

On Life and Meaning

MARK PERES

Episode 44 – Nick Napoletano – Quantum Entanglements

Leonardo in his Studio

And now a personal word,

As I sat across from Nick Napoletano, I thought of Leonardo da Vinci. I imagined Leonardo explaining his art to a journalist or at least trying to as the journalist busily scribbled away. Leonardo would be in one of his studios in Venice, Florence or Milan, surrounded by bronze castings of galloping horses; half-built floats and carriages; altar-pieces of the Virgin and child; walking mechanical lions and iron and wood automatons; architectural blueprints of cathedral domes and palatial estates; military plans to defend Italian cities; sketches of parachutes, flying machines and tanks; notes on astronomy, botany, mathematics and cartography; drawings of fetuses in utero and nerve endings in the human brain; etchings of muscles and kidneys and cartilage and skeletons; models of dissected cows, birds, monkeys, bears and frogs; movable bridges and barricades; hydraulic pumps and mortar shells; thousands of notebook pages of coded descriptions and findings written backwards; maps of entire cities drawn to scale; murals of battles and biblical scenes; and a few paintings, the *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper* and the *Salvator Mundi* among them, that redefined perspective, light, color, figurative composition and gradations of tone. The journalist, overwhelmed, would ask Leonardo to describe his work, and Leonardo would stare ahead, unable to find the words.

I have not seen Nick Napoletano in his studio, but I imagine sketches of murals, commissioned oil paintings on easels, spray paint cans and rollers, props and objects, projection mapping software and devices, computer terminals and laptops, and virtual reality goggles and headsets.

Leonardo worked from dawn to dusk without stopping for three or four days at a time. He often refused to eat in the throes of his work. Nick claims that he is immersed in his projects to the point of exhaustion.

Of course, it is high praise to compare Nick to Leonardo, but listen to his own ambitions as he compares himself to Bernini and Caravaggio. Nick is measuring his technical skills against the greatest masters of the Renaissance. However, the test for Nick is not his command of the brush and the human form, or whether he can mimic the masters; the test for him is what he has to say: whether his art makes a statement about the human condition, about what is true and real and what is beautiful and ideal. If his art advances form, if it advances an idea; then he is on his own footing. And by every

fair measure, Nick Napoletano is doing just that: his murals reflect on community, on inclusion, on acceptance, on who we at our best can be; his digital worlds invite us into mindfulness, into renewal and contemplation.

Such is art. There is a book on my desk called ‘The Power of Art’ by Richard Lewis, professor of art at Marist College, and Susan Lewis, professor of art at the State University of New York at New Paltz. The first chapter of the book talks about what art can do. It can bring faith to life, expressing the deepest and most tangible beliefs of a culture in material form, such as the Notre Dame Cathedral and the Sacred Mosque at Mecca. It can represent the ideals of a society, such as the statue of Athena in the Parthenon. Art can declare power and authority, as does the painting of Henry VIII by Hans Holbein the Younger. It has the power to shock, as did the work of Marcel Duchamp and Willem de Kooning. It has the power to touch our emotions, as do the paintings of Marc Chagall or the photography of Robert Maplethorpe. It has the power to awaken our senses, as do the work of Francisco Goya and Salvador Dali. Art transforms the ordinary to expressions that take our breath away, from the egg yolk tempera used by Andrew Wyeth to the found marble that becomes the Taj Mahal.

Art is a pouring forth. It marks time. It defines ages. It says hello. It invites us in. It turns us away. It challenges who we are. It condemns and forgives us. It gives us grace. That’s what I see sitting across from Nick Napoletano. That’s what I’m thinking about as I scribble away.

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