

// NEW RESEARCH ON THE WORK OF THE AMERICAN
PAINTER EDWARD E. BOCCIA, ST. LOUIS (1921-
2012) //

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SUMMARY: Despite success during his lifetime, the work of the erudite yet reclusive American painter and writer Edward. E. Boccia (1950-2012) has existed for some time in obscurity. Research has recently uncovered not only new and astounding pictures, but also a collection of critical writings by the artist.

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Born of Italian parents in New Jersey, Boccia was a professor at St. Louis' esteemed Washington University, a creative nexus that had previously hosted luminaries such as Max Beckmann, Philip Guston, and Stephen Greene. A teacher of the Bauhaus method, and a dedicated craftsman, Boccia was deeply concerned with the typologies of style. Notebooks reveal an astonishing collection of writing on the hierarchy of working methods in the fine arts, based in part on the writing of Joseph Campbell and Paul Tillich. Boccia's work and writing offer a remarkable view into mid to late century crisis of form and hierarchies of art history and American innovation. For some time, the artist worked in seclusion. In part because of the critical emphasis placed on abstraction and conceptual art as the primary force in American art his work has been mostly overlooked. Focusing on key works, and the artist's writing from the archives of the artist estate, this essay reveals a learned painter of great spirituality, intellectual rigor, and technical achievement. Today, the artist's work can be found in the collections of major museums including the National Pinakothek, Athens, The St. Louis Art Museum, and The Mildred Kemper Museum of Art, St. Louis among many others.

Introduction

The two – the hero and his ultimate god, the seeker and the found – are thus understood as the outside and inside of a single, self-mirrored mystery, which is identical with the mystery of the manifest world. The great deed of the supreme hero is to come to the knowledge of this unity in multiplicity and then to make it known. (Joseph Campbell, 1949: 31.)¹

The critical history of mid to late twentieth century American art has often been guided by a somewhat reductive hierarchy in which abstraction features as the key accomplishment of American ingenuity. Histories have been written according to whether artists fit into this formalist category. This marker of achievement has guided perceptions of what constitutes significant contemporary work. As a result, a number of figurative artists have gone under recognized. Artists like Boccia offer unexpected insight into the intellectual activity of key artistic and intellectual communities in America, American pictorial traditions and distinctly American modes of experimentation.

Painter Edward E. Boccia was a teacher of the Bauhaus method, and professor at Washington University, St. Louis, a creative centre in mid to late century America. The university was home to fine arts faculty such as Philip Guston, Stephen Greene, and Max Beckmann. Boccia was a public figure in the sense that he was a professor with many years of service, participated in a significant number of exhibitions, including a number of retrospectives. As well, there were numerous public and private commissions and acquisitions by important museums. However, it becomes apparent, that the artist spent much of his effort dedicated to the production of intellectual and formally complex oeuvre rather than self-promotion. This essay intends to introduce the academic community to the artist's artwork and intellectual writings and make a case for the importance of Boccia's figurative work within the American imagination of 1950-2000.

The understanding of Edward Boccia's place in the story of American modernism is not one of time, place, or chronology but rather sensibility, as an experience of contemporary life, morality, and creativity. That Boccia emerged in America is less a question of a national typology, and more an examination of the complexity of the artist's mind. Boccia's strange and intricate codex developed through thoughtful processes including lengthy journal entries, sketchbooks, preparatory drawings, and drafts. The ultimate goal of Boccia's rigorous process was to produce work that while formally adroit, spoke also of a non-material mystical quality, an expression of spirituality and artistic struggle.

Biographical Background

Born in Newark in 1921, the artist first studied at the Pratt Institute and the Art Students League, New York. He served in WW II in a unique battalion made up of his artistic peers; their tasks included planting decoy inflatable tanks and other artillery along the British coastline to deceive the Nazis. After the war, Boccia earned a BSc and an MA at

¹ Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. 1949. Ed. The Joseph Campbell Foundation. 3rd ed. Novato, California: New World Library, 2008: 31. All references to artist's writing the and notes are from the archival holdings of the artist trust, and all images are the property of the trust, full use and reproduction rights are granted by the artist's heirs, artist estate and trust for the purposes of this article. © In addition to the generosity of the artist estate, heirs and the Edward E. Boccia and Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis in allowing me full access to the artist's papers, I am indebted to my team of research assistants who have conducted key inquiries in preparation for a forthcoming book on the artist and have enhanced this article: CC Marsh, MA, Lead Research Assistant; Emily M. McEwan-Upright, MA, Research Assistant, American Art, and Wendy Timmons, Intern, German Expressionism. As always, I am grateful to my father Dr. KJ Berland for his example and emphasis on the life of the mind as well as the value of creative expression.

Columbia University while concurrently teaching art at the Columbus Art School in Ohio. In 1951, he was appointed the Assistant Dean of Fine Arts at the Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he played an important role as a painting teacher for over thirty years. There are over 1,000 paintings in existence including more than fifty monumental altarpieces featuring allegorical scenes in an Expressionist style (1956-2004).

A Legacy of American Painting: Precision Collides with Fantasy

Seven years before Boccia began the altarpieces, curator Dorothy C. Miller's foreword for The Museum of Modern Art exhibition "American Realists and Magic Realists" points to the precisionist techniques Magical Realists used to illustrate fantastic. She asserts that this style had developed throughout the United States in a spontaneous manner. However, she also goes on to show the way in which these "objective" works are part of a larger inheritance in the history of American painting, including a number of antecedents from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. This essay (and the series of MoMA exhibitions and essays on American art to which it belongs) is notable because Miller maintains that there is by no means an "American" school but rather that the works within the exhibition represent a trend. Boccia's formal technique and stylistic naturalism fit firmly within the MoMA curators' formulation of this American legacy.²

In the introduction Lincoln Kirstein speaks of sensibilities rather than concrete formal influence: "In Paul Cadmus there is a conscious debt to the truculent hatred expressed in Jerome Bosch's paintings of Christ Mocked."³ The cool ugliness of this "precisionist" trend was characterized by MoMA's Alfred Barr to be in some instances anti-Expressionist. Boccia's work from the 1950s onwards is clearly not anti-Expressionist but shares similar tactics with paintings shown in "American Realists and Magic Realists" which Barr had described as an American form of "new objectivity." Ivan Albright's work, for instance, lays bare the decay of the human soul in a cruel and meticulous style, melding the Gothic with the Expressionist. In particular, *Self Portrait* (1935) exhibits a tension between the grotesque and the meticulous. Like many of Boccia's works, such as *Low Tide* (1983), Albright's self portrait reflects self-discipline and a moralist criticism of oneself and one's world.⁴ That the two works were painted nearly fifty years apart is not at the crux of this comparison, rather it is that Albright's work contains a similar agitation and cruelty, rendered in illuminated brushwork. Boccia, who worked for so long in relative isolation - as if on a divine mission - was like Albright informed by his own aesthetic and world of symbols.

Boccia & Neo-Expressionist Religious Painting in America

Boccia also shared a sensibility similar to other Americans namely the work of Abraham Rattner, Jack Levine, and Hyman Bloom. Washington University owned a picture by Rattner entitled *Job* and it is certain that Boccia knew of it, having helped hang the very work in a 1954 exhibition of sacred art at the artist's guild. The very mission of that show - to display the marriage of modernity and religious imagery in new work - is a theme integral

² *American Realists and Magic Realists* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 5-6. This was one of a number of exhibitions at the museum known as the "Americans" series, highlighting contemporary developments in American Art.

³ Lincoln Kirstein, introduction in *American Realists and Magic Realists*, (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1943), 7-8.

⁴ Boccia, *Low Tide*, 1983, oil on canvas, 51 in. x 34 in., collection of the St. Louis University; Ivan Albright, (b. 1897 - d. 1983) *Self-Portrait*, 1935, oil on canvas, 30 in. x 20 in., collection of The Art Institute of Chicago, 1981.257.

to Boccia's lifetime oeuvre.⁵ Both Boccia and Rattner, in divergent styles, sought to physically depict an intangible spiritual conflict. Jack Levine had a somewhat similar trajectory to Boccia. Although his early Social Realist work was associated with the WPA projects, he would later work in a Neo-Expressionist style while maintaining a connection to satire like that of George Grosz and other American painters.⁶ Like Boccia, Levine's work transformed thematically; in the 1960s, Levine approached themes of spirituality and finally painted biblical scenes during the 1980s. The artist Hyman Bloom is also associated with regionalism and allegory as well as heavy use of mysticism and symbolism, and like Boccia illustrated allegorical stories of universal tragedies.⁷ However, despite Bloom's similarly luminescent handling of paint and vigorous expression, his most representational work was considerably more abstract in the late 1940s and bears more resemblance to the work of Chaïm Soutine, Grosz and various Boston Expressionists.⁸ These artists are mentioned in order to create a picture of the influence of Expressive art in America.

Problematics of Style

Boccia, keenly aware of the problematics of style and influence, describes the distillation and movement of ideas, and his own calling as he saw it:

A style-movement in art finally becomes opposed by another movement of a different art-style. Both camps are extremes and continuing to use and fall one against the other organically. Those artists who present these bold "Avant garde" viewpoints are warriors. Significant artists sometimes arise from these socio-artistic battles – But the truly significant Hero artist is really that (love) individual who joins neither camp. He is not a warrior, rather he is a worshipper. He doesn't fight "on the outside" – because he prays on the inside – His artistic grammar – i.e. form, tone color, etc. are the words of his prayers – his paintings are the prayers themselves. He pursues painting as a symbolic search for God. Artistic credos and styles in the socio-economic flux interest him very little.⁹

The transition to the study, contemplation and rigorous reorganization and reconceptualization of form and thematic would first appear when the artist arrived in St. Louis. Boccia's work was multifaceted, not only the framework and technique but also the elaborate iconographic codex. While he borrowed and adsorbed formal and conceptual lessons from various sources both American and European, Boccia developed a unique language of expressive visual power that is unlike any other. A poet, and philosopher of a sort, he wrote a great deal about his sources, about his disdain for copying as well as the slavish adherence to what he saw as trends rather than lasting iconic production. Boccia's own experiments in abstraction were for the most part from the 1940s and 1950s and had an element of Braque's cubic formations and the dynamism of Futurism, translating into a lyrical and dynamic neo-classical vocabulary in the 1950s. If one considers these works on their formal qualities alone, they are all successful works with an impressive armature, colour spectrum, and a captivating dynamism.

⁵ That Boccia knew of A. Rattner and the work *Job* in particular is recorded in the April 19th, 1954 St. *Louis Dispatch* article "Religious Art Show Opens at the Guild" in *Ars Sacra*, the exhibition of religious art at the Artist's Guild. A picture of Boccia and two others holding up the painting accompanied the article. Boccia kept a copy of the article in (notebook 2) (The Archives of the Edward E. and Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis, Missouri); hereafter referred to as the "The Archives." In the early years, the artist attended classes at the Art Student's League (1938) and the Pratt Institute.

⁶ George Grosz (b. 1893 – d. 1959).

⁷ Hyman Bloom (b. 1913-d. 2009). His work was included in the exhibition *Americans 1942*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

⁸ Chaïm Soutine (b. 1893 – d. 1943). Counted among the Boston expressionists are Jack Levine and Karl Zerbe.

⁹ E. Boccia, May 1960, Sketchbook 7, p.5 (The Archives).

Whatever the style, Boccia was concerned with a serious intellectual understanding of form and content, and did not take the making of a picture lightly. Hundreds of drawings for each major work testify to the arduous process of constructing a large-scale painting. Perhaps this is why the scaffolding of Cézanne, Braque, and the more geometric abstraction of late Kandinsky was important; a framework was always an essential part of the process. This took hours of time alone in his studio and as such, Boccia was keenly aware of his relative invisibility, but forged on regardless to dedicate himself to making art, a task he saw as deeply significant.

Boccia's Typologies: The Eras of Art and The Five Types of Art

I see the human figure in dynamic masses and gestures, which are absolutely related to man in our century. And I must so paint man. Never shall I slip into that caldron of the "pseudo" and the nostalgic. I am interested in the human drives, and forces within man. I want to paint life. I want to paint the affects upon man – his form, and his inherent symbology. Two things assist me; the giants (Beckmann, Goya, Titian) and my own neurosis. The various novelties of the so-called avant-garde only help clear the vision regarding my own figurative expressions. And again, by contrast, valid figurative dramatizations help clear the vision for abstractionists, the minimalists, the contractors [...]¹⁰

Recently uncovered in the archives, a group of notes and a short essay on the typologies of art provide insight into the way Boccia's ideas about style intersected in his painting. In the essay, Boccia reviews a number of artistic styles, outlining their formal and intangible attributes. Perhaps this was what first drew him to Campbell, to the poetic and sympathetic, to the emotive nomenclature of intent, psyche, and form. Constructing taxonomies of art was a rather popular exercise in the mid-twentieth century.¹¹ For Boccia, this exercise functioned as a way of releasing his own work from mimicry and idolatry, and tied him to the intangible, spiritual qualities of artwork throughout the ages. He writes of his intentions to study modes of art, as a device of developing his own practice. He characterizes Gothic painters such as Giotto as having a linearism, and a mainly two-dimensional, cartographic kind of perspective, but addresses the psychological content of their work in terms of what he calls a double view: e.g. the vision of man as truth and God as truth, and points to the Christian tradition of art.¹²

The Renaissance held a different allure; there is a pointed emphasis on the mass and chiaroscuro of the figure, the illusion of depth, and symmetry in the vanishing point perspective.¹³ God appears as a Logos-God, an inscription of holiness, as seen in the images of Christ in *Allegorical Episode* (1956).¹⁴ (Fig.1) However, Boccia does note that while there is a co-mixing of the secular world with religious art in the Renaissance, there is also a sense of experimentation: the artist is able to create, and this privilege is not reserved only for God. Formally the compositional boundaries of Renaissance pictures become for Boccia points of break-through, points through which the archetypes of struggle, mediation

¹⁰ Revised excerpts from Letter to Dean Kenneth Hudson from Rome, Italy 1958 (The Archives).

¹¹ The primary sources for this discussion are a 1957 plan of study, an undated page of slide notes, and a 1959 set of notes on Paul Tillich. (The Archives).

¹² Giotto di Bondone, (b. ca. 1267 – d. 1337) as well as Duccio, Martini and Sassetta. An example of encaustic-like coloring and linearism in Boccia's work includes *Prodigal Son*, 1956, Private Collection, New York, and *Path of Redemption*, 1956, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel: 81 in. x 70 in., side panels: 81 in. x 38 in., Collection of St. Louis University.

¹³ Masaccio (b. 1401 – d. 1428), Paolo Uccello (b. ca. 1397 – d. 1475), Piero, Sandro Botticelli (b. 1445 – d. 1510), Leonardo da Vinci (b. 1452 – d. 1519), Michelangelo (b. 1475 – d. 1564).

¹⁴ *Allegorical Episode*, 1956, oil on canvas, triptych, centre panel: 96 in. x 60 in., side panels: 96 in. x 36 in., Private Collection, Chicago, Illinois.

and crisis meet with redemption or, worse, exposure and descent, often illustrated in Boccia's works such as *Capture* (1961) depicting decapitated bodies, struggling and imprisoned figures.¹⁵

Within the context of historical art, Mannerism also offers the device of distortion, with its attendant asymmetry, elongation and diagonal composition. The core importance of this style for Boccia's development is the expressive quality of distortion. The stylistic dissonance of Mannerism is mirrored in the triptych *Allegorical Episode*, which takes the elongated limbs of a Pontormo and yellows the skin to create a sense of friction, and discord, captured in the artist's words: "human figure is expressive of the tension between the experience of flesh and the soul."¹⁶ (Fig. 2) The Baroque movement, accordingly, offers dynamism of movement, particularly in the human figure as well as an expansion beyond a classical architectural enclosure. This is majestically displayed in the autumnal triptych *Rome Allegory* (1960).¹⁷ In this picture, as in *Nereus Reborn* of the same year, the human figure creates both movement and narrative through wide calligraphic markings and ovoid forms.¹⁸ Boccia describes this grand scale as an elevated centre of gravity in which the human figure embodies something quite abstract: "the spirit becomes flesh transubstantiation."

Other conditions are described: Matter into energy, energy into space. Glories of heaven and earth. Therefore, for Boccia, this kind of mannerist dynamism illustrating the spirit, Godliness and miracle, is an artistic goal, a creation of compositional synthesis of matter and energy. Boccia writes that he seeks to affirm poetic essence in the material, to create compositional structures that are derived from tradition to form a lyrical Expressionism. This is clearly attained in the strange and muted picture *Passage of the Virgin* (1973)¹⁹ and in Boccia's series of Neoclassical works such as *Lyric Variation* (1956)²⁰ as well as the more Expressionist work *The Last Supper* (1976).²¹ These philosophies and images represent the artist's struggle to unite the expression of the unseen, mystical and spiritual within a picture that also was formally accomplished. In the pictures, the realm of the faithful, the mystical, mythological, and contemporary universal co-exists to form a narrative that is both real and magical.²² Building on Campbell's concept of mythological

¹⁵ *Capture*, 1961, 30 in. x 38 in., Property of the estate of the Artist; *Tall Figure*, 1965, 72 in. x 32 in., oil on canvas; *Night Dream*, 1968, oil on canvas, 70 in. x 88 in., collection of the St. Louis University.

¹⁶ Tintoretto (b. 1519 – d. 1594), Parmigianino (b. 1503 – d. 1540), Bronzino (b. 1503 – d. 1572), Jacopo da Pontormo (b. 1494 – d. 1556), Titian (b. 1485 – d. 1576).

¹⁷ *Rome Allegory*, 1960, oil on canvas, triptych, centre panel: 96 in. x 73 in., side panels: 96 in. x 36 in., collection of the St. Louis University. Caravaggio, Correggio (b. ca. 1490 – d. 1534), Andrea Del Pozzo (b. 1642 – d. 1709), Giambattista Tiepolo (b. 1696 – d. 1770), Guido Reni (b. 1575 – d. 1642).

¹⁸ *Nereus Reborn*, 1960, oil on canvas, triptych, centre panel: 93 in. x 48 in., Side panels: 93 in. x 25 in., collection of the University of Missouri, St. Louis.

¹⁹ *Passage of the Virgin*, 1973, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel: 88 in. x 72 in., side panels: 88 in. x 42 in., collection of St. Louis University Museum of Art; *Munich Angel*, 1968, oil in canvas, 67 in. diameter, collection of St. Louis University Museum of Art.

²⁰ *Lyric Variation*, 1956, oil on canvas, 52 in. x 60 in.; *Theme and Variation: Bacchic Counterpoint*, 1957, oil on canvas, 58 in. x 91 in.; *Bacchus*, 1956, oil on canvas. 50 in. x 42 in., Private Collection, St. Louis Missouri; *Bacchus Revised, #4*, 1956, oil on canvas, 43 in. x 50 in., collection of the St. Louis University Museum of Art.

²¹ *The Last Supper*, 1976, oil on canvas, 46 ½ in. x 72 in.; *Magdalene*, 1961, oil on canvas, 84 ¾ in. x 72 2/3 in., collection of the St. Louis Mercantile Library, University of Missouri, St. Louis.

²² Several historians and artists attempted to establish typologies of art history by mapping out the origins and developments of 20th-century artistic movements and their artists. In addition to Alfred Barr's famous 1936 diagram, "The Development of Abstract Art," created for the MoMA exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* of the same year, notable examples include Miguel Covarrubias' "The Tree of Modern Art—Planted 60 Years Ago" printed *Vanity Fair* in 1933, painter Nathaniel Pousette-Dart's "A Tree Chart of Contemporary American Art" printed in the June-July 1938 issue of *Art and Artistes of Today*, and artist Ad Reinhardt's "How to Look at Modern Art in America" printed in the July 2, 1946 issue of the New York-based tabloid magazine *P.M. Thank you to CC Marsh for her contribution to the research on this topic.*

patterns and belief systems, the artist contends are five “types” of art. These included the “Sacramental Type” which could be related to Magical Realism, and according to Boccia, corresponded as well to primitive art, Cubism, and artists such as Marc Chagall (b. 1887–1985) and Giorgio de Chirico (b. 1888 – d. 1978).

The sacred art object or image is a sensual entity, haptic and desirable. The danger of making these kinds of “sacred images” according to the artist is idolatry, and as such, he inverts types such as the Icarus like figure falling from the sky, a metaphor for moral collapse in *Dreams of Sea Myth* (1958).²³ (Fig. 3) Puzzlingly, Boccia associates the “Mystical Type” with action painting and states that this genre has no subject or object, saying this type of painting elevates structural elements and a pattern-heavy emptiness, which Boccia associates with “Orientalism”, a reductive interpretation of Asian decorative art.

As well, the artist’s notes on Paul Tillich reveal a classification system of the typology of art that demonstrates that the flux of Boccia’s work or use of genres was in fact not only a way of mastering technique and formal prowess, discipline etc., but rather an attempt to avoid pitfalls of mimicry and copying, of unoriginality.²⁴ Furthermore, in his 1957 outline of his own study of research in the field of art history, Boccia contemplates the devices used to engender art. He focuses particularly on multivalent techniques that not only have a command of the natural world but also express the spiritual. Boccia’s relationship with these historic movements should be analysed in depth. Here, however, we can only touch on some of his thoughts about these devices in a few of the pre-modern styles of painting. This is particularly useful in framing his writing and the context of his work as a functioning magical realism.

The Sacramental Type

Boccia, keenly aware of the heavy handed influence of modernist style, plotted out a system of classification including “the sacramental type” to which Chagall and De Chirico belonged. As such, De Chirico’s technical proficiency allows the viewer to be transported from his own physical reality to an oneiric plane. Imbuing objects with mystical light, these artists achieved “ultimate reality” luminosity, as did the Magical Realists who work in “luminous realism.” In fact, De Chirico is often regarded as the bridge between painters of the so-called “Magical Realism” or “Neue Sachlichkeit” because his clarity of form, strangeness of juxtapositions, angular, and realistic depiction influenced these styles. We should also contemplate the fluidity of time seen not only in Surrealist canons, but also in Boccia’s work, multivalence and *varietas* that is medieval in sensibility, in the sense that it uses different motifs, spaces, and time to create an experience of awe and allure. This confluence of influences and ideas engendered the work of American Magical Realist artists such as George Tooker and Robert Vickrey whose naturalist work combines a sense of esotericism and clarity, and had a significant impact on Boccia.²⁵

²³ *Dreams of Sea Myth*, oil on canvas, diptych, each panel: 47 in. x 23 in., collection of Alice Boccia, Los Angeles.

²⁴ Boccia’s Notes on Paul Tillich, part two, 1959. (The Archives). Boccia annotated Tillich’s 1959 lecture: Paul Tillich, “Ultimate Reality, and Art” (lecture, Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY February 17, 1959). Paul Tillich was a prominent Protestant theologian and author of *The Courage to Be* (1952), *Dynamics of Faith* (1957), and the three-volume *Systematic Theology* (1951–63). Tillich argued that Christianity offered a solution to the question of *human* existence by offering the transcendental concept of divine self-manifestation.

²⁵ George Tooker (b. 1920 – d. 2011); Robert Vickrey (b. 1926 – d. 2011).

Prophetic Protest:

Political artwork falls under his rubric for “prophetic protest” and Boccia includes Jusepe de Ribera and José Orozco as examples.²⁶ However, we must also point to the political thematics of Midwestern painters such as Grant Wood, John Steuart Curry, and in particular the influential American muralist Thomas Hart Benton, a native Missourian whose work was in the collection of St. Louis Museum of Art as well as the Nelson Atkins Museum.²⁷ This Midwestern group was for some time disparagingly called “regionalist” painters, and dismissed in view of a supposedly higher form of art and sublimation – abstraction.

Nevertheless, the independent minded Boccia was great admirer of Benton and they shared a regard for the canonical figures of Michelangelo and Caravaggio, particularly the latter’s mastery of dramatic lighting, muscular bodies and the effect of relief.

Benton functioned as a catalyst for Boccia’s entry into work of modern monumentality. More importantly, the younger artist regarded the master as possessing significant talent for conjuring the unseen and spiritual. Benton’s dynamic, off-kilter monumental landscapes represented an “animism”, a set of allegorical forms. From this operatic depiction of ordinariness, such as middle-American landscapes like *The Hailstorm* (1940) and *July Hay* (1943)²⁸ Boccia took his sense of wide expanding space and imbued his own work with the same formal sense of musculature and valiant Neo-Academicism.²⁹

Moreover, a true understanding of Boccia’s connection to Benton is not to simply point out the similarities in the heroic form, but to see the way in which the work of Benton taught Boccia to express abstract ideas through concrete forms. This influence precipitated Boccia’s move from classical training to more theoretical concepts and a plurality of form.³⁰ The highly expressive and monumental figures, as well as the epic

²⁶ Jusepe de Ribera (b. 1591 – d. 1652) and José Orozco (b. 1883 – d. 1949).

²⁷ Grant Wood (b. 1892 – d. 1942); John Steuart Curry (b. 1897 – d. 1946); Thomas Hart Benton (b. 1889 – d. 1975). Dennis says these artist’s modernism was comprised of four elements: formal order and aesthetic independence, mimetic reflections of social modernization, critical negations of modernization, and the use of myth as a device for ordering the furor of American history. James M. Dennis. *Renegade Regionalists. The Modern Independence of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, and John Steurt Curry*. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1998, p.5. Boccia also might have seen Benton’s ten-panel mural for the New School for Social Research, New York – *America Today* (1930 – 31) now in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. We know for certain that Boccia had an admiration for Curry, and The St. Louis Art Museum had a number of Curry’s works, including *The Mississippi*, 1935, tempera on canvas mounted on panel, 36 in. x 48 in. Thank you CC Marsh for this specialized accounting of local collections.

²⁸ *The Hailstorm*, 1940, tempera on canvas mounted on panel, 33 in. x 40 in., collection of the Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska; *July Hay*, 1943, egg tempera, methyl cellulose, and oil on Masonite, 38 in. x 26 7/8 in., the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. However, Benton met with a considerable amount of success and fame not afforded to Boccia, who while influential as a teacher was not well known despite his talent. Benton’s focus on injustice in America as well as quasi-celebratory mythic nationalism was a thematic shared with the earlier Mexican muralists. And as such for the most part both Americans and Mexicans depicted historical narratives, often focused on national or regional themes, as seen in Benton’s large-scale mural *The Social History of Missouri*, State House Lounge, Jefferson City, Missouri (1936). Various scholars have made a case for the “modernist” sensibility of regionalists but while certainly there are formal similarities, this is where the comparison ends in terms of Boccia. These “regionalists”, like the Mexican muralists, were concerned with a democratic affairs, and often their work incorporated social justice themes, as well as urban and agrarian scenes.

²⁹ Despite the formal similarities, Boccia’s work was less socially concerned and treated for the most part Catholic or spiritual themes including *Young Adam and Eve* (2006). These issues were not at the center of his dialect and thematics, rather more abstract struggles of a purely spiritual or intellectual nature troubled him.

³⁰ My gracious thanks to Hillary Kapan for his August 4, 2014 letter about the artist and the importance of both Benton and Stella. All references to Kapan’s text are from a private series of letters (January 2012-August 2014) to the author regarding Boccia’s practice, the copyright is held by the artist estate, Kapan and the author.©

physicality, dramatic tonality and horizontal composition are of the same taxonomy as Boccia's work. Boccia's outstanding triptych *The Dark Night of the Soul* (1987) takes many of these influences and produces a masterful work with its own sensibility, nocturnal lighting, and three dimensionality of form, musculature, and dramatic narrative.³¹ (Fig.5) Furthermore, the pure scale, panoramic composition, use of matte and illuminated colour, the attenuated abstraction in fields of colour, the heroic musculature is seen in Boccia's fine work *Untitled* (1958) the use of muted colour, architectonic structure and fragmentation cleverly maintained both a plasticity and dynamism.³²

In the scope of this discussion, we should mention Boccia's commissioned mural project at the First National Bank, St. Louis. The bank had a long history of collecting modernist work including that of Siegfried Reinhardt. Boccia's remarkable 1966 murals measured eight by nine feet, and explored the history of trade and exchange in the Mississippi valley.³³ In these paintings Boccia uses the illuminated supernatural colour of Mexican muralists drawing on symbology and motifs of Native Americans, in montages that are at once decorative and Cubist echoing a compressed sense of movement and dynamism. This is not to be reduced to a question of borrowing, but rather integration and reimagining. Boccia uses these strategies to produce work intended to contemplate universal problems such as spirituality, identity, and morality. In keeping with this symbolic and abstract treatment of historic events and national identity, according to Boccia, the genre of prophetic protest represented a depiction of historic reality.³⁴ It must be said, that in addition to the muralists and political painters, Boccia included a rather wide ranging collection of artists in this category, and in this passage, characterized Beckmann as a painter of familiar things seen in a strange context.

This exercise was clearly taken to heart, and this kind of positioning is seen repeatedly in Boccia's work as mediation of style, form and the expression of the immaterial, a sense of distance is achieved using allegory, and juxtaposed with a distorted strangeness in works such as *Adoration for a Virgin* (1977). This picture combines a puzzling assortment of iconic imagery in three panels including a central self-portrait in a boat, as well as an image of Pinocchio, a serpent, and figures of a Viking, Napoleon as well as a whole host of mysterious hybrids and figures.³⁵ That these figures represent human foibles, sin, lust, and greed is apparent, they act as metaphor for man's struggle to move above earthly concerns. And indeed, it is true that in post war American art, whether abstract or naturalist, humanist themes were common. The devastation of World War II meant that this was an expression not only of values and limitations, but was also marked by a cynicism that was quite different from the social justice focused depictions of humanity seen in muralist and regionalist painting.³⁶

While Boccia was dismayed by the atrocities of war, he was by his own admission not a political painter, but rather more interested in what he characterized as the "psychic

³¹ *The Dark Night of the Soul*, 1987, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel: 78 in. x 72 in., side panels: 78 in. x 36 in., collection of the St. Louis University.

³² *Untitled*, 1958, oil on canvas, 50 in. x 40 in., Private collection, St. Louis.

³³ Location unknown at time of publication, only available in reproduction in bank catalogue and archival photos. The interior of the former bank building is now destroyed, and the whereabouts of the murals is unknown at the date of this publication.

³⁴ Handwritten notes by the artist; appear to be notes for slide lecture. Filed as "Sacramental, Mystical, Prophetic Protest, Religious, Humanist." No date. (The Archives).

³⁵ *Adoration for a Virgin*, 1977, oil on canvas, 1977, triptych, center panel: 71 in. x 58 in., side panels: 71 in. x 28 in., Private collection, Missouri.

³⁶ This idea is discussed in depth in Patricia Hill's chapter "Painting, 1941-1980." *The Figurative Tradition, Whitney Museum of art Painting and Sculpture from the Permanent Collection*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980, p. 121. Thank you to Emily May McEwan-Upright, Research Assistant, American Art, Monograph Project.

state of man, a universal condition.” He shared themes and motifs with other post-war figurative painters including crucifixions, masked figures, and uncertain ritualistic activities, often transcribed as satire. As such, Boccia’s work is connected to the morbid figural works like Green’s *The Burial* (1947), as well as the sinister proto-cubist crucifixions of Siegfried Reinhardt.³⁷ In addition, Boccia’s work is linked to that of the American painter Philip Evergood, not in the sense that the two artists are completely alike or knew one another, but rather, that they both created pictures that depict grotesque carnivalesque tableaux that functioned as critical devices about morality as seen in a comparison of Evergood’s painting *The Jester* (1950).³⁸ Boccia’s much later works including *Eternal Rites of Spring* (1967), and *The Third Night* (1971) also share this satirical negative worldview.³⁹ Despair and ugliness function to evoke the crisis of not only morality but the problems of the artist who handcrafts his work, and arrives at his vision as independent of concepts of avant-garde or innovation. The artist writes:

What a terrible and sad time for a painter like myself. Man has all but wiped out the animal kingdom. He is ruining nature with his pollution – all based on greed. And, in turn, we are most likely killing ourselves. – Nature, traditional art; these two sources – my sources – these, the American artist doesn’t even know exist. – Just technology – fun – “now”. I paint dreams. I paint man’s plight. But who really cares? Then why do I continue to paint? Because it keeps me from feeling sorry for this world. This small speck of nothing in a limitless and unfathomable space. We are nothing. Oh God – where are you? ⁴⁰

The dark plight of man in a dream world functions as many satirical or disturbing images do in Expressionist painting, to evoke a sense of outrage or horror at man’s immorality seen in works such as *Last Supper for Wayne* (1968). (Fig. 4) This depiction of greed and brutality shows the cannibalistic thematics of Catholicism, a legless man is set upon a fish, and the attending figures seem to dine on the back of a merman.⁴¹ An awareness of this legacy is seen in the amusing picture *Beckmann Looking at My Model* (1991) showing a leering Beckmann in a doorway.⁴² For Boccia, this formative influence may have at times seemed inescapable. Some of Beckmann’s interest in the degeneration of twentieth century society cast a shadow over Boccia’s attempts to transcend such ugliness. The elegant and symbiotic transcendence that was the achievement of Arshile Gorky that fuelled Boccia’s imagination and aspirations:

³⁷ Siegfried Reinhardt, *Crucifixion*, 1953, oil on composition board, 28 x 45 ½ inches, The Whitney Museum of Art, New York. Other artists who express a similar sensibility include Evergood (b. 1901 – d. 1973), Jack Levine (b. 1915 – d. 2010), Mitchell Siporin (b. 1910 – d. 1976), Robert Vickrey (b. 1926 – d. 2011), and Hyman Bloom (b. 1913 – d. 2009).

³⁸ Philip Evergood, *The Jester*, 1950, oil on canvas, 72 in. x 92 in., The Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, no. 64.36. Illustrated in exhibition catalogue “The Figurative Tradition.”

³⁹ *España*, 1969, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel: 64 in. x 86 in., side panels: 64 in. x 42 in., collection of the Provincial House, University of Missouri, St. Louis; *The Third Night*, 1971, oil on canvas, 72 in. x 87 in., collection of the St. Louis University.

⁴⁰ The American Artist, excerpt from diary in Notebook 1 Jan 8 1971 (The Archives).

⁴¹ Specific similarities in terms of motifs include the severed extremities, in Beckmann’s famous triptych *Departure* (1932-1935) The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Accession no. 6.1942.a-c, there is a bound woman without hands. A note should be made here regarding Boccia’s relationship with the preeminent collector of Beckmann, Morton Buster May, and of course from the artist’s own extensive notes on his admiration and influence of the German artist.

⁴² Edward Boccia, *Beckman Looking at My Model* (1991), oil on canvas, 56 x 30, Private Collection, St. Louis, Missouri.

For Ed, Gorky's most noted works functioned as symphonic masterpieces and also as operatic performances, being—not blending—both abstractions and landscapes of figures at the same time. Gorky hit that high note of surreal displacement, as well as mid-notes and low notes. Each work was a work of bodies, emphatically so.⁴³

The Mystical Type

We can say that Gorky's orchestration was not as iconic perhaps as many Expressionist compositions, but rather uses the grandeur of the old masters, and as such was truly post Expressionist. Mysticism is seen in an expansiveness in gesture seen in Abstract Expressionist work, particularly that of Willem de Kooning (b. 1904 – d. 1997), another artist that Boccia admired, studying and drawing the way in which de Kooning would break a line to form a gesture, allowing a figural element to emerge, fascinated by the way in which the different elements worked together. A most surprising element is Boccia's love of the work of Clifford Styl and Robert Motherwell. Despite his lack of regard for many abstract artists, it was the heroic gesture of these painters that Boccia admired, in a sense this was not only a formal motif, or structure but also an unnameable quality about the evocation of the spirit, not only in terms of figuration but also about this abstract concept. Styl and Motherwell were intellectual painters, much like Boccia who implicitly understood the core of successful abstraction. In a set of lecture notes, he writes about the genres of art including "the mystical type" as the non-Objective – abstract kind of art that reaches ultimate reality without the mediation of objects, such as Mondrian, Malevich, and late Kandinsky.⁴⁴ Boccia also respected Guston's later work; the unabashed large scale figurative works in particular, appreciating the exposure of human condition and foibles, an honesty of sorts. "There can be many ways that a painting can function. It can represent, it can recall, it can be the result of a process, it can reveal a struggle, it can question, etc. In talking with Ed about Guston, Ed made clear that other than with Caravaggio and Cézanne, Ed did not know of a more honest painter [...]"⁴⁵

That a formal or structural element such as gesture could be also abstract, and emanate an idea of spirituality and intellect fascinated Boccia particularly as it pertained to his search for a language that would successfully and powerfully express a contemporary crisis of morality. Boccia pictured his work as a mediation of a universal moral struggle, a mode of transformation in the manner of many post-Romantic and post-Symbolist artists. Similarly, he is also linked to the mystical, occult, and theosophical traditions of modern art including the belief in the messianic role of the artist, seen in the work of the Symbolists, as well as the pictures of Paul Gauguin and Oskar Kokoschka among others.

Religious Humanism & Structure

Boccia was aware of the monolithic influence of historic canons, and neither formal analysis nor simple systematic affiliation with American trends is sufficient methodologies to describe the artist's work. Indeed, the historical positioning of Boccia's work in the story of twentieth century American art is complex and at times elusive, particularly in the face of constant experimentation. The artist worked in a number of modernist styles including abstraction and figuration.

Boccia's "Religious Humanism" typology is a figuration of artistic idealism, and represents for the artist "God in Man" seen in the paradisiac work of Poussin, Piero della

⁴³ HK to RB, August 2014.

⁴⁴ Boccia's slide lecture notes, not dated. (The Archives).

⁴⁵ August 2, 2014 letter from Kapan to Berland, regarding discussions with the artist about the function of painting in Guston.

Francesca, and Raphael.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, Boccia mentions that this type also errs on the side of static Neo-classicism. Such static or paradisiac staging only appears in vignettes in Boccia's work among a collection of the abject and supernatural. This type of order or idealism serves to depict the collision of beauty and Godliness with ugliness and sin, and loss.

A Syncretic Approach to Imagery in New Objectivity & Magical Realism

In addition to the historic painters mentioned, Boccia also wrote of the twentieth century painter Balthus as an example of this type of art that functioned to express the presence of God in man, and visa versa.⁴⁷ I give no credence to this statement, other than to say it is most likely the formal qualities that Balthus employed that captured Boccia's attention, including the strangely quiet palette, well-handled paint, and the feeling of reverie and contemplation. Balthus' empirical depictions which couple mood and a sense of mystery can be seen particularly in works like *The Dream* (1955), with its architectural composition and light infused form plastically rendered as stylized and sculptural.⁴⁸ There is a racy coolness to this artist's practice that appealed to Boccia. This coolness, ascribed to the ingenuity of classicism by Boccia was also seen in post WWI Germany, particularly in the New Objectivity genre, understood as a naturalistic response to the deformities of Expressionism.⁴⁹

While this essay is not the place for discerning the difference or sameness of New Objectivity and Magical Realism as they relate to neo-Germanic art work of the twentieth century, we can see Boccia's ties to this genre and its tenor. Hartlaub's exhibit in 1925 of New Objectivity included pictures clearly related to Boccia's practice, such as Dix's triptych *Metropolis* (1927 – 28), which may be instructively compared to Boccia's monumental five-panel work *Il Pensieroso* (1981).⁵⁰ At the centre of Boccia's picture, we see a self-portrait as an artist, sitting in front of a moonlit body of water, a disarticulated model at his feet. A confusing array of scenes populated with hybrid creatures and male protagonists decorate the other four panels, metaphorical and allegorical. In the sense that woman represent a decadence in Dix's work, Boccia diverts from this, and instead uses not only the altarpiece format, but the strange hallucinatory atmosphere, combining naturalism with Expressionist modes and Surrealist imagery.

⁴⁶ Nicolas Poussin (b. 1593/4 – d. 1665), Piero della Francesca (b. ca. 1415 – d. 1492) and Raphael (b. 1483 – d. 1520).

⁴⁷ Balthasar Klossowski de Rola, known as Balthus (b. 1908 – d. 2001). See undated Lecture notes. Boccia also notes Fra Angelico as an artist that fits this categorization (The Archives).

⁴⁸ *The Dream*, 1955, oil on canvas, 63-3/4 in. x 51-1/2 in., Private collection, Paris, France.

⁴⁹ In 1925, Gustav F. Hartlaub, Director of Mannheim Kunsthalle, organized the large exhibition "Neue Sachlichkeit. Deutsche Malerei seit dem Expressionismus." The exhibition featured artists whom Hartlaub felt had overcome the dominant expressionist mode by pursuing objectivity through either Neo-Classical or Veristic stylistic modes. In a 1922 article "Ein neuer Naturalismus?" Hartlaub further described the artists of the Verist, "left wing" as "glaringly contemporary, with far less trust in art, rather born out a denial of art, seek[ing] to expose the chaos, the true visage of our time." Gustav Hartlaub quoted in Eberle, Mattias. "Neue Sachlichkeit in Germany: A Brief History" in *Glitter and Doom*, 21. Hartlaub's exhibition would travel to various German cities including Mannheim, Berlin, and Dresden from 1925 to 1927.

⁵⁰ In addition to this quasi-photographic style, the term has also come to encompass a more hallucinatory style. Also significant is The Museum of Modern Art's exhibition "Americans 1943: Realists and Magic Realists" came to fruition in 1943, curated by Alfred Barr who describes magical realism as, "a term sometimes applied to the work of painters who by means of an exact realistic technique try to make plausible and convincing their improbably, dreamlike or fantastic visions."

Elements of the Supernatural

One can say after all, that Boccia was Post-Expressionist in Franz Roh's sense of the word and this is perhaps a reliable way to understand him.⁵¹ In Boccia, fantasy is dressed in the vestments of the real world; yet tell the story of the mystical and invisible. The element of the *Unheimlichkeit* (uncanny) defines much of his work.⁵² What in part characterizes the complexity is a collision of the realistic and empirical with the magical. At times the work appears uneven, almost patched together, while at others times in successful works it is a magical tableaux of endless narrative, magnification of small details, and epic grandiosity such as the *Midsummer Odyssey* (1975) as well as the late work *A Poet's Life*, a polyptych of nine panels (1998).⁵³ I should mention here as well, it is impossible to understand the artist's work in reproduction, that its roots in monumental painting, sculpture and altarpieces means that its power is a theatrical depth to be experienced in person.

Much of Boccia's writing contemplates the complex ontology of merging the magical with the real, leading to questioning of real and realism, a religious inquiry on spirituality and contemporary life.⁵⁴ Boccia emphasized inward inquiry. His understanding was that a natural or objective form should be paired with a magical truth, which in turn is dependent on imagination and inner contemplation. Boccia's conception of art as a negotiation between the observable world and the unseen world recalls the magical idealism of the German Romantic writer, Novalis.⁵⁵ Boccia says: "There are rules and there are emotions, the painting has to turn the rule into an emotion, and the emotion into a rule (Apollonian and Dionysian)."⁵⁶ In an essay about plans for study he writes:

It becomes apparent that the will of this applicant (myself) is bent on the validity of creation via sensory perception of nature and of artistic tradition. Consequently, while not excluding esoteric introspection inherent of its creativity, such introspection is refuted when esteemed the sole avenue of imaginal experience; which is to say that an Existential Act, which deprives judgment of having been formed via the perception of order in things, is an act which tends to negate judgment in the first place.⁵⁷

The encounter between naturalism and the imagination, the fantastic world of crisis and archetypes is often at the centre of the artist's pictures and iconography. We are struck by the phosphorous tones of the strange and unsettling picture *Good Friday* (1985).⁵⁸ This triptych depicts three seemingly continuous narratives, the central panel features: an Icarus

⁵¹ This nomenclature is used in the 1925 essay by Franz Roh "Magic Realism: Post-Expressionism." Published in full in Zamora, Lois Parkinson, and Wendy B. Faris. 1995. *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.

⁵² Ibid, see Irene Guenther "Magical Realism, New Objectivity, and The Arts during the Weimar Republic." pp. 33-74.

⁵³ *Midsummer Odyssey*, 1975, oil on canvas, folding triptych, center panel: 72 in. x 72 in., center panel: 72 in. x 36 in., Private collection, Minneapolis, Minnesota; *A Poet's Life*, 1998, oil on canvas, nine panel polyptych, 72 in. x 176 in., Estate of the Artist.

⁵⁴ Ontological arguments make the case for the conclusion that God exists, from premises, which are supposed to derive from some source other than observation of the world—e.g., from reason alone. In other words, ontological arguments are arguments from nothing but analytic, *a priori* and necessary premises to the conclusion that God exists. Oppy, Graham, "Ontological Arguments", *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/ontological-arguments/>>

⁵⁵ Novalis was the pseudonym for Georg Philipp Friedrich von Hardenberg (b. 1772 – d. 1801)

⁵⁶ March 19, 1971, Notebook (The Archives).

⁵⁷ Statement of Plans for Research and Artistic Creation, Edward Boccia, 1957 (The Archives).

⁵⁸ *Good Friday*, 1985, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel: 72 in. x 59 in., side panels: 72 in. x 34 in., collection of the Mildred Kemper Art Museum, Washington University, St. Louis.

like man inverted and falling from the sky, tiny red flower in his hand. He has wings and the wound in his side. He is flanked by two ladders symbolic of spiritual ascension. The ladders are populated by numerous figures, many of which are hybrids, a hallmark of Magical Realism. On the left, Boccia has painted a pair of hands holding a serpent with the head of a man, and strange double headed hermaphrodite, as well as Nereus like figure. The right panel is iconic, a tragic crucified Christ stares out at the viewer, fully conscious, a challenge or reminder to the pious, in the background, a grey angel holds a human skull, a symbol of death and hell, and finally a hybrid man-crab crawls along the ground. The ocean in the background serves as an allegory for man's lifelong journey. Like so many of Boccia's pictures, this is in essence a Magical Realist tale that serves as an allegory for a universal struggle, although we can rightfully observe that at the core of the artist's practice was his deep religious faith. Boccia in fact, called himself a fideist.⁵⁹ Fideism is defined in part by the belief that certain kinds of truth can only be understood through faith and by renouncing rational inquiry.⁶⁰ However, Boccia saw the rational almost mathematical analysis and study of form to be paramount, as reflected in the title of his 1957 musings "The study of systems of structure and psychological content of the various devices used to express structure and content."

Similarly, Magical Realism is sometimes defined as an "exclusive or basic reliance upon faith alone, accompanied by a consequent disparagement of reason and utilized especially in the pursuit of philosophical or religious truth." Within this framework, there is an understanding or conception of co-existing realities, which bring about an experienced reality, something not always measurable. As well, in terms of tone, American Magical Realism reflected in the work of Faulkner and Hawthorne has been characterized a brutal hallucinatory Magical Realism.⁶¹ Boccia correspondingly uses a certain brutality to depict the struggle of life; for example, *The Flesh Eaters* (1996) depicts quasi-cannibalistic scenes of degeneration.⁶² (Fig.6)

Per se, Magical Realism is seen as a narrative mode, and ultimately as an expression of the artist's reality. In Boccia's use of archetypal symbology, this expresses not only personal crises but also universal concerns.⁶³ Furthermore, we can consider that while Magical Realism is a way of transgressing in many cases, for Boccia the element of this genre present in his pictures functions as a way to reflect his religious faith. Much like the characters in Magical Realist literature, the protagonists in Boccia's mind reflect an understanding that this duality, these two spheres, of reality and magic or the fantastic co-exist. Drawing on the understanding of Campbell's redemptive hero, we see here a marrying of "Magical Realism" tropes and allegory:

⁵⁹ March 19, 1971, Notebook (The Archives). For a thorough explication of the term, meaning and use throughout history see Amesbury, Richard, "Fideism", The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta ed.)

⁶⁰ For example, Tertullian believed that the truth of Christianity was only to be revealed through revelation and was thus unknowable via reason. See Amesbury, Richard, "Fideism", The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy (Winter 2012 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

⁶¹ Whereas the more lyrical magical realism of Latin American literature combines the liminal with the ordinary.

⁶² *Flesh Eaters*, 1996, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel 68 in. x 30 in., side panels: 68 in. x 40 in., Estate of the Artist. American writers: William Faulkner (b. 1897 – d. 1962) and Nathaniel Hawthorne (b. 1804 – d. 1864).

⁶³ Because of the wide variety of applications of these terms and their changing meanings, critics have found that it is difficult to consider them in terms of one unifying genre, but rather that they constitute particular narrative modes. The distinguishing feature of 'marvellous realism', for instance, is that it brings together the seemingly opposed perspectives of a pragmatic, practical, and tangible approach to reality and an acceptance of magic and superstition into the context of the same novel. Bowers, Maggie Ann. *Magical Realism, The New Critical Idiom*. London: Taylor and Francis, 2004.

But the truly significant Hero artist is really that (love) individual who joins neither camp. He is not a warrior, rather he is a worshipper. He doesn't fight "on the outside" – because he prays on the inside – His artistic grammar – i.e. form, tone color, etc. are the words of his prayers – his paintings are the prayers themselves. He pursues painting as a symbolic search for God. Artistic credos and styles in the socio-economic flux interest him very little. His is not a compromise between right wing and left wing – between realistic and abstract – Rather, his is a bridging transcendence of the two. In solitude, he steps above the mundane battles of the popular soldier-artist.⁶⁴

Ecstatic Spiritual Type: The Expressionist Encounter with Mysticism

Lastly, in his undated essay and notes, Boccia approaches the final category "Ecstatic/ Spiritual Type" examples of which he lists as artists such as Van Gogh, Munch, Derain, Marc, S. Rottluff, and Nolde, calling them "these Pentecostal prophets."⁶⁵ For Boccia, the Expressionist mode is anti-realist, and mystical.

He contends that in this type of work, we encounter sometimes chaos, and a subjectivity that reflects carnality, and yet we know that the aim of a mystic is union with God. One rather intimates from this comment that in fact, the artist refers to his own practice, so closely related to the work of Beckmann. Boccia was reconciled to his inspirations: "I want volumetric figures in space but by using broken planes and broken colours (Kokoschka, Beckmann) I want broken planes of colour to give luminosity, combining Kokoschka and Titian." The numerous sketches, notes, frameworks and studies in paint, pastel, ink and pencil for each painting that still exist for many of the greatest pictures show the way in which he plotted out the technique, intending not to work from opaque wash-base, using black oil line on a white canvas for drawing, when line is dry brush transparent black washes, purple washes, sienna highlighted with black as we see in the accomplished picture *The Third Night* (1993).⁶⁶ In his notebooks, Boccia writes about the reconciliation of the use of ugliness with a higher calling or motive:

Some artists today accept our technology and use it as an art form. Some try to beautify it. Others use it to remind us of how ugly our everyday technology is. Other artists paint in a photographic realism, accepting and reflecting our pragmatism – our realism. Others paint avoiding outer nature and technology to give supremacy to the private soul and the imagination. No wonder I am so alone. I do not fit into any of these popular categories. I paint man as a form distorted due to his inhumanity, greed, and loss of God. Yet, I imbue the canvas with a sense of hope because my strange figures do not exist hopelessly. It isn't ugliness for its own sake – therefore the canvases are not ugly. How many see it as such?⁶⁷

He refuses to sublimate his search for a transcendent state to the simple or decorative. In this context, we can look to a number of works by Boccia that feature the distorted and strange. The Expressionistic work *Lovers* (1963) conveys this sense of carnality, and yet has an undercurrent of critical cynicism, the man seems caught in the trappings of lust and

⁶⁴ Edward Boccia, Sketchbook 7: page 5 (The Archives).

⁶⁵ Van Gogh; Edvard Munch (b. 1863 – d. 1944); André Derain (b. 1880 – d. 1954); Franz Marc (b. 1880 – d. 1916); Emil Nolde (b. 1867 – d. 1956).

⁶⁶ *The Third Night*, oil on canvas, triptych, center panel: 84 in. x 45 in., side panels: 84 in. x 39 in., Estate of the Artist.

⁶⁷ The American Artist, excerpt from diary in Notebook 1 Jan 8 1971 (The Archives). We might refer also to the work of Alton Pickens (b. 1917 – d. 1991) whose strange figural compositions constantly told riddles of the intent of his painting eluding any kind of categorization. The lesser-known artist Honoré Sharrer (b. 1920 – d. 2009) must be mentioned in this context, her five piece *Tribute to the American Working People* (1951) mirrors the composition of a Medieval altarpiece, the clarity of the figuration particularly the Northern Renaissance. This work was painted in oil on composition board, overall: 38 3/4 x 77 1/4 in., collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum. Gift of the Sara Roby Foundation, Accession no.1986.6.97.

ardour, the strident black colouring contributing to the sense of dark allure.⁶⁸ Furthermore, the compressed, frenetic picture *Last Supper for Wayne* (1968) is an emboldened treatment of harsh colour, violence, and betrayal, mirroring the blackness of Beckmann, this anti-realist, mystical nightmarish scene of horror and redemption.⁶⁹ The meeting of the nightmare/dream world in Boccia's works may rightly be categorized as "Surreal" as he combines imagery of desolation with fantasy.⁷⁰

Surrealist Iconographies & Magical Topographies

Where Boccia belongs in terms of such Surrealist practice is complex. We understand that he strove to depict the mystical and religious in the Christian sense and as such is intrinsically linked to various periods of European history. After all, great art was so often intended for the churches, or commissioned by the church that there is much to contemplate. In terms of modernism, and the idea of the inner mind as creativity, we know the roots of this stream of thought began in the eighteenth century with romanticism, and translated ad hoc to the Germanic artistic tradition in Romantic painting, as well as Expressionism. And indeed, the search for the intangible, the imagined, that of another plane is something that Kokoschka often discussed in relation to his portraits, however the means of Expressionism, such as this form of nervous agitation that Boccia so accurately describes, is not the sum of the parts in Boccia's work. Rather, we see the distillation of verisimilitude motifs related to Surrealism.

We can for a moment look to Eugene Bermann's more purely Neo-Surrealist works that were also developed in the mid century, and became fairly well known, garnering the interest of The Museum of Modern Art's director James Thrall Soby among others. The association of Boccia's work with that of American Magical Realists must be made including the Surrealist paintings of Blume and Charles Rain (b. 1911 – d. 1985).⁷¹

⁶⁸ *Lovers*, 1963, oil on canvas, 72 in. x 50 in., Private collection, Mendota Heights, Minnesota.

⁶⁹ *Last Supper for Wayne*, 1968, oil on canvas, 88 in. x 55 in. Collection of St. Louis University Museum of Art.

⁷⁰ Like Boccia, artists such as the Russian born Boris Margo (b. 1902 – d. 1995) whose primary contribution was the development of the cello cut, a new print technique but also made eerie landscapes busily populated by strange creatures are layered by a number of techniques and features, including most famously, decalomania. Margo's sensibility is important to mention here, if only to gain a deeper understanding of Boccia's layered complexity. Margo's works exhibit similarities: twilight light, black outlines, hybrid creatures, although the Russian artist eventually resorted to more abstract depiction of figures as seen in *Homage to Bosch* (1935). In this picture, Margo shows strange rock formations populated by bird dragon hybrids, a body of water at the center with a drawing of a man on what appears to be a vessel. This layering of color, technique, and imagery for a bizarre and puzzling assemblage of an equally puzzling narrative is a parallel development. One should note that in the 1930's America many artists were at odds with the core ideas of Surrealism, particularly the concept of pure automatism as outlined in Breton's *First Manifesto of Surrealism* (1924). Many artists, who were associated with the FAP and WPA, and the Communist party, actually felt that abstraction's primary fault was its lack of political or collective voice. However, it has been suggested that many socially minded artists reconciled with the use of abstraction and automatism when Breton collaborated with Leon Trotsky on the treatise "For A Revolutionary Art." "Art, like science, not only does not seek orders, but also by its very essence, cannot tolerate them. Artistic creation has its own laws — even when it consciously serves a social movement. Truly intellectual creation is incompatible with lies, hypocrisy, and the spirit of conformity. Art can become a strong ally of revolution only in so far as it remains faithful to itself. Poets, painters, sculptors and musicians will themselves find their own approach and methods, if the struggle for freedom of oppressed classes and peoples scatters the clouds of scepticism and of pessimism, which cover the horizon of mankind." Leon Trotsky, "Art and politics in our epoch." *Partisan Review*, 1938. Signed by Rivera and Breton. See also: Retrospective at the Brooklyn Museum, 1939. Space fantasy genre originating with Matta. See analysis of this artist's work in Wechsler, Jeffrey, and Jack J. Spector. 1976. *Surrealism and American Art, 1931-1947: Rutgers University Art Gallery, March 5-April 24, 1977*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers), 59-60.

⁷¹ See the visualization of this crisis of morality in Jared French's *Murder*, 1942, egg tempera on composition board, 17 1/4 in. x 14 5/8 in., Private collection.

However, as related to the discussion of *Neue Sachlichkeit*, the coolness and purity of form is not omnipresent in Boccia's work, yes, we see a naturalistic handling, and a similar sense of strange and enigmatic juxtapositions, but they are not equivalent.⁷² Let us consider for a moment, the following observation about mid century painting in America:

Human limitations, which had become a major theme in representational painting, now included servility, venality, and corruptibility. As the anger in artists subsided, they began to tolerate with a certain amount of bitterness what they previously had condemned as the baser human motives, such as selfishness and avariciousness. At times, they drifted toward otherworldliness, and preoccupation with fantasy, as Evergood did, or they turned to abstraction as a way out.⁷³

Could this be true? Why did artists like Boccia continue to work figuratively even when approaching themes such as avariciousness in combination with what some might consider fantasy? As well, there is a connection in Boccia's work to the cool distillation, empirical if stylized observation of often-horrific events in early twentieth century American painting such as the work of Blume.⁷⁴ Surrealism also played a role, and as such, he can compare to American inventors such as Albright, Leon Kelly and Irving Norman's whose baroque and disturbing tableaux are similarly executed.⁷⁵ All the same, I do not make these comparisons to validate the strength of Boccia's best work, this is self-evident. Rather to show the way in which American painters reinterpreted mythological archetypes, European canons of Renaissance and Baroque art history, as well as the twentieth century avant-garde while expounding on contemporary and personal crises.

Conclusion

The historical positioning of Boccia's work in the story of twentieth century American art is complex and at times elusive, particularly in the face of the artist's constant experimentation. A well travelled, educated and intellectual painter, Boccia was acutely aware of the monolithic influence of historic canons, and neither formal analysis nor simple systematic affiliation with American trends are sufficient methodologies to describe the oeuvre. Nor do the many threads of influence that my research has uncovered, e.g. that of Expressionism and the expatriate influence in St. Louis provide a total accounting of the zeitgeist of Boccia.

An overarching sense of isolation, of a loss of meaning in the modern world is central to Boccia's methodology. Just as he read secular texts, he adopted modernist idioms and an expressive sense of distortion and ugliness to illustrate his own struggle to attain

⁷² "Neue Sachlichkeit" was "new" realist style that emerged in the years after World War I during the Weimar Republic (1919-1933). Artists strove to capture the tumult of these years - marked by the horrors of war, widespread political disillusionment, the worldwide economic crisis of 1929, and the rise of fascism - in a sobering, realistic style. "Neue Sachlichkeit" emerged as the dominant term to describe the idiosyncratic realism ascendant in painting and the graphic arts at the time, but was soon used to describe photography and architecture of the period as well. Thank you to CC Marsh, for her research on this period of German art, as well as the contributions of intern Wendy Timmons.

⁷³ Patricia Hill "Painting, 1941-1980." In *The Figurative Tradition, Whitney Museum of art Painting and Sculpture from the Permanent Collection*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980, p 121.

⁷⁴ Peter Blume, *The Rock*, 1944 - 48, oil on canvas , 57 5/8 x 74 3/8 inches, collection of the Art Institute of Chicago, Accession no.1956.338. While it shares the epic scale and tone, Boccia's work differs in subject matter from the socially realist work like that Paul Camus (1904-1999) *The Herrin Massacre*, 1940, tempera and oil on linen on pressed wood panel, 35 1/2 x 26 3/4 inches, collection of the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus Ohio.

⁷⁵ Boccia's formal intricacy is also paired with an intellectual complexity comparable to other American painters such as Ivan Albright, who similarly kept detailed sketchbooks and journals. Other artist dates: Leon Kelly (b. 1901 - d. 1982); Irving Norman's (b. 1906 - d. 1989); Giorgione was born c. 1477 - d. 1510; Pablo Picasso b. 1881 - d. 1973).

“true art.” In this essentially spiritual journey, Boccia went from Cézanne inspired abstraction to figural over the short course of ten years, whereas many of his colleagues followed a fairly homogenous path: figural to abstraction.

Moreover, an entire discussion alone could be dedicated to his philosophy of art, particularly considering the recent archival discoveries. I end this article with an excerpt of the artist’s own view of the idea of style, tradition and experimentation:

For many artists today, ideals derived from tradition (recent or ancient tradition) are no longer meaningful. All given ideals – ideas – seem fruitless, and infertile. The artist then, finding himself stripped from historical foundation of thought – is left on his own. In his hand he has however one weapon left – and it is the grammatical tool inherent in art itself. He clings to the properties of line form color etc. Since he cannot put such formal elements to the service of a culturally given idea, he must achieve the discovery of an idea – experimentation with these artistic principles themselves. A pitfall has been, and is, for some: art for arts sake. He can’t always manipulate space, hue, texture, etc. (his grammar) and come up with anything beyond a visual sensation. He remains often minus ideas. He achieves work, but he doesn’t always evoke spiritual enlightenment.⁷⁶

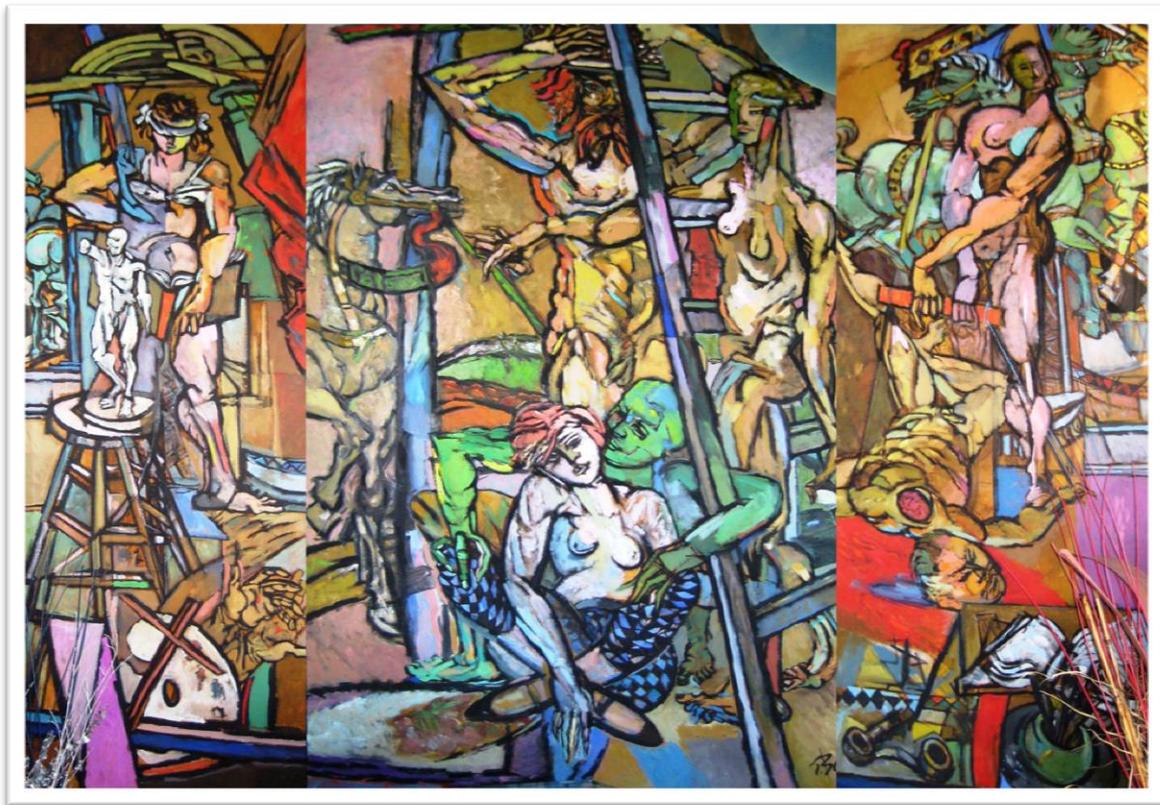


Figure 1. Edward E. Boccia Allegorical Episode, 1956, oil on canvas triptych, center panel: 96 in. x 60 inches side panels: 96 in. x 36 inches. Private Collection, Chicago, Illinois. Image reprinted courtesy of The Edward E. Boccia & Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis. ©

⁷⁶ E. Boccia, January 8, 1971, Notebook 1 (The Archives).

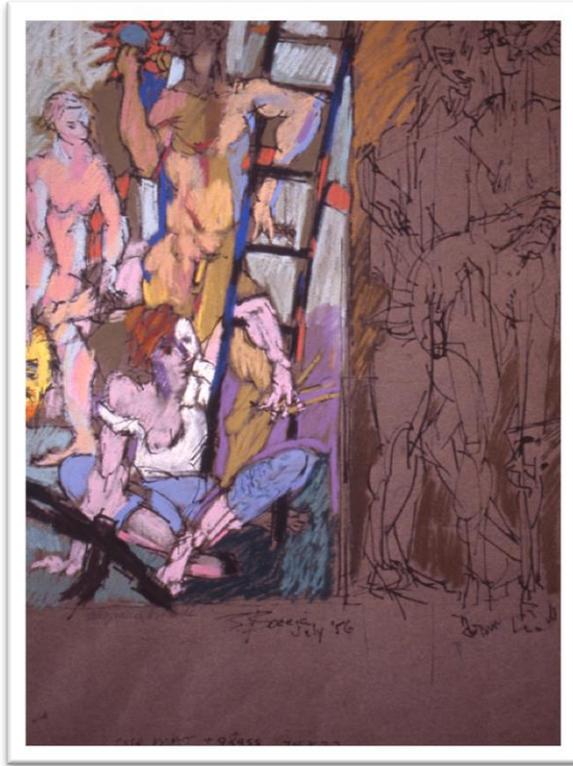


Figure 2. Edward Boccia Study for Allegorical Episode (1956) pastel, chalk, ink on paper with inscriptions. Image reprinted courtesy of The Edward E. Boccia & Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis. ©

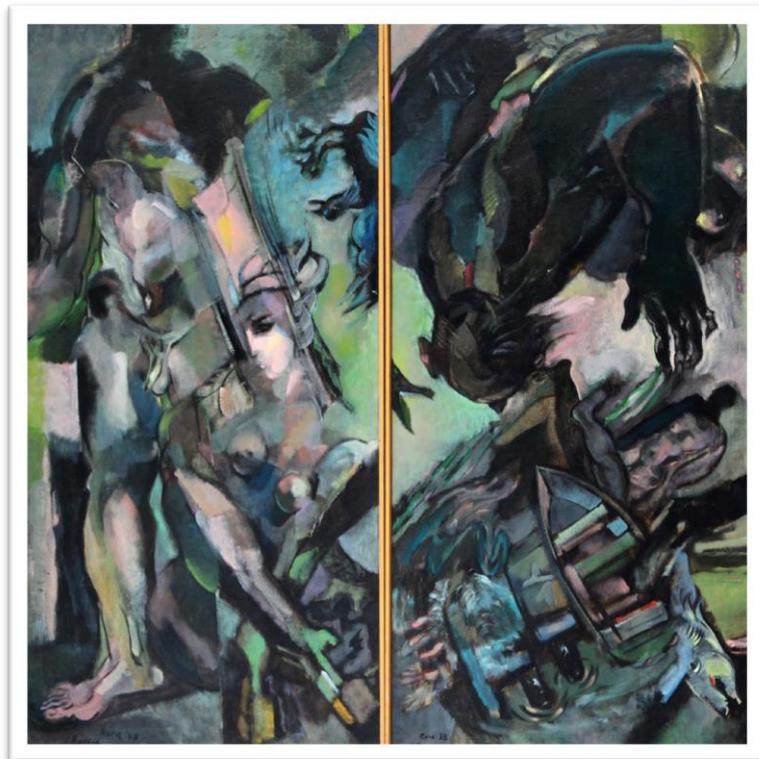


Figure 3. Edward E. Boccia Dreams of Sea Myth, 1958. Oil on canvas diptych: each panel 47 x 23 inches. Image reprinted courtesy of The Edward E. Boccia & Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis. ©



Figure 4. Edward E. Boccia Last Supper for Wayne, 1968. Oil on canvas, 88 x 55 inches. Collection of St. Louis University Museum of Art. Image reprinted courtesy of The Edward E. Boccia & Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis. ©

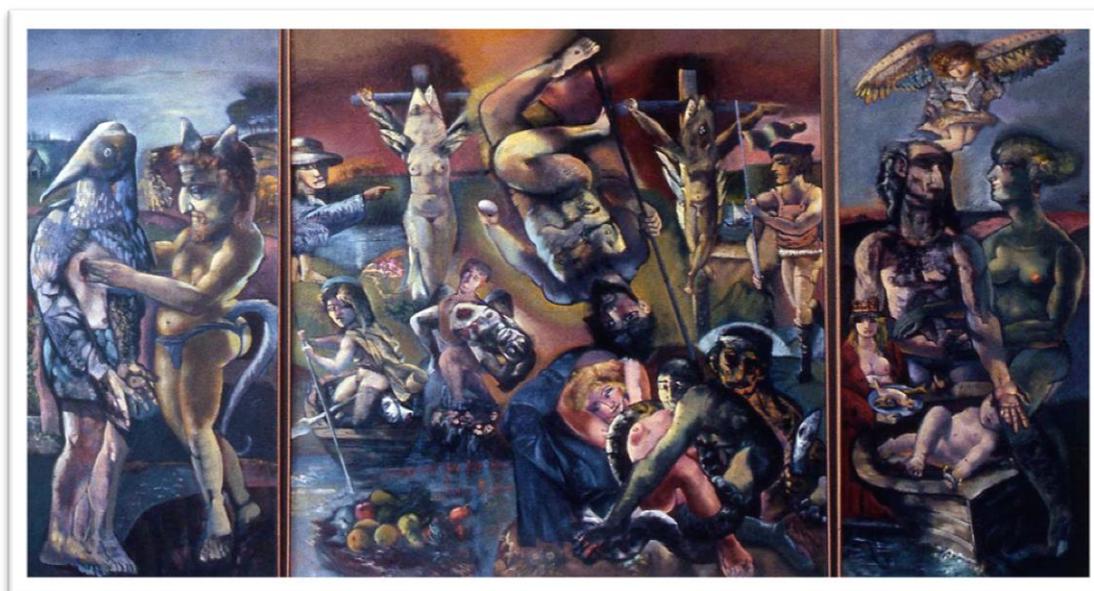


Figure 5. Edward E. Boccia, The Dark Night of the Soul, 1987. Oil on canvas triptych. Center 78 x 72 inches, side panels 78 x 36 inches. The Collection of St. Louis University Museum. Image reprinted courtesy of The Edward E. Boccia & Madeline J. Boccia Trust, St. Louis. ©



Figure 6. Edward E. Boccia, The Flesh Eaters, 1996. Oil on canvas triptych, center 68 inches x 30 inches, side panels 68 x 40 inches. Image reprinted courtesy of The Edward E. Boccia & Madeline P. Boccia Trust, St. Louis. ©

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