

Chantal Joffe: *The Eel*

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Victoria Miro Venice, Il Capricorno, San Marco 1994, 30124, Venice, Italy

The Spoils

First they went to Florian, looking even now like a promontory on a lake, then they went to dinner. It was pink drinks all round, it was green water and black boats and little blue glowing orbs flung up into the night sky. That was Venice 2023, there was a dress everyone was wearing, made in China, paisley print, that could be tied in any number of ways. The music was bells and the constant sound of a cover version leaking from somewhere, *Creep* by Radiohead as a ballad, *Every Time We Say Goodbye* to a samba beat. Different voices saying the same things, different bodies passing through the same stations, walking in Reebok/Balenciaga/backless velvet slippers along the same streets. I'm in a garden, a family comes in and immediately starts setting themselves up for pictures, two cameras, many combinations, everyone including papa slipping rapidly through a sleek repertoire of poses. I take a photo of a Tiepolo, then a photo of my shoe, graze the day with my eye, lock it up inside my phone. Everything is very beautiful, a cannoli with a cherry on top.

Venice is a factory of images, a mechanism to stimulate the eye. It reduplicates itself constantly, in every ripple and pigeon puddle. It's the most pleasurable place on earth, except that the spectacle of people taking pleasure is quite unpleasant, a problem accurately diagnosed by Henry James. At Nico's, Chantal and I order ice creams called *Coppa Olimpia* and wait for them greedily. They are the biggest ice creams in existence, their visual perfection already curdling into something obscene. This is Venice in miniature, its spoils on the turn. The bin men come very early each morning to wash away the evidence, return the city to a site of splendour. Look at a Bellini, spoon in more cream. Not everybody likes the rollercoaster. A man in my hotel, American, wealthy, says to his family, 'I've been trying to change our flight on Expedia. There's nothing to do here!' He says it three times.

Later that same day, we went to the Rialto fish market so that Chantal could buy an eel. We went from stall to stall, past clams and crabs and live snails imprisoned in an open casket by a rim of salt. The eel stand was under the arches on the left. There was only one left, its tongue lolling bloodily. Chantal asked for it to be packed in ice but

somehow instead and very quickly a man in a white apron beheaded it with a cleaver. The eel, already unnerving, became an object of horror, a dense dead thing encased in slick silver skin, blood still drooling from its mouth. It was very dead, definitely dead, but also weirdly and uncannily animated and motionful.

How can you paint all this? Put your body in the middle of it and hope to catch a flash as something vanishes or changes state. The only way to walk in the crowd is to submit to its sleepwalker pace, and maybe these pictures are a little like that. Lido, vaporetto, tramezzini on a plate. Everything is gorgeous, everything contains its secret evidence of death. Too late at the beach and there's a warning of a storm. The umbrella guy's packing up and the sky's so overcast the sand has gone green. Soft bodies like bread rolls in their beach clothes, baring white flesh. The umbrellas look exactly like the tents in Renaissance paintings. The same thing keeps happening again, as the centuries go creaking by. The same foot steps out of time, leather sandal, bag full of sun cream, a tired Madonna up against a pink wall. Esme dreaming on the vaporetto, chin up, rosy sunburned arms encircling a clear expanse of blue. Same old humans, travelling through.

Paper bowl of cherries, navy-striped swimsuit, black umbrella in the rain. The hard facts mount up. Two self-portraits on a couch, the same not-quite-nude seen from in front and behind. White bra, enormous knickers, huddled like a figure from Pompeii, averting the future and then the wind changed. I think we're down to the essentials here, the pre-modern kit: cup, shoe, bed, the colour cleaned away to slabs of sand and pink and grey. Bodily shades, dispassionately tender, nearly abstract. Timeless is a boring word. These pictures are sloshing with time. Longueurs and languor, time running out or stuck on the dial. Days sweet as cream, a ferry to catch. Piling up spoils that spoil, that are disarticulated before you even see the cleaver flash. You can't sidestep this impossible mutability, this insane resistance to change. The eel went out with the rubbish. The cherries are new all over again.

Olivia Laing, 2023