

Agnieszka Gratzka on Isabella Ducrot

AF artforum.com/print/reviews/202306/isabella-ducrot-90609

Conceived as altarpieces for the baroque church of San Giuseppe delle Scalze a Pontecorvo in Isabella Ducrot's hometown of Naples, the three larger-than-life works on paper presented as part of the artist's show "*Il Miracoloso*" (The Miraculous) sat somewhat awkwardly on the walls of a white cube dwarfed by their imposing scale, their lower edges curving out to rest on the gallery's polished concrete floor. And yet the tension arising from their sacred subject matter now being shown in a profane space was productive. The triptych, whose display at T293 replicated that at Le Scalze, juxtaposed three miraculous episodes drawn from the New Testament: the Annunciation, the Adoration of the Magi, and the Descent of the Holy Spirit.

With their contrasting flat planes of vividly colored, patterned Japanese paper stuck onto a fortified paper base, these works—the Annunciation and the Adoration especially—evoke Nabi paintings. The barely sketched faces and hands in those patches that had been left blank have a beguiling tenderness and childlike sweetness. Outlined against a starry night sky framed by a gothic arch, the sinuous figures of *Annunciazione*, 2021, nod to the protagonists in Simone Martini and Lippo Memmi's celebrated 1333 painting of the same subject in the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, the starting point of a whimsical essay Ducrot published in 2018, "*La stoffa a quadri*" (The Checkered Cloth). In "*Il Miracoloso*," the artist reinterprets the humble checkered pattern of the cloth lining the angel's mantle in Martini and Memmi's Annunciation and makes it her own: The motif features in her rendering of the amorphous space that separates the angel Gabriel from Mary, crops up again in the cape sported by one of the adoring Magi, and decorates the setting for the dancing figures in all six of the medium-scale works in the "*Discesa*" cycle, 2023. These latter works, which are variants on the theme of the Descent of the Holy Spirit, were made especially for this exhibition and depict in multiple the theme of the final part of the main triptych.

The Descent of the Holy Spirit is undoubtedly less familiar than either the Annunciation and the Adoration of the Magi, which are among the most recognizable and oft-depicted biblical stories. As told in the Acts, the Holy Spirit bequeathed to the Apostles and other followers of Christ the gift of speaking in tongues in Jerusalem during the Feast of Weeks, Shavuot, a Jewish harvest festival; the gentile equivalent of this celebration is Pentecost, so named because it occurs fifty days after Easter. The work's setting on this festive occasion may account for Ducrot's depiction of the worshippers dancing with outstretched arms in a gesture of thanksgiving in her highly original take on the New Testament narrative.

Whereas the flames in the vast *Discesa dello spirito santo* (Descent of the Holy Spirit), 2021, recall burning candles, torches, or even matches, those emanating from the Holy Spirit in the six smaller companion pieces suggest, if anything, falling petals—recalling the rose petals that to this day can be seen raining down over congregations gathered in

churches on the morning of the Pentecost, symbolic of the “tongues of fire” that endowed the Apostles with the uncanny ability to speak to everyone in their own language and marked the beginning of the Christian church in the biblical narrative. These six framed works, displayed in two rows mounted onto a freestanding exhibition panel facing the triptych, are marked by a process of growing abstraction: The Holy Spirit himself, the hero of this particular story, is present in a futuristic white shape, more like an airplane than a dove.