



Domenico Beccafumi, *Saint Michael Expels the Rebel Angels*, c. 1528. Oil on panel. Church of S. Niccolo at Carmine, Siena. Courtesy Monte dei Paschi di Siena. Photo: Fabio Lensini.

Reflected Light

In Siena with Beccafumi

David Reed

Several years ago, I searched out all of Domenico Beccafumi's paintings in the churches and museums of Siena. One of the most difficult to find was the *Coronation of the Virgin* in the small church of Santo Spirito. The painting was dirty and badly lit, hanging high up, seemingly neglected, in a side chapel. I remember I had to wait while someone finished mopping the floor before I could go in. The painting was very dark and its muted tones reminded me of Rothko's late work. It is divided by a horizon in the center and, as in the late Rothko, one's emotions sweep toward that distant horizon. Beccafumi (c. 1484–1551) was the Steven Spielberg of his time, with his imaginative monsters and narrative élan, but this painting was that and something different as well. It has been cleaned and was magnificently displayed in Siena's recent tribute to Beccafumi.¹ Below Christ and the Virgin, two male saints are reading from the same book, their heads crossing the horizon between heaven and earth. To the left, Mary Magdalene

looks toward a vision of the Coronation in the sky. To the right is another female saint, Catherine of Alexandria, in profile, staring to our left. For a long time, I tried to figure out what this figure was doing. She's holding a book, and what could be a martyr's palm. Or it could be a pen. At first I thought she was writing. Her expression is intense, but her eyes are unfocused. I've decided that she is drawing the Magdalene. Beccafumi is showing us his kind of knowledge. One understands not just from writing and reading, but also from seeing and recording the appearance of the natural world, which looks to God and leads us to Him.

Beccafumi is obsessed with observing how light reveals the world: silhouettes, highlights, atmospheric perspective, sunrise and sunset, shadows and reflected light. The sense of light in Beccafumi's paintings, though spectacular, is from these natural effects observed and exaggerated. In his *Nativity* in San Martino, for example, it might seem at first that the Christ Child is emanating a supernatural light, but in fact, the angels encircled above his head have caused a zone of exaggerated reflections. The Madonna holds up a white cloth between herself and the Christ Child. On the side of the cloth toward her, blue, magenta, and red are reflected from her garments. The Christ Child floats within these colors over a rock of liquid reflections.

Beccafumi is one of the first artists, if not the very first, to use reflected light systematically. Often the reflected light is red, as in the reflections on God's shirt and sleeve in the *Fall of the Rebel Angels* from San Nicollò al Carmine. This reflected red gives an electric energy to God's gesture, striking a color tone that runs down the whole center of the painting. God's colors are primary, red and blue, and turn into Saint Michael's secondary colors of violet, purple, and turquoise. There is reflected light in heaven but not in hell. In the *Descent of Christ into Limbo* from the Pinacoteca, the red cloak of the saved patriarch is reflected in Christ's blue robe in the center of the painting, unifying the composition and emphasizing the connection between Christ and the figures he is saving. In the tondo of the *Holy Family with St. John and Donor*, there are two wonderful strokes of blue pigment to show the reflected light on the yellow cushion between Christ's legs. My favorite example of reflected light is in the magnificent *Annunciation*. One of Beccafumi's few paintings from outside Siena, it comes from a church in the small town of Sarteano. For many years I wanted to see this painting but had been discouraged from going by reports that it was dirty and badly lit. In the show it was very well lit, and the color was spectacular. A strange, dark brown cloth, a cape of some sort, comes out from under the Madonna's dress and across the floor in the foreground of the painting. For a long time I couldn't figure out, beautiful as it was, why this cloth was there. Then I noticed that in its darkest shadows are flickering reflected highlights of fire red, rose, and yellow from the angel's dress. This reflected light is a spectacular effect, unifying the painting, pulling light across the deep spatial recession and void in the center of the composition. For Sieneese painters the problem was always how to integrate the local colors, to keep away from the decorative. Beccafumi uses reflected light to unify the color and to make each painting a total color composition, an innovative addition to the Sieneese tradition.



Domenico Beccafumi, *Annunciation*, 1546, Oil on panel. Church of S. Martino and S. Vittoria, Sarteano. Courtesy Monte dei Paschi di Siena. Photo: Fabio Lensini.

Beccafumi's paintings do not have the kind of anxiety and moodiness that one would expect from such a late artist. They seem very full and quietly joyful, while using what they have learned from the past. In the late *Nativity*, Mary and Joseph are shown with the Christ Child in a moment of quiet contemplation while the kings and shepherds can be seen approaching from the distance. This is a very touching moment, one I haven't seen depicted often. The humility and pomp of religion will come, but only after this full moment of silence and contemplation. Beccafumi is thought of as being at the end of his tradition, but artists today can still learn a great deal from his work. Does this mean that his tradition is not yet over?

Beccafumi and His Time spread throughout all of Siena. Paintings were shown in a deconsecrated church near the Pinacoteca. There were eight major paintings on altars along the nave, with many other paintings and several polychrome sculptures exhibited below. Drawings and prints were displayed in the Pinacoteca. The inlaid marble pavements of the Cathedral were uncovered. The frescoes in the oratory of San Bernardino are freshly cleaned and finally open to the public. The frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico looked better than ever, and the other secular frescoes in the private Palazzo Bindi Sergardi were open by appointment. What would it be like to have frescoes by Beccafumi on the ceiling of your card room? □

1. Domenico Beccafumi and His Time, Siena, Pinacoteca Nazionale (until Sept. 16); S. Agostino; Oratory of San Bernardino; Cathedral; Hospital of Santa Maria Della Scala; Palazzo Pubblico; Palazzo Bindi Sergardi (until November 4).

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