

Sandy Skoglund

in conversation with Demetrio Paparoni

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DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *Every story is by its very nature a series of sensations. In your photos these sensations, instead of hurrying events along, slow down the process of perception, detaching us from a rational understanding of what we see. It is like looking at a scene from a film whose protagonist, by not expressing any wishes, is in fact absent. Or perhaps the leading role is taken on by the relationships holding the objects together.*

SANDY SKOGLUND: I do, in fact, think of my work as a film shot in a familiar environment where the spectator feels at ease. And yet, in this space delimited by a frame, there is always something explicitly anomalous. The subjects I prefer are domestic interiors, and I explore them with morbid curiosity. I am currently interested in the bathroom, a traditional American or European — a western — bathroom with sink, mirror and everything else normally found in it. I constructed it in paper, populate it with animals sculpted in clay and then cast in resin, and then I photograph it all. The animals might represent for those of us living in the present the possibility of traveling in time, in that the relationship between people and animals has changed throughout history. The animal takes on in reality the role of a kind of alternative awareness.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *An alternative awareness can be expressed in various ways: it can be identified with a flight from civilization, or a mystical experience, or even the will to go beyond the limits of reason. Does this alternative conscience you refer to foresee a unification of reality and fantasy? Or are these two elements antithetical?*

SANDY SKOGLUND: I think there exists a contrast between the fantastic aspect — animals seen as cartoons or as fantasies — and reality. Since we, as human beings, consider ourselves the primary form of consciousness existing in nature, I decided to populate my images with animals in order to introduce this alternative awareness into our experience.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *In modern culture animals are mostly considered as organisms that act only as a result of automatic stimulus-response. So they are seen in the same way as a machine, differently to what happened in the ancient world in which both men and animals made up a mythic reality. It is clear that you do not consider animals in this mechanistic way: does this mean you believe they have a soul?*

SANDY SKOGLUND: Yes. The progressive cultural evolution of humanity will lead us to understand that we are animals among other animals. Science is exploring these arguments that I, as an artist, express on the plane of physical representation. In studying paganism, I discovered that its roots are to be found in the same religious experience in which we commonly recognize ourselves. I think that the main monotheistic faiths — Judaism, Christianity, Islam — have in some way distanced us from the natural world, making us lose our ancient contact with animals. Now science, ecology, new philosophical orientations, all re-evaluate animals and see in them conscious beings with a soul similar to that of humans. Before beginning *Walking on Eggshells*, I undertook some research in order to discover how the rabbit has been interpreted iconographically from 2000 BC up to the present day — including the American Easter Bunny which has its origins in the fact that North European paganism venerated the rabbit as a symbol of the changing seasons. I have explored art history searching for representations of rabbits and snakes and I analyzed the use made of them. I have studied the evolution of serpent imagery in Egypt — where serpents symbolized chaos. And then again I have explored the most widely differing cultures, from the Hebrew world to the Greco-Roman one, from Celtic culture to that of the Native Americans.

The relationship between humanity and animals has always been important and complicated. You just have to think of the serpent and Eve in the Bible. Such knowledge is interesting, it makes us understand that we project ourselves onto animals and that we use animals so as to represent our own consciousness.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *Your work has very strong social implications because it attempts to mirror American society. At the same time the fantastic dimension is more important than reality, as is shown by the dream-like component in your work.*

SANDY SKOGLUND: My images seem like dreams to others, not to me.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *Such a statement, typical of the Surrealists, seems to belong to the art of the beginning of the century.*

SANDY SKOGLUND: I don't think that my work has a direct relationship to Surrealism. I believe, instead, that it is about the contrast and complexity that today characterizes the United States. No, I don't think of these images as

dreams. There is only one element that is dream-like: intrusiveness. My images have a realistic component and another, unreal one that, intruding on reality, interferes with it. Think about an image like *Revenge of the Goldfish*. If the fish are eliminated the image shows nothing unusual: it's just a room with two people in a bed. It is the fish that give an unusual dimension to it. At the same time the image is plausible, and this is the reason why photography is more adapted to my purpose than painting. The most critical aspect of my work as an artist in the Nineties is that it is photographic, it shows something that is "really" happening. Often I am asked why I do not produce my images with a computer: it would change the meaning. To know that what we are looking at has really existed, changes our perception of the image. Think of Hollywood movies: if we know that the backgrounds are created by a computer our felt experience of the scene changes. An electronically constructed image is perceived in a different way than a photographic image. I am not against the computer as an instrument in itself but, with regards my work, the mirror image of the installations, and the photographs, has a decisive importance. *Spirituality in the Flesh*, for instance, is wholly made from real ground beef: if the viewer knows this, his or her experience of that image is changed forever. If I had constructed the image with a computer the experience would have been quite different. I would simply have represented raw hamburger.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *When you construct an image you give it a narrative structure, in the sense that we could say of a certain work that it "represents a child who, in his room, cannot sleep because he has nightmares — Borges says that dreams are the type, but nightmares are the species. He is there on his own with his dreams while his kid brother sleeps. The world seems dark blue — the same color you have painted the walls of his room — because this is the color of night. Around him there is a myriad of goldfish..." and so on. This is a genuine story. But then you realize that that story is rather unlikely, inasmuch as each element of the tale acts with an atomistic movement, in the sense that it follows its own trajectory in the "emptiness" of the scenic space rather than in the "fullness" of a narrative structure.*

SANDY SKOGLUND: I am happier if an image expresses a multiple meaning, even a contradictory one. At the start of

Sandy Skoglund

in conversation with Demetrio Paparoni page 2

a project I purposely construct a conceptually active puzzle. But this construction is not only psychological: besides vision, it regards the use of certain materials rather than others. For example, let's take the image you were referring to, *Revenge of the Goldfish*. In the photo, the angle of view doesn't allow you to see if you are dealing with a man or a woman. I like the idea of someone thinking it is a piece about homosexuality while others think it is about the sexual abuse of children. Generally Americans tend to see narratives in social-political terms: in front of an image like this they do not think of the fish as the materialization of a child's fantasy. For me instead the fish represent another reality working in the same space in which the child exists.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *You yourself have stated that what you show us is not a simulated reality, it isn't in fact created with a computer but constructed physically with the "objects" that continue to exist after the photo has been taken: these objects, besides being "models", are also works, "sculptures". So the work expresses a double nature right from the start, given that both the object and its photographic representation are art. This ambiguity generates a conflict that has its real reason for existing in the photograph, insofar as the image is not the representation of a sculpture but is pure vision. As you yourself say, a fish or a rabbit has another reality with regards to our space or time. It is this that makes your work open to conflicts of interpretation.*

SANDY SKOGLUND: Yes, for me this conflict lies at the heart of the work: I want to open up the content to various interpretations and to diversify the political sense even when this seems specific. *Radioactive Cats*, for example, which I made in 1980 during the Cold War, refers to a nuclear holocaust. The action takes place in a room where a bomb has just exploded. At that time I was interested in cultural *Zeitgeist*. This image can be interpreted both positively and negatively in terms of the outcome of nuclear disaster: the cats have changed, becoming green, and yet they are surviving.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *The way these images are seen — shining, plastic-finished, technically almost metallic — makes one think of advertising: they were conceived as art yet ambiguously they are seductive like posters, as inviting as the windows of fashionable shops. I mean to say that, like publicity images, they seem to be eyeing the viewer and saying, "come on, here's*

something to buy". In this sense your photos use language in order to call others to them, not in order to be seen for a self-contained visual experience, but in order to stimulate the acquisition of something other than the image. It is well-known that the big American businesses also make use of the fascination of art in order to persuade the consumers that a refrigerator or a television, even though it is new, should be exchanged for a new and aesthetically more attractive one. Can your work be interpreted in this way?

SANDY SKOGLUND: Of course! I think you have summed my strategy up very well. At the end of the Seventies my context was that of the traditional European avant-garde which, while being influenced by Pop, tried to offer an alternative. There was so much minimal and conceptual art at the time that was concerned with nothing more than itself. The end of the Seventies can also be seen as the end of Modernism because the decades-long practice of re-defining the art object had finally resulted in the evaporation of the physical work, turning into philosophical discourse. In the Eighties we felt that that strategy was finished and I myself was actively involved in a new culture that, instead of refusing popular forms, made them its own and took over advertising strategies. In other words, it came as near as was possible to advertising without actually advertising anything. I saw publicity as a form of direct visual communication between the spectator and the creator of images — a strategy lacking from the earlier avant-garde which was so esoteric as to create codes only comprehensible to a few initiates. I find this politically offensive and quite uninteresting. This led my work to assume the characteristics you have noted. I am interested in being in culture, in revealing it, but this does not mean that in certain cases I cannot be as disgusted by it as any other citizen is.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *So your work also has a Pop matrix.*

SANDY SKOGLUND: As regards sensibility, then yes, but not in an emotive sense. With pop art the emotive relationship between the artist and the viewer is often cold: I believe that Warhol was cynical both in what he did as well as in the way he did it. My esthetic is warm, "digestible". In my work there is a sense of common language, and so when I show my work in a museum, any passer-by can be as involved in the work as the museum director himself.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *What does the*

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future have in store for us?

SANDY SKOGLUND: I don't think we will last, at least unless we find a way of leaving the planet. If we find a way of leaving Earth and colonizing other planets, then, I think, we might have a great future. The universe is vast. If we stay here the population growth will probably ruin the planet. Even in this case, however, there is the possibility that evolution will begin again in a scenario of complete ruin and that other forms of life and of awareness will be born. As we contemplate these scenarios, history is very important for our capacity to survive.

DEMETRIO PAPARONI: *When in a painting from the past we observe the way people were dressed or the environment in which they were portrayed, we manage to have a document of that particular historic moment. Do you think that someone looking at your work in two thousand years' time will understand how our world is today?*

SANDY SKOGLUND: Yes, in the same exaggerated way in which we, looking at certain Middle Eve, Renaissance, or Baroque European paintings, deduce earlier realities. If we look at a painting by Breughel we can understand the consciousness of those times, even though the image is exaggerated. The process of exaggeration in image-making is important for me because it expresses the energy, enthusiasm, and excess of contemporary American culture.