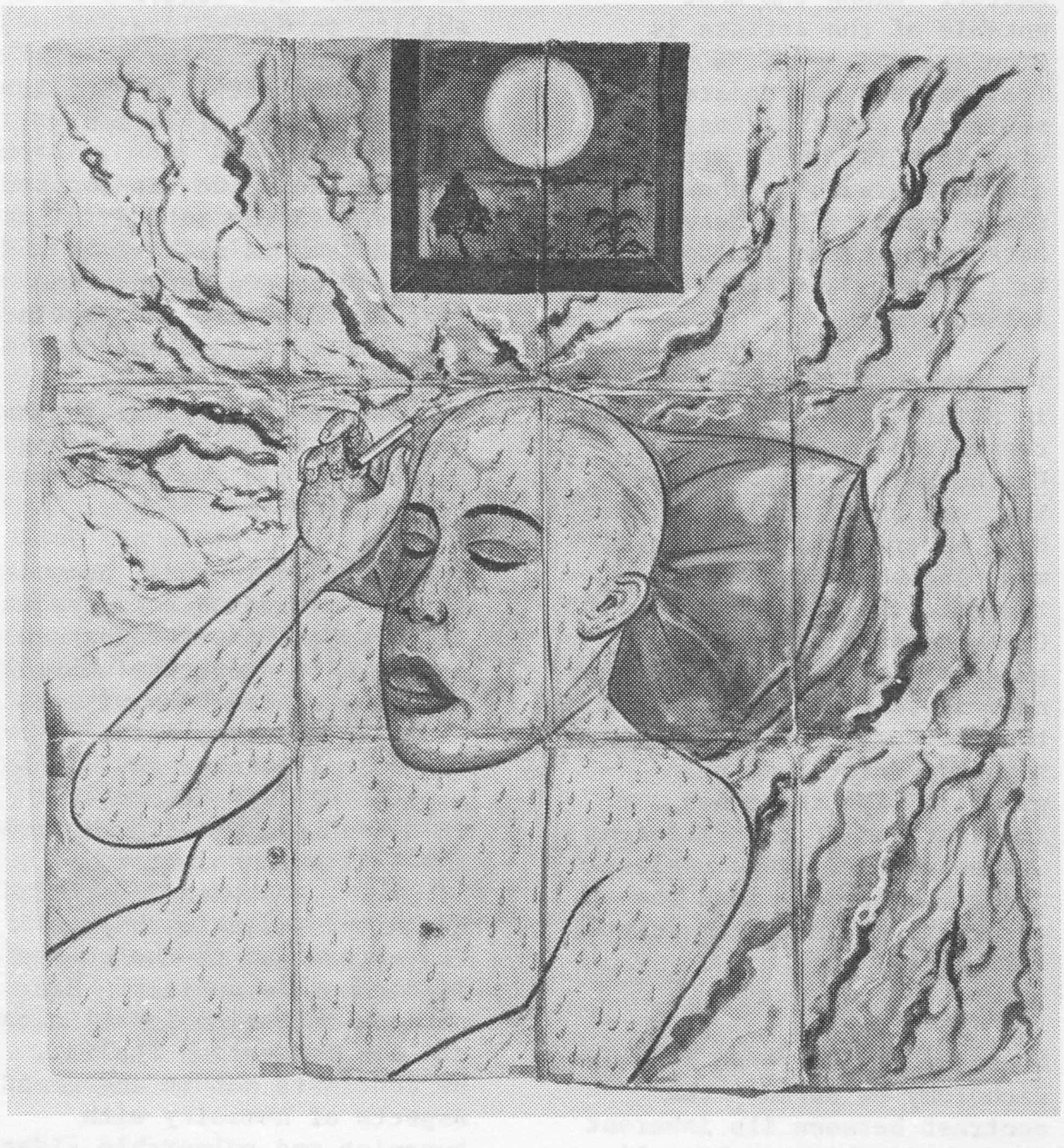
Francesco Clemente
MATRIX/BERKELEY 46

University Art Museum
August - mid October

Sun, 1980



It has been centuries since mythical and allegorical themes played a prominent role in art. In the last decade, however, a number of artists in America and Europe have begun again to explore such subjects. They have been variously labeled, including New Imagists, Primary Imagists, and Neo-Primitivists. Many differences exist between the individuals, but crucial is a renewed engagement to subject matter. Among the most notable of the artists is Francesco Clemente, a young Italian, who has created the series of powerful images on view in MATRIX. (Others of similar persuasion shown at the University Art Museum, Berkeley include Jon Borofsky, Neil Jenney, and Susan Rothenberg.)

The titles of the paintings in MATRIX connote large to cosmic topics: Moon, Sun, Earth, Rain, Hunger. Given the fact that such subjects hold a paramount position in most legendary systems of thought, the meanings of Clemente's paintings are graspable. A Michelangelesque Adam is sent plummeting from the heavens to earth in Moon, his fate determined by gravity. The theme has implications of the Fall from Grace, as the figure uselessly bends his head against the yoke taking him to his future, terrestrial life.

Humanity discovers an age-old dichotomy on earth: the contrast between its inherent nature and the paraphernalia of civilization. In Hunger, the primitive, maddened urge to eat animal flesh is shown taking place at a conventional table. The implements of eating prove dispensible or a hindrance, however; the glass is overturned and the dish is inadequate for the purpose at hand. In this painting and throughout the series Clemente contrasts cosmicly continuous, circular forms with the imperfect rectilinearity characteristic of human life.

Once committed to an implement, a bowl, human ingenuity develops. A figure of multiple ethnicity, perhaps an everyman, reverses the bowl for use as a military helmet in Earth. The figure's ability to manipulate his surroundings results in his being shown atop a globe, in command of his situation.

Natural phenomena are coopted by civilization in Sun. That is, the sun is mimiced by a Van Gogh-like painting, and fire and heat are the province of a cigarette. Clemente transcribes the sensual experience of sleeping in the glow of the sun to a setting created by the accoutrements of civilization.

Once more fully nude, humanity in the form of an androgynous, Leonardesque figure embraces nature. It drops the umbrella, an appurtenance of civilization, in order to bathe in the conciliating rain. Thus a cycle of life is present in Clemente's paintings, from the Fall to Absolution.

Humanity's relationship to its nature and to the cosmos is Clemente's subject. His outlook is basically religious and his conception Italian. He contrasts heroic and grand aspects of humanity with humanist and vulnerable sides. Curiously, in other work Clemente has never been quite so precise or dogmatic about his subject matter. He is usually abstruse, mysterious, symbolic or personal. Self-portraits, erotica and perversity occur; allegory too is sometimes present. But the images here are fundamentally neither allegorical nor symbolic. Rather, he creates an imaginary space in which mythic personages act. The paintings at Berkeley give the religious-philosophical underpinning of Clemente's art and thought.

Clemente's willingness to be free in his approach to subject matter is echoed by his technique. This series consists of tempera on sheets of handmade paper, attached to cloth. At other times he has done photography, mosaic, book illustration and fresco; he is at ease, too, introducing words into his images. His drawing style also varies wildly, between the childlike and elegant. In the paintings discussed here, there is an assuredness of line aligned to a seemingly primitivistic approach. The result is a bold, compelling quality about the work.

A part of Clemente's inspiration comes from far beyond Italy, in India. He lives approximately half of each year in the remote town of Madras, and has taught himself Hindi and Sanskrit in connection with his study of Buddhism. The series in MATRIX was produced during his 1980 sojourn in Madras. He lives the rest of the year in Rome. Francesco Clemente was born in Naples in 1952.

Mark Rosenthal

Works in MATRIX:

Rain, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth. 95" x 94".

Earth, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth. 92" x 96".

Moon, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth. 91" x 96 3/4".

Sun, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth. 91" x 95".

Hunger, 1980, tempera on 12 sheets of handmade paper mounted on cloth. 93 1/2" x 96 1/2".

All works are lent by Sperone Westwater Fischer, New York.

Selected one-person exhibitions: Gian Enzo Sperone, Rome '75, '76, '80; art & project, Amsterdam '78, '80; Paul Maenz, Cologne '78, '79; Padiglione d'arte Contemporanea di Milano, Italy '80 (cat. pub.); Sperone Westwater Fischer, NY '80, '81.

Selected group exhibitions: XII Biennale, Sao Paulo, Brazil '75 (cat. pub.); Sandro Chia, Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, Nicolo-de Maria, Luigi Ontani, Mimmo Palladino, Ernesto Tatafiore, Kunsthalle, Basel, Switzerland '80 (traveling exhibition, cat. pub.); Aperto '80, Biennale di Venezia, Italy '80; Westkunst, Cologne, Germany '81.

Selected bibliography about Clemente (see also catalogues listed under exhibitions):

Ammann, Jean Christophe. "Expansive-Excessive," Domus, vol. 593 (April '79).

Bonito Oliva, Achille. "The Italian Trans-Avant-garde," Flash Art, no. 92-93 (Oct.-Nov. '79).

Bonito Oliva, Achille. "The Bewildered Image," Flash Art, no. 96-97 (March-April '80).

Lawson, Thomas. "Chia, Clemente and Cucchi," Flash Art, no. 100 (Nov. '80).

Bonito Oliva, Achille. "Francesco Clemente," Domus vol. 613 (Jan. '81).

DeAk, Edit. "A Chameleon in a State of Grace," Artforum, vol. XIX, no. 6 (Feb. '81).

Russell, John. "Critics' Choices," The New York Times (Feb. 22 '81).

Martin, Henry. "The Italian Art Scnee," Art News, vol. 80, no. 3 (March '81).

L(arson), K(ay). "Francesco Clemente, Obsessed and Repelled by the Past," Art News, vol. 80, no. 5 (May '81).

MATRIX is supported in part by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, a Federal Agency.