

Your Foot on My Hand; Always, Raphael

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I allow for the reading of this title as a joke and a tease. (...) I hope there's an element of defiance in my collages – I sharpen my scissors and jump right at Raphael himself. I – an Eastern European artist – place myself next to him. It is laughably absurd to the point of desperation.

Western painting, as traditionally understood and taught in schools, predominantly followed the principles set forth by Leonardo da Vinci. In this tradition, the Virgin Mary was typically portrayed as instantly accepting God's message, without resistance, doubt, or contemplation about the potential cruelty of this divine demand upon her as a mother. What would the world look like had Leonardo been a bit more accommodating and entertained the idea of Mary throwing herself out of the window in a painting? What if he had considered such a depiction, even playfully, without necessarily intending it as a form of protest or commentary on prevailing gender roles in a society where women are expected to unquestioningly fulfill the demands of unassailable authorities? Perhaps we would be living in a completely different world, and the record of art history would have taken a different shape. In such a world, there might have been a greater sense of compassion and patience for mothers, and the image of the Madonna with downcast eyes may not have been wielded as a means to admonish and compel mothers into obedience. In various sources in Church history, Mary has been referred to as «The Gate of Heaven», «a spring enclosed», «a fountain sealed» or «House of Gold». These epithets highlight the belief that Mary, unlike all other women, possessed not only a sinless nature but also a perfect and flawless body, serving as the ultimate exemplar of purity and utility. She is shown as a model for all women – also through the paintings of the Renaissance masters. She is both a source of inspiration (as she is a woman who overcame challenges), and at the same time a tool for the promotion of strict submission – the child is everything (especially a child such as Christ), while the mother is just a vessel, a nest, a cave for this child to develop in. Without the central role of Christ and the Lord's plans concerning Him, there would be no Mary and, consequently, no story or significance attributed to her.

In Rasa Jansone's new large-scale collages «Your Foot on My Hand; Always, Raphael», the title can be interpreted on multiple levels: Renaissance masters carried out specific commissions while quietly fighting their battles over what could or could not be painted of the Virgin Mary (in Renaissance Italy, for example, she was by no means allowed to be a redhead). Such a premise allows me to interpret the historical Madonna as a literal cutout from a textbook on beauty or canonical depictions of the ideal mother. I then attempt to combine it with images from modern women's lifestyle guides, images from lifestyle, travel and glossy fashion magazines. Both these images – that of the Renaissance woman and the modern woman – combine to create a new complex image where it is impossible to picture today's woman without her historical predecessor Mary. It is impossible to tell which one is more dominant, or where one ends and the other begins.

Renaissance masters painted the Virgin Mary often using their sisters, maids or lovers as their models. The premise that the Virgin Mary is an earthly woman, allowing her portrayal as, for example, a peasant with bare feet, rather than as the Byzantine art canon's Heavenly Queen, became relevant precisely in the Renaissance period.

The Virgin Mary, the mother of Christ, possesses an explicit duality. On one hand, being a woman, she left her mark on the history of Western thought and was depicted in countless variations throughout Europe. On the other hand, as the historical description in my text shows, being a woman, she remained firmly within the confines of a male-dominated society. This is indicated by the depictions of Jesus as having placed his little foot on his mother's hand or foot – He is more important than his mother. It is simply inconceivable to imagine a Virgin Mary who is protesting, screaming, or furious. In that sense, «Your Foot on My Hand» can be read as a commentary on the role and position of women throughout history and (unfortunately) in contemporary society. It's no secret that by becoming mothers, young women almost inevitably find themselves in a place of financial hardship and emotional vulnerability.

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