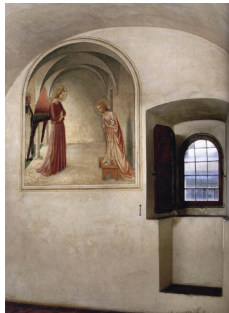


# APPARITIONS

By Fares Chalabi

1



Fra Angelico paints apparitions. In the *Annunciation* (1442) depicted in the third cell of the Convent of San Marco, the frame is placed in such a way that it cuts the wall into spherical triangles. The actual spherical triangle on the upper left side is taken back into the pictorial space. The same applies on the upper right spherical triangles. In that way the architectural structure in the

pictorial space reproduces the actual architectural structure of the cell. This duplicating technique reaches a point of indiscernibility in the wall separating the Angel and Mary, which seems to recess into the background of the pictorial space while actually being the physical wall of the cell in real space. The indiscernibility between the actual image - the wall of the cell- and the virtual image -the wall in the painting- transfigures the void separating the two figures into an Apparition. This void acquires a force of presence, an aura, that makes it seem to be now infinitely approachable in the actual dimension and yet unreachable in the virtual-pictorial dimension<sup>1</sup>. The auratic space

ends up contaminating the cell with its powerful presence and turns it into the place that can receive the Annunciation. With Fra Angelico the power of the apparitional is hence at the service of the Annunciation and the other world, the world of the beyond, the apparitional structure is that which gives presence to this other dimension, the beyond becoming present here and preparing for the event of the Word that will become Flesh. Indeed it is at the moment of the Annunciation that Mary conceives the Son of Man and hence the divine sphere comes into contact with our actual worldly sphere<sup>2</sup>.

2

To have an apparition we need then to have an image that is perceived simultaneously as the actual image that it is and the virtual double that it is supposed to be in the pictorial space. Yet, this apparitional structure can be put at the service of the world rather than at the service of the other world. Daniele Genadry proposes a number of paintings that can be qualified as apparitional paintings carving a place for believing in our world, in this actual world<sup>3</sup>. The general plastic solution sustaining these apparitional paintings consists in making indiscernable the actual ambient light of the room - where the paintings are hung - with the luminosity of the pictorial space. These paintings don't need to be inscribed into an actual space, duplicating the architectural elements of that space as in the apparitions of Fra Angelico, but, by taking light itself as what sustains the apparition, they are able to generate the apparition in any given space. The privilege of the cell, of the sanctuary, of the place where the apparition took place, is in this way scattered all over the planet: any place can now be the place of an apparition, but of an apparition that belongs to and sanctifies this world. The process of sanctification of the world will unfold fragment by fragment, place by place, the world coming forth in some of these fragments as an apparition. If a mountain at sunset, the flickering surface of the sea, or

a water fall can have a power of presence, beauty, it is because they burst out, at times, as apparitions- as images that seem to be there in their full actuality and yet open on some imaginary virtual double: a mountain at sunset, bathed in a pink-orange light, seems to become a pure optical apparition and yet it is massively standing there. Angels sometimes come in the shape of mountains<sup>4</sup> as mountains themselves burst out as apparitions. In other words, the world itself, in some moments of grace, reaches the apparitional plane, the plane of the Angels, and seem to be startled into Life<sup>5</sup>. At these moments we are left speechless, with the apparition having the power to suspend our inner monologue<sup>6</sup>, and to open on contemplation. In the state of contemplation the apparition comes forth as a whole and constitutes itself fully in front of our eyes: Angels never appear in pieces but always as a whole - one cannot make a close up of an Angel, focus on one of its parts, nor compose an apparition<sup>7</sup>. The apparitional paintings of Genadry are therefore not compositions<sup>8</sup>. but rather modulations of light allowing the whole painted motif to appear in front of us either in a flash or as a progressive coming forth.

3

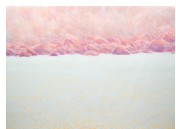
If one of the tasks of art is to make us believe again in our world, if this task has its urgency today, it is because our epoch has produced a counterfeit of our world, a world made of clichés<sup>9</sup>, quick-ready-to-consume images, the world itself becoming confused with these mass-produced images. In such a world- the world at the age of technology where communication happens at the speed of light and where henceforth everything arrives instantaneously without the need to depart, annunciation itself becomes impossible<sup>10</sup>. In such a counterfeit world everything is already seen before it is encountered, any presence being already covered by its cybernetic double, the Metaverse. In such a world an aesthetics of presence<sup>11</sup> is a call to resist the proliferation of the counterfeits and the Reality Labs that sustain them.

4

To resist, Genadry wrestles fragments of time from beneath the instantaneous communication systems and the proliferation of the clichés. Working against the immediate photographic image and the never-ending feed of electronic images, Genadry's apparitional approach consists in breaking these images open to give them a power of presence. In the *Glow* (2014) for example, an event is being captured - the moment where light flashes into one's eyes causing them to turn away. The apparitional structure of the painting raises this shocking event into presence making it available for the viewer to dwell upon and contemplate. With this arrangement the singular paradoxical event gains duration - the fact that we can't see when being blinded, that when faced with a flash of light we can only have a memory of that event, is overcome by making such an event available and turning what usually can only be grasped as a memory flash into an actual durable perception. In *Light Fall* (2017) the figure itself, a waterfall, becomes light, and by being raised into presence, the movement of the water falling turns into a never-ending fall. While a photograph would only capture an instant of such a movement, the pictorial arrangement makes it such that this instant seems to eternally flow. *Blind Light* (2017) is a painting depicting the photograph itself rather than simply making a painting from a photograph. The photograph being depicted is a burned photograph due to the failure of the photographic machine to capture the waterfall. Genadry brings to presence the overexposed white trace, the moment light has burned the photographic plate and by that startles this moment back into life making the burn reach a ever-starting phosphorescence. In *The Fall* (2015), we face an overexposed valley, the white surface appears to cover many rocks, pebbles,



plants, while actually it is completely empty. The reconstruction of the experience of the glaring valley as a presence makes it such that one can now stare into that glare coupling the time seeing to the time of the apparition of the figures from the white background - the more one stares the more one sees details coming forth from the glaring surface. The relation between the virtual and the actual consists here in coupling the actual contraction of the viewer's iris with the viewing of some images that seem to be constituted by such contraction, giving these images the feel of apparitions or more specifically of a mirage - if the viewer looks away what he would have seen will disappear. *Shimmer (Cap Canaille)* (2022) uses this technique to capture the flickering surface of the sea. What comes to presence, in this case, are the flickers of water. The quick vanishing rhythm of the flickers appearing and disappearing is captured in an overall temporality and duration that brings all the flickers to appear together progressively. Their fast rhythm contrasts with the slow progressive apparition coming forth from the white glowing surface.



5  
These paintings bring to presence fleeting moments but also inject a specific temporality in each of the different motifs: to make a blinding flash endure in time, to turn the movement of a water fall into a never ending flow, to bring back to the present an instant captured on a burned photograph, to couple the time of the mirage to the time of the viewing eye, to contrast the fast rhythm of a flickering sea with the slow coming forth of their apparition. To inject time in the hectic course of the worldly events saves us from the mechanical repetition of its counterfeits<sup>12</sup>, and by that we can say each one of these paintings, taken alone, can be viewed as a temporal capsule where the beauty of this world can be

contemplated for a while. On the other hand, when a number of these paintings are hung together they delimit a volume of light that bath everything that enters that luminous space into the apparitional dimension. If Genadry's paintings seem to be empty landscapes it remains that whoever observes the room where they stand will start to see the viewers, objects, clothe, etc. bathed in a startling luminosity. The paintings recede into the background and emit a strange light that seems to give presence to anything that is present in the room. In this way the delimited volume of light reorients the gaze towards the here and now and make us present to our present.

6  
By reorienting our gaze towards this world-our world, by making us see this world as a fragile apparition, and by injecting duration into the hectic course of time, Genadry reenacts a way of seeing proper to the context of the Lebanese Civil War. There, people became accustomed to seeing things as always on the verge of disappearance and destruction, to seeing things in times of urgency without having the time to see, as well as to seeing this world as covered by all forms of mass media coverage and counterfeits. Genadry's paintings address this situation by requiring a certain way of seeing, a *bittersweet* sight, as she calls it. This bittersweet modality captures and gives some time to what might disappear, even if this time will only last for the time of an apparition: we see the beauty of the mountains, the beauty of the sea, a flowing water fall, or the whole of nature as if, or maybe, for the last time - after all we live in a time where a nuclear threat or an ecological disaster loom over our world. The harmonious unity of man and the world was the promise of the technological breakthroughs of the beginning of the past century, a promise that Monet emulated, among others, in trying to recreate the sunlight in his paintings thanks to his passion for nature and the science of color. It remains that the industrial capitalist

process has missed its promise of harmony and the realization of an earthly paradise and has left us with a destroyed nature, wars, and a counterfeit world. The luminism of Genadry can be opposed to the colorism of Monet, with the light characterizing our epoch being a light that makes our world appear as on the verge of an imminent, but not ascertained, disappearance. To show this world in its fragile, shimmering, apparitional beauty is one of the ways to resist such a possible outcome, an outcome fueled by the eco-geo-political escalations and urgencies. In this way, these paintings are untimely<sup>13</sup>; they are against their time and their historical inscription, because they are able to bend the imperatives of the epoch in which they are inscribed in order to propose an experience that transfigures these imperatives<sup>14</sup>. These untimely paintings emerge out of history<sup>15</sup>; they oppose the presence of the world to the urgencies of history, and in that are a reminder that one doesn't only struggle in history but also against History<sup>16</sup>. Today, our historical condition requires that we build a place from which we can believe in this world, and it is therefore our historical condition itself that demands that we step out of History into the suspended time of pure presence, into the time of the apparition. Maybe, for the lasting time of the apparition, we will be able to be present to the pure presence of the world.

7

Time, is a doubling structure correlating two images that can be actual or virtual. In the *déjàvu* we perceive in the same time the actual image and its virtual double, hence we see how Time doubles the actual with its virtual image and brings them together<sup>17</sup>. In *déjà-vu* we experience the crystal of time. In the crystal of time, we see how the present is virtually falling in the past, by constituting a virtual past image, and opening the course of time towards the future by adding these doubles to the actual present images<sup>18</sup>. In that we see the instant as it is unfolding and not anymore as flowing in physical time. It is this doubling power of Time that allows the

passage of time, yet Time as such doesn't pass, because for it to pass we will need another Time that will correlate its image to its virtual double, which would lead to an infinite regress. Time as a never passing structure is apprehended as an absolute present, the present that never passes, the eternal Now. This eternal present needs to be distinguished from the passing present: the absolute present is the pure actuality abstracted from any particular actual image and any particular virtual image, while the passing present is one particular actual image coupled with the passage of time. Schopenhauer calls this absolute present the manifestation of Life itself - try to intuit the universe as always there while everything else is passing by<sup>19</sup>. Presence consists in an image whose virtual and actual dimensions are indistinguishable - some call it aura or charisma like when someone feels the presence of something. An apparition is a form of presence pertaining to the visual field. Apparitions are experienced when the actual image is fused with its virtual double, where hence the actual and virtual visual dimensions become indistinguishable - like the Angel appearing to Mary that is a virtual creature and yet present here in the actual world. Eternal presence consists in coupling the absolute present with some particular presence, in that the abstraction from any particular image is coupled with some presence - Angels are said to be eternal presences, the eternal acts of God that never fade and yet are neither virtual creatures nor actual ones<sup>20</sup>. Pure presence on the other hand will give presence to the absolute present, hence it will consist in an image where the indistinguishability between the actual and the virtual dimensions gives body to the present that never fades - like when one looks at an eclipse and feels that time has stopped. Genadry makes pure presence present: hence to the absolute present (abstraction from any images) she gives presence (indistinguishability of the virtual and actual), in the shape of an apparition (indistinguishability of virtual and actual light). In that we can rigorously say that Genadry's paintings bring to a point of indiscernibility the highest abstraction, the

absolute present, with the most concrete figuration, the actual present light bathing the room. Pure presence is the reverse of eternal presence, it is the presence that sanctifies the world, that make us believe in this world.

8

Beauty is an image that is freed from the determinism of physical and historical time, such an image stands on its own and doesn't illustrate a concept nor is subsumed in a causal chain - like when we say that a prisoner *a fait la belle*, did the beautiful one, i.e. he escaped. Given that the Absolute Present, Presence, Eternal Presence, and Pure Presence present an image that is subtracted from the Course of Time the images that are presented in such temporal configurations are said to be beautiful - a mountain has a strong Presence, it looks like an Apparition, and is apprehended in a Pure Present as if it escaped the order of Nature. Beauty relates then to Liberty, even Kant had an obscure intuition of that when he said that Beauty is the *free* play of the faculties.

- 1, 4 Jalal Toufic, *What Were You Thinking?* (Berlin: DAAD, 2011); *The Aura: an Approach*.
- 2 We can read here the book by Didi-Huberman for an erudite study of Fra Angelico's painting, even if my approach consist more in showing the constructive mode of an apparition rather than an explanation of the paintings of Fra Angelico. Georges Didi-Huberman and Angelico, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance & Figuration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).
- 3 "The modern fact is that we no longer believe in this world. We do not even believe in the events which happen to us, love, death, as if they only half concerned us...The link between man and the world is broken. Henceforth, this link must become an object of belief: it is the impossible which can only be restored within a faith. Belief is no longer addressed to a different or transformed world." Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 171.
- 5 Jalal Toufic, *What Was I Thinking?* (New York: Sternberg Press, 2018); *Thinking Across Lapses of Consciousness if not Being*.
- 6 Jalal Toufic, *Undeserving Lebanon* (Forthcoming Books, 2007); *To Pray or not to Pray*.
- 7 Toufic, *What Was I Thinking?*; *Thinking Across Lapses of Consciousness if not Being*.
- 8 Contemplation relates here to beauty as presence, as a pure apparitional power, rather than relating to the Kantian free play of the faculties, a free play sustained by the apprehension of the different pieces of some composition. Emmanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Paragraphe 9 .
- 9 Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 21.
- 10 Jalal Toufic, *(Vampires): An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, Rev Exp (Post-Apollo Press, 2003), 205.
- 11 Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (London; New York: Continuum, 2004), 52.
- 12 Toufic considers that prayer is what injects time and save us from repetition. In our interpretation we have then the following sequence: the apparition, or Angel, suspends the course of time and the inner

monologue and hence open on contemplation, and in that suspended space-time a new temporality opens up, the time of the prayer which is the time where we contemplate the apparition as such. Apparition, contemplation and prayer allow us to step out of the hectic course of time. Toufic, *Undeserving Lebanon; To Pray or not to Pray*.

- 13 Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Continuum, 2002), 109.
- 14 “History thus appears as the act by which reactive forces take possession of culture or divert its course in their favour. The triumph of reactive forces is not an accident in history but the principle and meaning of “universal history.” Deleuze, 139.
- 15 “Instead of this universe of “signification” (psycho- logical, social, functional), we must try, then, to construct a world both more solid and more immediate. Let it be first of all by their presence that objects and gestures establish themselves, and let this presence continue to prevail over whatever explanatory theory that may try to enclose them in a system of references, whether emotional, sociological, Freudian or metaphysical.” Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 21.
- 16 “This is why Nietzsche can think that nihilism is not an event in history but the motor of the history of man as universal history. Negative, reactive and passive nihilism: for Nietzsche one and the same history is marked out by Judaism, Christianity, the reformation, free thought, democratic and socialist ideology etc. Up until the last man.” Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 152.
- 17 Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer, 8th ed. (New York: Zone Books, 2005), 90.
- 18 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlison and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), 68.
- 19 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation. Volume 1*, trans. Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway, First paperback edition (Cambridge New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Paragraph 54.
- 20 Jalal Toufic, (*Vampires*): *An Uneasy Essay on the Undead in Film*, Rev Exp (Post-Apollo Press, 2003), 200-215; Kneeling Angel with Mountainous Wings (aka Toward a Title for a Gibran Watercolor Left Untitled).