Antonio Puri and Margo Allman: *Contrast*

Virginia M. da Costa, exhibition essay for Contrast,
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Chester County artists Margo Allman and Antonio Puri juxtapose their lives and work in their current exhibition, *Contrast* at the Serpentine Gallery in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Upon close inspection, what appears as diametrically opposed as their black and white outfits in their centrally placed catalogue portraits is much less so after an intensive interview with the two of them that I was privileged to conduct in August, 2011. It is a unique and rare experience to hear a living artist's story. Too often, viewers gaze upon an abstract canvas and wonder what they are supposed to see or what the artist felt at the time of creation. Both artists hope that the audience will be seduced by their obsessive markings, their pain, joy and sense of romance in a life worth living and find a sense of oneness and shared experience by the time they navigate the rooms of the gallery.

Perhaps the exhibition title *Contrast* is a misnomer. Allman and Puri are both abstract painters with observable differences in painting style and approach regardless of their chosen substrates – river stones, canvas, paper, wood, jute, or silk. According to Margo, their work is very similar in terms of a shared spiritual and classical approach to the material itself. The idea of contrast can be a literal definition when one considers the materials, colors chosen, subject or the manipulation of media but it can also delve into other meanings, many times undiscovered by casual observation. For Puri, art is a dance between time and timelessness, oneness with opposites and torn between two polar experiences. In art, this divergence is a tension between organic and geometric or figurative and nonfigurative. Tensions in his paintings create charges which make the individual works living organisms. This is the heart and essential spirit of *Contrast.*

Both artists are romantics; they want to find someone equally obsessed with their work which would be extremely fortunate and indeed nirvana in the words of Allman. Margo's ovoidal forms are repetitive shapes that echo the human and feminine mantra full of its own life within the universe, praising the mystery of beginnings, completion and endings. When she paints, it is an act of meditation; she physically moves around her studio in the manner of a performance artist while she creates the openings of her ovals, their direction, and their underlying energy source as she layers the multiple forms of a mystical ancestral egg. Her work is the creative force contained in a moment of time, ready to spring forth as it lies nearly quiescent but alive, very much alive. Each painting and rock stands alone as a unique work of art yet also contrasts, yields, and combines with the strings of Puri's abstract forms connecting to the microscopic or macroscopic perspective of the unseen world. He likes to express events such as the mitosis of cells and the birth or death of stars unseen except through mechanical means such as powerful microscopes or telescopes. Antonio uses strings in his art as an allegory of binding together as an expression of attachment. He also removes those same strings as metaphors for detachment whose negative trails and tracking in the acrylic medium remain as remnants of their past existence.

Contrast is about dual and non-dual existence, time and timelessness, the one and the many with special meaning for Allman and Puri. Both artists agree that the exhibition is a microcosm

of one painting divided into different aspects which is why they decided to embark on the exhibition together. Taken to a higher level of universality, each life is a painting whether it is expressed as the oval that has been the salient form of expression for Margo for many years or as the unseen made visible with deconstructed forms barely discernible in Antonio's compositions. Perhaps, as viewers walk through the Serpentine Gallery, they will recognize the ovals as complete forms that are self-contained as Allman does. As a former student of biochemistry, she sees science and technology as intuitive mechanisms for creative inspiration. The sensual energy of her art pulses with light and life just beneath the surface, layer upon layer in a colorful and light filled palette. Inherent in the paintings of Allman is her wish for viewers to break down the imagery seen in the compositions into the pure experience of self-exploration and self-realization so that they can feel some of the light and life that she does when she creates. Puri's palette is more subdued – a contrast to Allman's -- but it is nevertheless expressive of a similar theme. His is a darkness that speaks of deep space, endlessness, and a potential for life.

Each work bears a title with specific meaning to the artist rather than a common contemporary method used by artists in many galleries and museums of using *Untitled* to identify a work of art. For Allman and Puri, their titles give an essential clue to the viewer of what to expect. What completes the art is what exudes from the final product itself, that unseen but definite essence that affects the viewer's perception of the work. It is the ability to transcend the work from a wall into a larger consciousness -- that energy is essential for the art to become aware, to move and to live. For both Antonio and Margo, their art cannot experience totality unless the cycle of process, perception, and understanding is created and transcends into a higher consciousness like a drop that is absorbed back into the ocean of oneness.

When Margo works in her studio, she does not think about the reception of her art on the viewer. Her goal is to paint her forms over and over until they are imbued with a feeling of energy that she can feel once it is achieved. She hopes that a viewer will respond to this dynamism in some way. No work of art is allowed to leave the studio unless there is something to respond to. And if the life has been inadvertently extinguished, the canvas is blackened and put aside. She is not the only one to blacken a canvas whose life has been terminated for one reason or another. Antonio has done the same to certain canvases. He explains that black is the combination of all colors and is not death but a blotting out of what once was in order to become something new.

For Antonio, the viewer is the higher consciousness that witnesses his work and is where the process continues. The very philosophical Puri, explains that his art and Margo's art may be coming from a universal higher consciousness in the first place. What makes the art work, he explains, is the Indian concept of *drishti* and *darshan* which is explained as the idea of looking. Darshan is looking at a composition as an individual looking at one's own reaction to it whether as artist or as observer. Drishti is the ability of the work to look back at the artist and tell him what it needs. In other words, it is the ability of the higher consciousness to look at me through my work, he muses.

Artists Margo Allman and Antonio Puri are extremely courageous in showing their abstract works in an aesthetic atmosphere where most viewers want to see quickly and easily without much contemplation. They challenge, they mesmerize, they seduce their audience into contemplating, if only for a short time, their own visions of time, place, happiness, and strength

in their convictions in the nature of the universe. What I gained from my interview was a sense of who these artists are, what their goals are at present, their dreams for the future and an inside glimpse into their respective life stories. Puri says that he hasn't yet completed a painting and that maybe when he is dead, he will have finished one. He expresses parts of his story; our role as a viewer is to put some of his shattered pieces together to resonate with our spiritual convictions. Margo investigates the hidden rooms of her dreams, both conscious and subconscious, many times changing the direction of her work and finding new avenues of exploration. For both artists, the continual growth of their art and their ever-changing stories keep their imprints of destiny etched upon their canvases, scrolls and installations.

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