Modern Library, 2006), p. 781.

2. David Young, *The Poetry of Petrarch* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. ix.

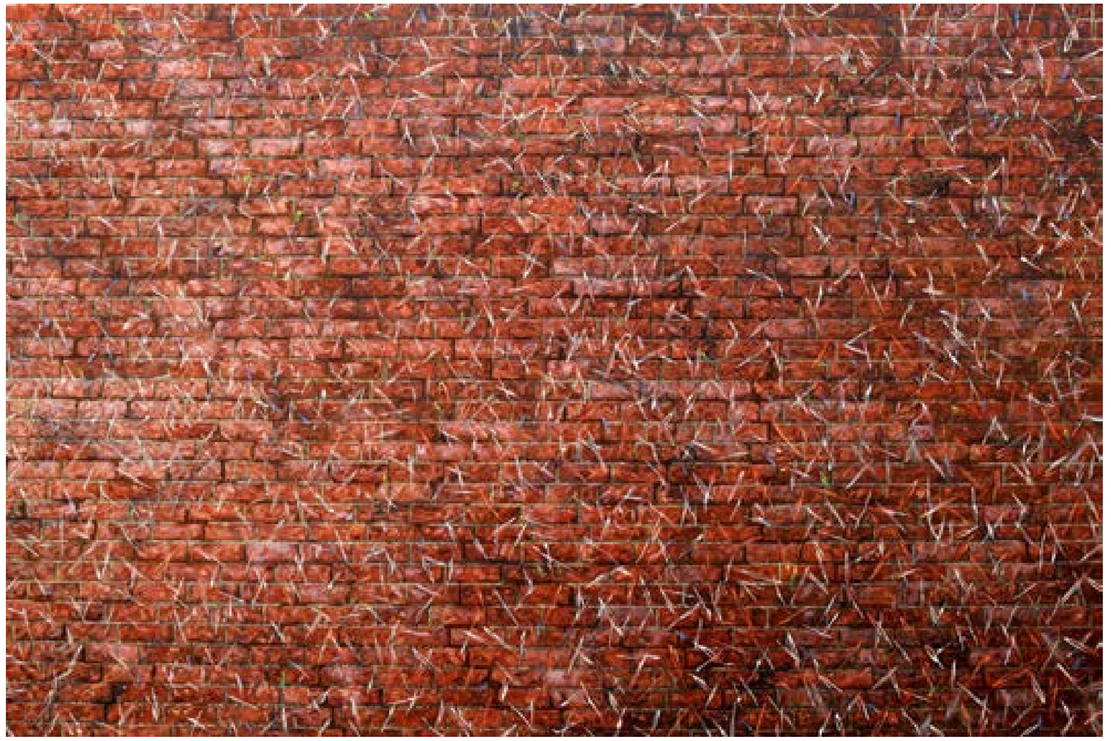
3. Juergen Schulz, *The New Palaces of Medieval Venice* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), p. 27.

4. The X-ray is reproduced in Giovanni Nepi Scirè's essay in Sylvia Ferino-Pagden, *Late Titian and the Sensuality of Painting* (Venice: Marsilio, 2008), p. 311.

MARY E. FRANK *is an art historian who focuses on the art of Renaissance Venice. A member of the Project Committee at Save Venice, her most recent book is a collection of essays in honor of her dissertation advisor at Princeton, entitled* Reflections on Renaissance Venice: A Celebration of Patricia Fortini Brown *(Milan: 5 Continents Editions, 2013). Her current project is the establishment of the Rosand Library and Study Center at Save Venice in Venice.*

TIME AND TIME AGAIN, 2015. Oil on canvas, 89 x 134½ inches (226 x 341.6 cm)

COSA MENTALE, 2015. Oil on canvas, 107 x 160 inches (271.8 x 406.4 cm)



Of the Letters, Nebular

DEJAN LUKIĆ

HOW TO EXTRACT THE MOST IMPORTANT PARTICLES from paintings that themselves depict elemental modalities of reality (of the cosmos, language, memory)? To address these monumental themes with an enormous gravitational pull, Doug Argue takes a singular approach: atomization. He decomposes language into its elementary particles—into vowels and consonants—turning them sonorous. This instilling of letters onto the surface of reality (in this case onto canvas), one that signals the omnipresence of language through implementation of its corpuscles, is Argue's signature procedure.

We see these paintings as letter-nebulas. This does not mean that galaxies are constructed by actual letters. They are obviously generated by gaseous clouds with different degrees of solidity. But on paintings, clouds are intensified by minuscule letters that are barely perceptible, depending on our distance from the canvas, as if they are products of a secret gesture that takes pleasure in occasionally revealing itself (we discover the letters when we approach closer). Hence, the canvases are cosmological as much as they are painterly; they are of the language, as much as they are of the paint.

But before we get lost in abstract cosmological and linguistic matters, we should point out that Argue is more precisely a creator of paintings that are, on the one hand, *photonic* (with ever moving particles that carry energy proportional to their radiation frequency) and, on the other, *phonetic* (inscribing perceptually distinct units of sounds). What these paintings express is not the usual optical-tactical space of the canvas; rather, they reveal an alphabetic-nebular domain, where what matters is a micro-perception. This is their humility and precision: a molecularized vision.

The syntax of the brush that turns cosmic dust and gas into an image is therefore "galactic," as much as it also belongs to the history of painting. If all paintings depict some kind of movement (even scenes of the so-called still life contain consciousness of eventual decay), Argue's paintings are movement itself. The vision they frame expands, contracts, falls, floats. They are processual, tapping into essential modalities of life (physically and existentially speaking): motion, change, generation. We know that the universe is, as cosmologists tell us, constantly expanding in all directions. It is multidirectional, multifarious, since it is based on vectors and speeds. Forms, as a result, are secondary. The beauty (that endangered term) is in the process.

The most personal and idiosyncratic formation of letters finds its fulfillment in what we call a "signature" (originally the sign or the mark of the sovereign). In 1621, German mystic Jacob Boehme wrote a book titled *Signatura Rerum* ("Signature of All Things") in which he equated signature with form. In other words, God marks all things in the cosmos with his signature, thus giving form to everything. It can be said that this is the essence of theology of creation. And in a reverse manner, by engaging the same problem of the "signature," Argue reverses the gesture, de-theologizes it, by decomposing the signature, by releasing the formation of words and names—and by extension commands—from its divine origins. Boehme treats the entire formed world as "divine corporeality" through which all things are generated; Argue treats the same world (of language, of stars) as alphabetic *elementality* through which all things are generated.

The letters that inhabit paintings serve as Argue's proper signature, his instantly recognizable style. And the great thing about this atomized, molecularized, alphabet is that it carries no authority. It is a language that is still agrammatical, paradoxically free from any type of sovereignty, exercising its power on the canvas only as a recognizable series of marks that move as they please. One looks at these flying letters, which are broken-down words, now joyfully released from the laws that govern them, that give them meaning (the cosmos of grammar). In their defused state they start to stutter and in this stuttering universe a new type of freedom is realized—one that lies at the core of movement.

CALLE, 2015 (detail)

Here then are four paintings that capture, reconfigure, and release these scattered poetics of color, sound, and writing. Here the nebular, is grounded in the specific: *brick wall* (the mark of the city), *water* (reflective light of the canals traversing the history of painting), *the sky* (initiator of consolations), and *the street* (location of traditional processions). The title of each section bears the title of the paintings. These titles are nothing short of passwords that provide admission to the emergent tonalities of letters and colors, of time and space.

CALLE

Why is there a sense of relief when our gaze is lifted upwards? (Or else downwards, into the waters, into the sea?) It is a matter of depth, and of what depth provides: a longer elongation of our sight, and thus of our thought. We call freedom "open horizon." But there is something else here, something which the painting reveals: it is not the profundity of the depths that entrances us; rather, it is the sheer movement that open space announces.

The fullness of the canvas: an immensity of dots, of letters, turning into colors, expanding, turning into constellations, as they cluster, turn into milky ways, then disintegrate; letters turning into stars, stars into letters, until each is an unrecognizable star-letter forming gaseous clouds of slowly moving colors, exploding. And as our eyes move along the surface, the tiny letters and exploding color-dots start to sound, chirping like insects, like the cicadas of a Venetian summer.

And then a surprise: when we obliterate the distance between the canvas and our eyes, looking at the landscape that the brush and the hand conjured into existence, we encounter a sudden circular arrangement of letters that reads "consolations." Indeed, looking into clear sky at night provides us with this sensation, giving way to a formulaic proposition: constellations are consolatory. The arrangement (of stars) thus turns into a sensation and the leap from one to the other is perfectly plausible. In fact, the word consolation comes from Latin *consolidare*, which also serves as a root of consolidate, that is "join together and make firm." Consoling is solidifying (making stronger, reinforcing), turning bad thoughts into crystals. And what else does the night sky reveal? Constellation: a formation, a gathering, a conjoining of stars.

Hence, there is a double joy that arises from stepping into this immense fragment of the sky, or more precisely, a double view, depending on one's proximity to the canvas: one galactic, the other myopic, each with its own rewards of viewing and thinking.

But most importantly, the double view is first and foremost grounded on the street, proceeding and projecting from it. For the painting is a veritable patch of sky we see when we look up between two buildings on a narrow street, one of many that wind their way toward, for example, Palazzo Contarini dal Zaffo.

The letters here are nebular. They simply exist, so to speak, like physical bodies, helping the galaxies to (self)generate.

COSA MENTALE

"A thing of the mind…" Is this expression meant to undermine the gravity of the fact that all reality is an illusion? A construct of an individual mind? And if this is true, how do we judge which construct is better, more interesting, more vital and intensifying? In fact, Argue listens to the entire set of audio-files of *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust while painting this piece. It is from here that the title jumps out, an expression Proust takes from Leonardo da Vinci so as to reveal his own stance that all exists only in memory. There is a Proustian, as well as da Vincian, molecule permeating the brick wall, which is the main image of the painting.

A wall just like any other wall in Venice, an ordinary brick wall, a common thing, coupled with fluttering letters. The painting of the wall is also hung on a brick wall, thus extending beyond its frame in order to form a conversation with all the other walls in Venice. When we look at maps of this city, from the digital to those of the Venetian Republic, we first see the canals. When thinking about Venice, we imagine canals. Venice equals canals. But it is the brick walls that are the counterpart of the winding liquid passages; it is the brick walls that form the canals; it is the brick walls that are slowly being swallowed up by them.

And it is the walls, and their facades, that are proper Proustian memory devices, for only they remember all the masters of painting, architecture, and writing that traversed the canals in the past centuries. In fact, it is on the walls that their memories coexist.

In addition, it is the light that strangely and subtly overtakes the wall on the painting. A light that is descending from the left side, as if from a window positioned next to the painting. Looking to the side of the frame, we notice that the illusion is—real. There is indeed a window next to it.

The letters for their part open up the space of the wall, as they flutter in all directions, populating it. The movement (of the brush and of their nature) protracts them. Furthermore, they attack each other, overlap, erase, cut through. As a result, they fizzle.

The letters here descend and ascend. They lift the heaviness of the bricks by decomposing the memories these walls normally carry.

TIME AND TIME AGAIN

Surface upon a surface upon a surface. Times, ages, periods, flattened and superimposed until they start to flicker, like a reflection on the surface of the water. Here the underlying impulse, the guiding image, is that of Titian's *Pietà* (c.1575). For it is still the same fascination with light that guides Argue's hand as well. It is through this fascination with light (among other things) that so-called Western painting, no matter how secular, participates in the religious gesture which treats every illumination, no matter how small, as an illumination of a mystery.

This relation of Christianity to painting—its provision of themes and figurations—does not mean that a painter has to be religious. In fact, he or she can be indifferent to theological concerns (as Gilles Deleuze clearly pointed out in his analysis of Francis Bacon) because Christianity contains already within itself a molecule of atheism. The form and the essence can now become scattered letters, falling on the dead body of Christ cradled by Mary.

But the title says it all: it is not the monumentality of time that matters; rather, it is its passage, the recurrence of which is never the same. The process that creates the illusion of what we call time sweeps everything along its generative principle. What Argue captures are the coexistent coordinates in the history of painting: Titian is revisited by the Impressionists, who are defined by the light reflected on the surface of the water in the canals of Venice, on which now float minuscule letters. There is a direct association with the great "European" images of the past; that is, a conscious recognition that any disassociation, at least when it comes to the medium of painting, would be impossible.

And does not time itself consist of sheets of experience folding onto one another in order to create what we call a period, that is, a length or portion of time, an interval? In the case of this painting, time is the surfaces of light arriving from different centuries, non-preoccupied with the depths of history. The essence of painting lies in the particular treatment of light and the movement of color. These are the primary characteristics of Argue's art too.

This is not a mastery of time as such, but a convergence of different times into a singular image or perception. For we see a Titian-instant and an Impressionist-instant colliding with the nebular-instant (of the letters) in the colors and reflections painted here. In this *reflectatory* painting, it is the small waves of color that carry it, as the best initiators of movement and passage (traveling by sea) one can possibly summon. Indeed, Venice was built on the Adriatic waves, it emerged out of them, and is now battling a return back into them. Everything arrives and leaves on the same waves.

The letters here are the waves themselves. They inhabit reflecting surfaces of the history of painting.

MOTHER TONGUE

The undulations of the brushstroke now clearly show the secret affinity between the act of painting and the waves. (To undulate: to move in a wave-like motion, from Latin unda, "a wave.") But this is not the representation of the sea as such. Rather, we see the rhythmicity of the small, choppy, elevations of the micro-waves typical for the surface of the Adriatic waters. What can one say about these proto-waves, these tiny, cradle-like ridges that propagate in all directions? At least that they announce the eventual rise of the curling curves we properly call waves. They are the mother tongue of the sea.

Mother tongue: a complicated mechanism of articulation that paradoxically implies comfort and intimacy. Also sometimes called "first," "native," or "cradle" language. It carries gravity of ethnic belonging but also a vernacular sense of lightness and freedom. One theory states that the first use of the term came from the medieval Catholic monks who wanted to differentiate the language they used for preaching from the official Latin language of the Church. Hence, mother tongue is an undulating proto-wave that strays from the "higher" linguistic body that desires unification.

This is what Petrarch had in mind when he reinvented the sonnet, its formal expression, by using his mother tongue. (*Scattered Rhymes*, the title under which the present series of Argue's paintings is exhibited, points toward the sensibility of the four-teenth-century poet Francesco Petrarca.) To make poetry in the vernacular is both a poetical and political gesture—for language, like the sea, is never neutral. It is to turn it more affective, bodily and experiential, as it naturally happens when a language attains distance from the official or institutional manners.

The painting however comes about from a very concrete (and literal) reflection: the twilight refracted in the canals of Venice. There is no doubt that so-called old masters also viewed this twilight, and did what they could to transfer it to the canvas. The proto-waves are not metaphoric; they are waves and they are mirrors; that is to say, they move and they reflect. The sur-face is the expression of the flux, not just of time, but of all matter. And the painter or the poet needs to assemble this appearance of the surface, gather the waves, and re-create the veil on which the reality of what we see is projected (one thing is veiled over another).

But the most significant thing about the veil is that it flutters. It is ultimately the fluttering (i.e. flickering, waving, rippling, quivering, surging) of this painting that struggles to reveal two notions: permanence and flux. And one cannot exist without the other. As Alfred Whitehead noted, the passing moment gets its intensity from the submission to permanence; and permanence can only be extracted from the impermanent flow. A timeless moment is thus captured in that which is passing. It is in this respect that one has to view the *Mother Tongue*. The depth of it lies in a tripartite feature: surface-veil-reflection. The painting itself is a fragment of the sea: out of the cradle-like waves smooth letters spark out.

The letters here undulate. They inhabit the coil of timelessness.

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MOTHER TONGUE, 2015 (detail)

Doug Argue

BORN IN ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA, New York City-based artist Doug Argue's thirty-year painting career has culminated in a striking body of abstract work that encompasses a diversity of mediums and formats. His compositional approach extends to both spatial construction and figural depiction in an oeuvre that lyrically conjures metaphors and art-historical references to the past and present.

In his most recent work, fluid orchestrations of biomorphic forms and geometric shapes, amidst spontaneous gestural swaths of color are swept over different pictorial depths and surfaces suggesting movement, instability, and the passage of time. Integral to Argue's vocabulary of shapes, computer-generated stencils of scattered letters dissipate across these illusionistic fields to form their own lexical cosmos.

Culled from literary classics such as Moby-Dick to sonnets by thirteenth-century poet Petrarch, Argue's atomized texts are inspired by psycholinguistic and scientific phenomena The artist explores abstraction syntactically: paragraphs, sentences, and words compose and decompose into one another, until they are only discrete letters; stretched and skewed, elastic and malleable as meaning itself.

"There are many different histories in the world, in both art and politics, and we often see things in the current moment, yet have no idea what lies beneath. One language is always turning into another, one generation is always rising and another falling, there is no still moment. I am trying to express this flux– this constant shifting of one thing over another, like a veil over the moment itself."

Argue's work has been the subject of numerous solo exhibitions including at the Richard Heller Gallery, Santa Monica, and in New York, Edelman Arts and Haunch of Venison. Most recently, two of his paintings were commissioned for the lobby of One World Trade Center in Manhattan. His work is held in the collections of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Walker Art Center, Weisman Art Museum, and numerous corporate and private collections Argue has been the recipient of multiple awards including a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant (1995) and the Rome Prize (1997).

NATO A ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA, ma ormai facente base a New York, l'artista Doug Argue ha alle spalle una carriera trentennale, culminata con un'impressionante raccolta di opere astratte realizzate con tecniche miste e in formati diversi. Il suo approccio compositivo si estende alla costruzione spaziale così come alla rappresentazione figurativa, in una creazione artistica che evoca in maniera lirica metafore e riferimenti storico-artistici al passato e al presente.

Nelle sue opere più recenti, orchestrazioni fluide di forme biomorfiche e figure geometriche, inserite tra fasce gestuali spontanee di colore, vengono applicate su profondità e superfici pittoriche diverse, facendo così pensare al movimento, all'instabilità e al passare del tempo. Parte integrante del vocabolario delle forme di Argue, gli stencil di lettere sparse, generati al computer, si disperdono su questi campi illusionistici a formare il loro cosmo lessicale.

Ricavati da classici letterari come Moby-Dick o i sonetti del poeta duecentesco Petrarca, i testi atomizzati di Argue sono ispirati da fenomeni psicolinguistici e scientifici. L'artista esplora l'astrazione sintatticamente: paragrafi, frasi e parole si compongono e si scompongono gli uni negli altri, finché non sono che lettere separate; stirate e distorte, elastiche e malleabili come il significato stesso.

"Vi sono molte storie diverse al mondo, nell'arte come nella politica, e spesso noi vediamo le cose nel momento presente, però non abbiamo idea di cosa ci sia sotto. Una lingua si trasforma di continuo in un'altra, una generazione è in continua ascesa e un'altra è in caduta, non c'è un momento di quiete. Io sto cercando di esprimere questo flusso, questo continuo spostarsi di una cosa sull'altra, come un velo sopra il momento stesso."

Ad Argue sono state dedicate svariate mostre personali, tra cui si ricordano quella organizzata dalla Richard Heller Gallery di Santa Monica e le due mostre allestite presso le gallerie newyorchesi Edelman Arts e Haunch of Venison. Recentemente, due dei suoi quadri sono stati commissionati per l'atrio del One World Trade Center a Manhattan. Le sue opere si trovano nelle collezioni del Minneapolis Institute of Arts, del Walker Art Center, del Weisman Art Museum, e in numerose collezioni appartenenti a società e a privati. Argue ha vinto svariati premi, tra cui una borsa di studio della Pollock-Krasner Foundation (1995) e il Rome Prize (1997).

Doug Argue in his studio, 2015

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

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P. 13: Gentile Bellini, *Procession in the Piazza San Marco*. By permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Venice. Photo: Cameraphoto Arte, Venice

P. 18, left: Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*. Courtesy, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

P. 18, right: Composite X-ray, Titian, *Venus with a Mirror*. Courtesy, National Gallery of Art, Washington DC

P. 19: Titian, *Pietà*. By permission of the Ministero per i Beni e le Attività Culturali, Venice. Photo: Alinari/Art Resource, NY

Opposite: COSA MENTALE, 2015 (detail)

Front & back cover: CALLE, 2015 (detail)

Inside front cover & page 1: TIME AND TIME AGAIN, 2015 (detail)