

## **Io malcontenti**

### **John Barbour**

Associazione Viafarini, Milano

Marz 25, 2008

Consider the photographic image John Barbour has chosen to represent this showing of new works made in Italy. It's a scene the artist recorded of the wall of building at an intersection, a crossroad, in the Via Dei Malcontenti in Florence. There are the universal signposts – No Parking, No Standing – small rectangular plaques suspended above our heads on metal poles. The wall itself is decorated with graffiti...there are anonymous tags and a spray-painted text, which reads: IO E TE TRE METRA SOPRA IL CIELO. It's ambiguous...is it a story of aspiration to rise above a world of despair? You and I, the reader and the writer, the viewer and artist – linked together three metres above the sky. Or are the clouds above us? Are 'we' a dichotomy? Can hell and heaven be so close? Or does it simply reflect a longing to get high? The concrete reaching for the aether?

It seems that in Barbour's work there is an attempt to synthesise, to visually reconcile such contradictions...but this work does not presume a definitive solution. The motivation seems more to do with generating associations... perhaps personal, perhaps general... This is the generosity Barbour's work offers - and why it intrigues me. We are invited to feel free to engage, in our own way, with our own experiences - beyond words.

The artist begins with certain 'givens' -- things familiar and accessible - humble, economical materials - fabric, thread, found objects, ink and, of course, space. In a preparatory process, Barbour has deconstructed threads from sheets of silk. These 'selvedges' become the thin 'streamers' linking small rectangular shapes to the gallery floor. The Japanese prints on these found pieces of fabric are abstract, cloud-like or as black as the night sky. Out of our reach, they are less like the prohibition signs embedded in our streets and more reminiscent of the spirit-elevating kite.

Another work seems to occupy an indeterminate space. Is it a painting? One liberated from its traditional framework? A Rorschach-like object reflects its own construction in a cruciform of creases, suggesting the crossroad, the mirror, and the window. The surface is fetishised through an obsessive elaboration of hanging coloured threads. The Rorschach is the sign of the mind, of the inner space - typically abstract and suggestive. Barbour describes this object as a 'grotto or a curse'. The dominant colour is a dark and mossy green, at once malevolent and beautiful. The tattered edge exaggerates the textile quality. It's worth noting that textile and text have common etymological roots in the weaving of meaning. In Barbour's work, words occasionally appear...like mantras or prayers – or curses. Letter-forms are shaped with a deliberate, awkward difficulty, but also an intense concentration which defies the literal meaning – and the ideal. The artist does not dictate. The work is not didactic.

Likewise, Barbour's process does not necessarily assume an autonomous object. Works may layer or overlap, surrendering their individual autonomy – or not. Often, outcomes that have singular properties seem to attract each other - for the benefit of mutual aid. Perhaps they want to cooperate in the construction of a bigger picture - or for higher a purpose?

**Paul Hoban, Adelaide, March 2008**

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