

Mythicising Nothing: The Insubstantial Self In Anthony Catania's Centaur Chase

"That seeming something, yet was nothing".
- Tennyson, *The Lover's Tale*

Anthony Catania's *The Cave of Centaurs* is a title that clinches his exhibition's crucial anachronism – for it intriguingly implies that it is revisioning Paleolithic centaur art. And this is just one anachronistic aspect of Catania's mythical task, for not only does he distil the bulky black horse in the Lascaux Hall of the Bulls to a skeletal Sagittarian version of its rearing representation, but he also plunges this Chiron-like bowman into a centaur hunt that Hellenises the Germanic *wilde Jagd*. Equally crucial is that Catania's Centaur never appropriates in his myriad metamorphoses Nessus's pursuit or that of Odin. Sharing neither the Norse god's mythological cupidity for windblown human spirits nor his equine progenitor's lustful craving in Attic vase-painting, Catania's Centaur reaches out beyond the dead or any bride, since what he endlessly chases looms palely in its absence. That the Centaur's chase leaves nothing in its wake is further affirmed by an overridden Wild Hunt figure Catania reworks: a stalking antlered version of the human-headed corpse curs or *Gabbel Ratchets*. Evoking Seurat's canine study for *La Grande Jatte*, with its *conté-crayon* hound scenting the invisible, what this cervid creature obsessively smells out remains likewise out of sight. Absence defines Catania's vision of existence, and his Centaur is his spectral paragon. Hence Catania's riveting depiction of the Centaur as an 'arrowness' of being whose unleashing annihilates his pastel essence to eternal emptiness. Prancing the Attic/Teutonic nightmare, Catania's Centaur dissolves the blackness of his Paleolithic equine soul into fragments of the void.

Consider, for instance, the initial 'Herne Hunt' triptych whose Centaur, unlike his Paleolithic ancestor at the *Trois-Frères* Sanctuary, finds an enshrinement in no cervine chapel. Lacking this divine dimension, what the Herne Centaur shares with the Horned Deity is his Teutonised stag nature which spurs him onto a quest that leaves him more tragically empty than the similarly horned Dorylas in the Lapithai-Centaur conflict. Significantly, what this 'Herne Hunt' chronicles is a metamorphic process whereby a Stygian centaur gallops into inclemental darkness to emerge in emaciating whiteness. What remains of the Centaur is just an anaemic shadow. Rather than trailing his guts like Dorylas does, the Herne Centaur undergoes the more harrowing ordeal of losing his substantiality. The Herne Centaur recalls in this respect his Pan parallel's pale fate. For what the 'Pan Centaur' clearly trails in his eerie white wake is his evaporating pitch black self. Theirs is a shared plight of breaking in the light. But this is more treacherously true of the Centaur in the 'Nosferatu Quest' diptych whose Murnaesque vampiric identity harbours the seed of its white annihilation even at his darkest manifestation. For what initiates as an unholy halo round the stagman's features finally blazes to dissolve the undead Centaur in its deadly paleness. That the Centaur is palely fated is further reinforced by the second 'Herne Hunt' triptych where he disperses once again but in semi-transparent geometric shapes. No matter then into which form this chameleon Centaur mutates, he cannot transcend the lightness of his insubstantial self. For the Centaur's centre cannot hold as his scythe-like hoof's cubistic slicing crumbles into pallid impressions of expressionistic anguish.

Such centaur torment reaches however its convulsing climax in the stunning 'Agony of Antlers'. The 'Agony' is a searing ecstasy whereby the Attic Centaur not only manifests tines as strangely aching as those of the black stag in the Lascaux Axial Gallery, but he bizarrely transfigures them into writhing sunflower antlers. The effect is of blooming Van Goghian pain, for the Centaur literally scatters into blossoms of thorn-like petals. But the Centaur's *angst* screams in an achromatic

dye, and his sable sprouts instantly wilt into blanched buds. The Sunflower Centaur thrives in no light, for his is a light darker than dark. The 'Agony' Centaur's is a floral Van Goghian death, but one which Catania roots in the creature's pale self. Just as palely pained is 'The Acheron Centaur', a Dantean *alter ego* of the 'Agony' Herne, whose Paleolithic horned essence appropriates Charon's fiery Dis affliction by paling it through his awesome flickering. An offspring of seething murk, the ferryman Centaur flares and pales in his fitful Hades self. It is through such tragic anachronistic transmutations that Catania blows his howling Centaur's Paleolithic horns through an Attic/Teutonic cave that never was. But it is this Ovidian metamorphic might that impels the Centaur to fall instinctively apart. Like the Keatsian bard, the Centaur lacks a self, for he is the quintessence of nothingness. It is thus as a Non-Other that the Centaur incarnates the selflessness of others. Like an equine Everyman, the Centaur aesthetically canters through time warps of evanescence.

Nowhere is this perhaps more enigmatically depicted than in the series of drawings entitled the 'Chaos of Centaurs' where what is most subliminally revised is Soutine's 'fowl' concept of reality as feathered fragmentation. By transmuting Soutine's avian pyrotechnics into a pointillistic eruption of black splinters blotting white paper, these Centaur drawings deepen the insubstantiality of being, for the Centaur hauntingly mutates into scattered remains of the Norse celestial Dragon or Middle Earth Worm. But the Centaur Dragon's fragments, unlike Eliot's, cannot be shored against his ruins. For the Centaur Dragon implodes into a primordial chaos whose abyss differs radically from that into which Dictys, his Thessalian relative, fatally collapses. Significantly, nothing like Dictys's mountain-ash sliver impales the Centaur Dragon. The Centaur Dragon is transfixed by the nothingness within. His is a daemonic descent into the self's ever-expanding emptiness. For the Centaur is the Chaos, nor can he be out of it. His is the incoming of no outgoing, and his only realm is the Valhalla of Nowhere. With its intense Teutonic sense of Nothing in the air, the 'Chaos of Centaurs' series reworks Heidegger's vision of humanity as thrownness into Non-Being. The result is not unlike a stellar implosion whose fragments disperse into pallid self-nothingness. What the Centaur Dragon leaves in his darkly dappled scattering is a ghastly Melvillean cessation. The Centaur Dragon's is an existential galloping that sets his paleness echoing.

Hence the thematic aptness of 'The Apocalyptic Centaur' where Catania annihilates the Centaur chase to a paler shade of pale. Once again, paleness is of the essence, for what the Centaur's apocalyptic arrow unerringly penetrates is a spectralised ethereal region where only mistiness flourishes. But the Centaur's galloping cannot be but misty, as it is his own insubstantial self that he restlessly tramples. Thus the Centaur's darting shaft clarifies the light to the pallor of his skull. 'The Apocalyptic Centaur' thrives for its uncanny effect on intimations of Death as equally substanceless. He is literally the *genius loci* of Nullity. Significantly hornless, the Death Centaur, just like his 'Chaos' counterpart, looms in ghostlier terms than those of the lightly outlined stag in the Lascaux Apse. It is Catania's Revelation of Death as something less than Paleolithic cervine phantomness – for his Death Centaur is forever bolting in his own dissolving mirages. Like Keats's Autumn, what Catania's Centaur breathes is eternally melting mist.

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