

**Aw, Phooey! *Il Ghirigoro* at Pio Pico, Los Angeles (curated by Francesco Tenaglia)**  
(Unpublished essay shortlisted for the 2020 International Awards for Art Criticism)

By Patrick J. Reed

*Author's note: the following text was written during the latter half of April 2020. Thus, it is a document specific to the early, uncertain days of the pandemic.*

*Il Ghirigoro* closed unexpectedly on March 14, 2020 due to complications from coronavirus but found a comfortable revival online for the remainder of its tenure at Pio Pico, Los Angeles. Other exhibitions curtailed by the shutdown did the same, but few were as primed for a second life, half-life, afterlife as this one. *Il Ghirigoro* was so well versed in reiteration that its passage to the digital realm seemed natural and obvious. *Il Ghirigoro* was so well versed in recursion that it became the subject of its own debate, over and above what its curator, Francesco Tenaglia, could have anticipated.

The exhibition was deceptively simple: a standard group show thoughtfully hung to afford the work of five artists ample space to emanate, but behind the conventional pretense churned contractions and expansions, cycles and spinoffs that, had they been mapped, would have rivalled a chart of ocean currents. And at the center of it all was an unlikely fulcrum: Donald Duck, middle name: Fauntleroy, Italian name: Paolino Paperino.

In his long history as a Disney icon, Donald Duck played a recyclable pawn for the situational gags and thinly-veiled social commentary that propel classic cartoons. His repertoire includes treasure hunter, reluctant Nazi, gung-ho American soldier, and more, but it was his stint as a talentless painter that set in motion the warp that would be *Il Ghirigoro*, years before its gallery debut.

A passage from the exhibition statement, long but necessary, explains:

The curator's encounter with contemporary art happened in the 1980s in a reprint of the comic book *Paperino and Il Ghirigoro*, originally published in the weekly *Topolino* (the Italian name for Mickey Mouse). In the issue dated September 19, 1964, Donald Duck is a painter of little success...When he discovers that the 'Museum of Modern and Future Art' is hosting an extremely successful exhibition, he takes inspiration from a work he sees there, "Il Ghirigoro" ("The Scrawl"), to create a substantially identical painting, a replica. Unfortunately, the original is stolen and the police—on the advice of eminent art experts—arrest the duck, who tries to exonerate himself by calling attention to the fact that initials on the back of the picture are his...The exhibition is an attempt to imagine, today, a possible version of that 'Museum of Modern and Future Art.'

In a nostalgic twist on a nostalgic twist, Tenaglia superimposed the "Museum of Modern and Future Art" onto the space of Pio Pico and populated it with works by Jef Geys, Ezio Gribaudo,

David Ostrowski, Andrea Romano, and Trevor Shimizu. In doing so, he paid tribute to Donald Duck's misguided attempt at greatness by way of decoy, itself a classic narrative of hapless ambition, and one that he equated with Walt Disney's alleged self-isolating, world-builder narcissism and Lucifer's voracity for paradise. The exhibition statement, with respect to Disney: "...he struggled to free himself from the romantic idea of artistic authorship...One biography reads an anecdote about some company managers who were annoyed because Walt would miss their nighttime poker sessions, preferring to spend his hours imitating the shape of his own name, drawn by someone else on a piece of paper." And again the statement, with respect to Lucifer: "he tried to become original, to steal Our Lord's authority, to command his own destiny, to bear his own light! And he won his own domain, didn't he. Didn't he! And his own light is the light of the fires of Hell!"<sup>1</sup> The takeaway? Be the change that you wish for yourself in the world...

...or *be being* that change if actuality is not an option. Be the next big thing, a state we shall call "B," even if by becoming B one must cease *being in* a state of "A," that is, one's comfortable status quo. Lucifer relinquished his divinity; Disney, his sociality; Donald Duck, his integrity (from a Modernist POV); Tenaglia, his guardianship of a cherished, formative experience. To simulate something, with the hope of exceeding that something, means to gamble A part of oneself.

The transition between A and B is volatile, and it can unleash any outcome, from victory to its opposite. A mentor once told me, in reference to the emotions of fathers, that she believed transitions are especially hard for men. Now I understand what she meant. Lucifer went straight to hell and Donald Duck went straight to jail. Their ambitions wrought condemnation, but the duck and the devil are only half of whom we are considering, and regardless of the circumstances and outcomes of the decisive wagers these males made, they all engaged in a common strategy in their stab at so-called greatness: mimicry. Mimicry is the common denominator; mimicry jumpstarts the sacrifice of identity, originality, "authenticity"—or the precious illusion of such ideals—requisite for passing onto a subsequent state, felicitous or not.

In Tenaglia's case, that stab at greatness is tempered by a cognizance of inevitable failure. In *Il Ghirigoro*, mimicry manifests the cartoon in physical space, but it fails to explode with zip-a-dee-doo-dah animism—like in the worlds of *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?* (1984); the music video for A-ha's "Take on Me" (1984); or even *The Three Caballeros* (1944), starring none other than Donald Duck—due to the simple impossibility of such things occurring outside cinema. Still, the boundary between illustrated dimension and reality is effectively destroyed in the attempt. As is Tenaglia's fantasy of an inaugural, "real-life" Museum of Modern and Future Art. The deed is done, the fantasy fulfilled, or at least played out. The moment the Museum of Modern and Future Art became *Il Ghirigoro* it superseded its cartoon iteration and any alternate versions still floating in the curatorial ether.

*Il Ghirigoro*'s constituent artworks verified these terms or otherwise echoed the supporting details of the exhibition's premise in their own aesthetic and conceptual programs. For example, Trevor Shimizu's crude and carefree paintings *Playboy #5* (2016) and *Elevated Penis #7* (2016)

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<sup>1</sup> Note that this an excerpt from William Gaddis's proto-postmodern novel *The Recognitions* (1955) as quoted in the exhibition statement for *Il Ghirigoro*.

are indebted to Cy Twombly, whose signature spiral gestures seem to be referenced in *Paperino and Il Ghirigoro* as the artwork—the titular scrawl—that Donald Duck forges.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Enzo Gribaudo’s deskilled paintings of palm trees—all entitled *Cuba* and dated 1967—reinforced the exhibition's self-reflexive comic attitude through their unpretentious scenography, which look, in part, as though painted with a finger.

Yet it was Andrea Romano’s *Potsherds of Gazes* (2019) that hewed closest to *Il Ghirigoro*’s postmodernist mindset. Romano’s series turns *The Flintstones* into a collection of cropped action sketches that approximate the cartoon’s fictitious Stone Age universe in the same way *The Flintstones* approximated life in the Palaeolithic age. The broader implication of this correlation is its hand-me-down pattern: we moderns will someday have our history inferred through our cultural debris too—cultural debris that may include traces of Fred, Wilma, Bamm-Bamm, and Pebbles, and thus further distort the historical record.

Like *Potsherds of Gazes*, *Il Ghirigoro* represents but one stage of cultural trace formation on a continuum extending both backwards and forwards in time. The brick-and-mortar museum serves as the parent referent for the cartoon Museum of Modern and Future Art, and so *Il Ghirigoro*’s ancestry is composed of a lineage initiated by the cabinets of curiosities of the late-sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries (i.e. the first museums). That the cabinet of curiosity was meant to illustrate the Cosmos in abstract summary suggests we are receding toward infinity in the hunt for a museological progenitor. Vastness likewise attends *Il Ghirigoro*’s rebirth in the digital cloud. If we accept the notion of computers as modern cabinets of curiosities and the Internet as a cybernetic cosmos, then *Il Ghirigoro*-online brings us back to infinity, albeit at a different level, for now we have the cosmos at *our* fingertips and Tenaglia’s Museum of Modern and Future Art perdures as a constellation among constellations.

Is not intimacy with the cosmos one of the earliest promises of art? Perhaps the more urgent question is: what will happen next with this cyber cosmos that has become our primary conduit to the world since the pandemic? A big bang or a black hole? A is in the rearview, B is on the horizon, and judging by the news of late, this transition will require that we relinquish more than we want; more than the anti-quarantine protestors who rallied on April 18, 2020 in Austin, Texas are willing to consider; and more than most in isolation are willing to admit. So while some of us take a cue from A-ha and declare “it’s no better to be safe than sorry,” the rest of us abide by our screens and cry like Donald Duck “Aw, phooey!” because there is no foreseeable upgrade to this limbo.

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<sup>2</sup> Although Twombly’s well-known spiral works *Cold Stream* (1966) and *Untitled* (1967) postdate *Paperino and Il Ghirigoro*’s publication by at least two years.