

ANTHONY FISHER

In Anthony Fisher's great slabs of meat and flayed sheep there is a vitality that we don't expect to find in dead things. He swivels the flesh so that it shimmers in the light. He gives it a space in the open air, against the greenery of a Tuscan landscape, seen through an arcade that opens onto an intensely blue sky. And he elevates the dead object from its lowly status by giving it a high position on a pedestal, demanding that we view it as if it were a fine china bowl or a portrait bust. Meat, raw meat, is a metaphor for the artist himself, his pressing need to understand conflict, violence and aggression in human and animal life.

There is something intensely Mediterranean in what Anthony Fisher has chosen to paint and how he has painted it. His concentration on everyday things suggests the *bodegones*, those Spanish arrangements of vegetables, dead meat, or fish that attracted Sanchez Cotan and Luis Melendez in the 17th century. Like them, Fisher has been drawn to these items for their formal interest. But unlike them he does not seek to give an elaborate virtuoso display of descriptive truth. Meat is merely an armature on which to hang paint. He layers, scrapes away, layers again. Doubt and the drive to embody an emotional state compel him to a compulsive series of corrections. Under each picture are seven or so others, discarded, reorganized and reconfigured. His method is much like an archaeologist in reverse. Rather than digging into the earth to find the treasure, he finds it only by elaboration, by a continuous growth and evolution. 'Like rings of a tree,' he says, running his finger across the bumpy paint-encrusted top of the canvas.

Spanish painters knew something about painting as a way out of compulsion, anxiety and fear. Picasso, painting in Royan in 1939 remarked that his sheep's heads and bloodied joints were a form of magic, of painting what he didn't have---light, coffee, vegetables, meat and hope. He thought of Goya's sheep's heads and joints, done to understand death and the mutability of the flesh. It is in this long line of artists who seek to create order out of the chaos of war, deprivation and internal questioning, that Fisher has located himself. "Does meat have a soul?" he writes. How are we to think of the paradox of meat, this dead flesh, that is packaged, bought and consumed with no further thought. How can we explain the paradox of its initial energy and its subsequent inertia and our participation in that change?

It has been said that nothing cultural dies. It is reinterpreted in the context of one's own time and place. That is surely true of the reinterpretations in the present of the meaning of flesh as meat, meat as flesh. Over time, Fisher has come closer to its thinginess. His work is bolder, more assured, and in his circuitous journey of research he has gained a deeper understanding of what it is that he sees and wants to say. The evidence for this is in the paintings of the flayed sheep whose titles suggest both the human use of the animal and its religious connotations. The lamb is an *Agnus Dei*, Lamb of God, God incarnate according to Christian theology. It is a lamb onto which blame can be laid, a *Mea Culpa*. But we should be wary of being too reductive, because it is also a meal, a *Feast*, though possibly a sacrificial meal. The strain of muscles, the twisted teeth and the bones of the mouth all document suffering. Yet the readings are multiple and the weight of the painting guides us away from theology by bringing the viewer back to the very materiality of what we see. It is paint on canvas, heavily worked in an impasto that emphasizes the shape and weight of the animal itself, as though fully present in our own space.

As subject matter, meat rolls out a continuous association of meanings: of flesh, of carnality, of the next meal, of the spiritual dimension of sacrifice. In the painter's hands it comes alive in its transformation from inert lump to shimmering, intense color, and in this single thing, this *carne* that is both flesh and spirit, we register both the everyday and the extraordinary. The primitive and aggressive on one side, and civilized achievement and tranquility on the other. These paintings work on both registers. They are perplexing because they shift back and forth in meaning from dinner to sacrifice. And they are satisfying in the allure that the object offers in the aesthetic pleasure of the manipulations of paint, light and space. That is a lot to ask of a solid piece of flesh.

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