

Antonio Salemme, Easton Irregular, February 2014

The last major retrospective of Antonio Salemme's work was organized twenty years ago by Karl Stirner for the State Theatre. A retrospective is on view now at the Sigal Museum until April 6th, 2014. Treat yourself to a rare opportunity and see this thoughtful selection of Salemme's sculptures, paintings, photographs and drawings that represent only a portion of the prolific and long-living artist's total production.

After a full career in New York, Paris, and early years abroad serving in Italy and Austria during WW I, Salemme indentified himself as an Easton artist, living and working in a converted schoolhouse in Williams Township, focusing on sculpture and painting. A handful of lovely images shot on the property by Easton photographer Ed Eckstein accompany self-portraits Salemme painted in his youth, presenting us with two very different personas: the first, a youth full of bright energy and confidence, and much later, a full-blown artist radiating solidity and vigor.

Today, the Antonio Salemme Foundation is managed by Joseph Skrapits, who catalogues, archives and arranges for the work to be available to the largest possible audience. Skrapits observes that following Salemme's development is a "road map of the 20th century." He emigrated from Italy at the turn of the century; his natural talents were recognized and nurtured in the 'teens in Boston (the center of the art world in the early part of the 20th century); WW I landed him in Rome where he absorbed classical sculpture; Paul Robeson modeled for him during the height of the Harlem Renaissance; he was in France in the 30s during the onset of Modernism; got swept into spiritualism, Vedanta and meditation during the 60s and 70s; participated in the New York 80s figurative painting boom. Making commissioned portraits for Portraits Inc. in New York secured a comfortable lifelong income yet marked him as a sell out to many Modern artists, critics and collectors. Herein lies the paradox of Antonio Salemme's career: Sculpting classically came so easily for him that he could capture the essence of a sitter without calling attention to the material, yet Modernism demanded that artists "make it new" through changing their method. By not altering his three-step process of portrait making, modeling in clay by hand, fine-tuning a copy plaster with a file, and then casting the final copy in bronze, he was stylistically out of date. Contrast him to Richard Serra flinging molten metal at the corners of rooms, Dan Flavin arranging florescent lights, Robert Smithson working outside the gallery altogether: they were the sculptors that became famous.

Yet now that Postmodernism has come to the fore, audiences are ready to fully absorb Antonio Salemme's contribution. Instead of the Modernist rally to "be a hero," Postmodernism asks artists to "make a copy" and "be a team player." From the very beginning of his painting career, Salemme synthesized the multiple styles and motifs drawn from Matisse, Monet, Magritte, Picasso, and Cézanne in a loose, random and seemingly oblivious way, and I'm naming just a handful of influences. Under the current art taste, Salemme would be admired for avoiding a single style that reflects his personality. His painting recalls the

masters with a twist in the same way that say, John Currin, a postmodern painter who baffles and entertains us with provocative nudes in a retro High Mannerist style, makes us also think of Edward Hopper, Rembrandt and Albrecht Dürer.

Salemme's painting *Green Tomatoes* delights with mystery: a folding screen is painted in three closely related but different greens, creating the illusion of a laterally measured background that hides something. Mingling bits of Matisse (for color choice and the use of a painted screen); Cezanne (for careful attention to fruit); Morandi (for being off center and emphasizing stillness); and Picasso (for bold lines and composition), *Green Tomatoes* reminds us of what we know about art history as it challenges us to discover the seams between the disparate styles. René Magritte informs Salemme's *Imaginary Painting #15* through the use of mirroring. The three-part painting breaks into conflicting literal or figurative "views," as there are either two women, one reflected woman or two paintings of women in the composition. Humorously, the subject or subjects seem shocked and uncomfortable with either the sliver of space allotted to each or by their own self-recognition. The tension is framed and extended by being juxtaposed and compared to a Van Gogh-style vase of flowers.

I am running out of room but I must talk about *Reverie*, a lush, summery rear view of a woman leaning back on her bent arm in a chair. Broadly speaking, Salemme is contrasting Cubism and the flattening of forms with Classicism and the rounding of forms. But more pointedly, he's making a visual pun with the word "field." Hyper-colorful, floating, impressionist shadows, "fields" of color vibrate and hover over a garden corner, the figure's arms and neck, and a garden table, both flattening and creating space. *Reverie* contrasts gazing out at an actual country field with Color Field Painting, a branch of Abstract Expressionism that was prevalent during the 50s and 60s and that was revisited with Neo-Expressionism in the 80s. Hans Hoffman, Clement Greenberg and Mark Rothko would have got the joke—and laughed along with Julian Schnabel and Eric Fischl. And that's the beauty of Antonio Salemme's best work: he unifies art history from an informed and playful point of view. The absence of ego and a single, defining style may have hurt his reputation in earlier eras, but now the larger art community is ready for him.