

## Piping Pestilence: The Minstrel of Death in Anthony Catania's Rat Requiem

"I hate music! We all hate music!"

- Eric Frank Russell, 'Rhythm of the Rats'

Arguably, the most visceral vision in Anthony Catania's 'The Piper's Requiem' exhibition is a black pastel drawing that transcribes its rodential *Weltanschauung* on its sunset texture as unquiet requiescence - for what 'Rhythm of the Rats' dissonantly spawns is the scuttling birth of a piping pestilential Death. Echoing the late medieval concept of the Pied Piper as a leading Death Dancer, Catania reconceives Hamelin's nemesis in terms of a rattish version of the fifteenth-century Skeleton-Musician haunting Parisian *Danse Macabre* murals. Manifesting as a Minstrel Rat who waxes and wanes as he scurries along the requiem scale, Catania's Piper transcends the *Rattenfänger* image of his Browning counterpart by literally incarnating the *diabolus in musica* - the discordant chord that rattishly untunes all. A virtuoso *Rattus rattus*, Catania's Piper rivals the metamorphic might of Coppola's Dracula by hideously shattering his musical self into a similar cacophony of scattering rats. What Catania ominously unleashes appropriates the "shrieking and squeaking" of Browning's rodents to orchestrate their infectious "sharps and flats" into a psalmody of pestilence that is as reedily lethal as the engraved elegy of Holbein's skeletal minstrels.

Consider, for instance, the Stygian Piper of 'Doom's Diptych' whose music surges in malefic modulation of the darkness welling within to erupt in choking clouds of smoky trumps. Emitting nothing like Seurat's 'Montfermeil Drummer's' halo of *conté* light, Catania's Piper ambles beyond the latter's sable substance into the insubstantiality of paroxysmal patches and dashes. Pitched to a polluting repertoire, what Catania's Piper evidently grates in blotched and scratched sooty pastels is the Black Death's requiem. Hence the Piper's lanky leap into the sickly smeared throes of 'The Plague Jig' - a Whirling Dervish ritual whose capering convulsions blackly scythe into a reaping dance. Blackness is of such a crucial essence that Catania's pastel drawings eclipse their sombre shades to 'Death's Diptych's' inky shreds. For Catania's Piper, true to his rotten ratness, airs his self-gnawing bubonic blackness by trumpeting it to blotted tatters. Into such swelling smudges, so cacophonously corrosive, Catania plunges his Hamelin's Piper-palled offspring. Significantly, not only does Catania's 'Black Totentanz' darkly revision the charnel *Danse Macabre* fresco cycles of medieval Paris as children's death revels, but it gnawingly emaciates the spellbound revelers to Rackhamesque serrate silhouettes airily dancing to the Piper's tenebrous trumpet. More fragmentally silhouetted are the 'Golden Totentanz's' whirling children whose nibbled bodies the Piper pitches to the gilded trill of his Midas touch that twirls them twig-like into the blackness of a Goyesque carnival. What renders the 'Golden Totentanz' more lethally alluring an overture to Death than Verlaine's alien air, "Mourons ensemble, voulez-vous?", is the gilt-toned fluting of its terrible troubadour. Startlingly stunning in its antithetical depiction of Hamelin's children blown like black bits of bark into a golden sky, the 'Totentanz' painting intensely reaffirms its pastel

parallel's darkest threat – for its Musical Plague's glittering promise entails more of the same rodential gnawing. What the Minstrel Rat musically infects blackens to a ravaged requiem.

Shimmeringly deadlier, however, is the 'Scarlet Summons' Minstrel glaring upon his prancing prey's sight in scurrying red light. Mesmerised into this Minstrel's incandescent dissonance, Hamelin's children flaringly surrender to his spectral Rembrandtesque splendour. But theirs is plangently a rat-infested destiny. For Catania, not content with having moulded a Minstrel Rat from Browning's Piper, imbues him with the mystical might of his Russell counterpart – another bizarre bard whom Catania's Piper eerily evokes by his similar spawning of rattish souls. Hence the grisly revelation of the 'Summons' Piper untuning Hamelin's progeny to plagues of flickering rodents. In its sinister suggestion that Hamelin's offspring dancingly incarnate Otto's *mysterium horrendum*, the horrifying negative numinous that annihilates them to the Piper's fiery ratness, the 'Scarlet Summons' drawings aptly prelude the 'Bleeding Adagio's' threnody for their rodential metamorphosis. Obliquely tragic, the 'Bleeding Adagio' is easily the most delicately disturbing of Catania's 'Piper' paintings. Calmly crooning in gorgeous gore what the 'Summons' sadistic twist entails in human loss, this 'Adagio' poignantly bleeds the rat changelings' silent shriek – a lulled lament which the Piper flutes to a crimson shade. But with such blood music seeping through its sylvan Gainsborough setting, the 'Adagio' silently surges to the mournful pitch of the 'Lugubre Gondolier' – another series of 'Piper' paintings which Catania pivots on the Black Minstrel, hearse-plumed like Poe's King Pest, setting sail on a self-steered skiff to the Isle of the Dead. That the 'Bleeding Adagio' actually prefigures the 'Lugubre Gondolier's' evocation of Böcklin's 'Toteninsel' is further suggested by its revealing relocation of the Piper's rat changelings' crusade to the bloody banks of a river of death. Significantly, by modulating Friedrich's monk by the sea to its lake piper edged on an equally aqueous absurdity, the 'Bleeding Adagio' opens the fluting floodgates to the 'Lugubre Gondolier's' gleaming rivers of smelted guilders which the unpaid 'Golden Totentanz' Piper eternally plies in his black barge. No less thematically crucial, however, is the 'Scarlet Summons' Minstrel whose rodential incandescence transmutes his 'Charon Piper' equivalent into a vortex of rattish changelings blazing across a fluted constellation of weird Böcklin mutations.

Anything but Böcklin's "image to dream by", the 'Charon Piper's' Isle is fabulously a Ratman's chant, for the Minstrel screechingly conjures it from his own scurrying changelings into a shower of rodential impressions. A perfect mirage for a Minstrel who rattishly embodies the evanescent waters that haunt Guardi's hunched oarsman. Like the Keatsian chameleon poet, Catania's Charon Piper is essentially the paragon of self-unmaking. For whether Catania rimes him in Coleridgean ice or silvers him in Delamarean moonlight, the Charon Piper constantly crumbles into his Isle's insubstantial substance – a rainbow realm that rivals the empty prism of Poe's death castle. We are, in fact, Prospero's guests for, as the Charon Piper's prospective changelings, our ecliptic fate lies in the Red Death's spectral spectrum. Pitched to the Ferryman Rat's plague piping we likewise embark on a trajectory to his Isle's rodential liminality, but mystifyingly in airs of unknowing. For the Charon Piper's is music of the spheres rattishly warped

to a phantom dirge. His is truly a hauntology of flutings. Soaring like Derridean drawings of the musical void, Catania's 'Charon Pipers' propel Böcklin's cypress solidity into luminescent spectres of its fiery Van Goghian equivalents. Held in its ethereal thrall, we cannot but heed the Ratman Isle's beckoning call, for its rat requiem is our *nocturne* of the soul – and we too sail on.

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