Marcel Duchamp

The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even or Large Glass, 1915-1923

Duchamp condensed almost his entire painting career into The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even (or Large Glass, 1915-1923). It represented his greatest artistic effort and underwent a long conceptual and compositional design phase before he declared it «definitively incomplete» in 1923.

Widely recognized as one of the most meaningful pieces of art created in the twentieth century, the work has been subject to many interpretations such as the one here by Octavio Paz. Formally the piece is made up of two horizontally contiguous plates of glass which the artist has used as a support for oil painting. His title, in French, literally means The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even and points, on the one hand, to deliberate absurdity while, on the other, it highlights the theme of erotic desire.

Long disquisitions have pointed to the French “Mariée” (Bride) and “mêmes” (Even) as alluding to the Great Mother and to Christian Marian doctrine.

The images on the lower glass are depicted in perspective while the ones on the upper plate appear flattened. This organization picks up a feature found in altarpieces where the higher section tends to host the most important holy image while the lower areas are devoted to spaces more in keeping with our earthly existence.

Duchamp allows no relationship between these two divided realms. The upper one is static like a stopped motor while the lower one – picking up on the principle derived from Aristotle’s Physics as well as from the Divine Comedy – is moved by desire. In fact the two-part division here refers not so much to the separation between the divine and the human as to the male/female dichotomy.

Duchamp left the glass leaning horizontally against the wall for months, a deliberate wish for it to accumulate dust which he then invited Man Ray to photograph. The result was titled Dust Breeding. The same dust was glued to the glass as a symbol of what befalls by chance. In many aspects of the art work, happenstance is indeed a fundamental force:

– the Milky Way emanated by the Bride takes the form of a cloud perforated by three quadrangles. These voids were obtained when the artist dropped a cloth on the ground and traced the irregular shapes formed. Distorting so-called objective measurements, such a process casts doubt on any certain measure and exalts the role of chance as a regulating principle of life.

– the refusal to use canvas as the support for painting. Through its transparency glass includes daily reality, therefore the painting’s overall image is never definitive. The depicted scene, blocked at the moment of its execution, blends necessarily with what happens in its environment. (Duchamp referred to painting as «lateness» and deemed it a way to stop the flow of time.)

– the history of the art work itself. In 1926, on its way back from an exhibition loan, the glass was broken and the artist decided to accept the shattered aspect, limiting himself to sealing the fragments into place.

No matter what interpretation the viewer decides to accept, one thing is certain notwithstanding those who believe that Duchamp was just laughing at art historical tradition: the Large Glass is a complex work tied to Western art and philosophy. What emerges is a world view opposed to the one held by religious paintings: life is nothing more than the result of chance associated with the motions driven by physical desires such as eroticism.
Elements for the Large Glass’s Interpretation

The bride can be identified in the left-hand side of the upper window as the insect-like form with a half-moon-shaped head and the waist and belly of a wasp.

She emanates a grey Milky Way from her flesh coloured boundaries, a sign of the secretions of her erotic desire.

The rod that sticks out of the bride’s body should be her genital organ that seeks, but never achieves, union with the nine males in the lower window.

Having been “stripped bare” by the bachelors, her clothes were meant to be painted along the lower dividing line but this part was never executed.

The men are represented by nine empty suits arranged like a carousel in the glass below. Not really men but more like moulds, machines without personality that have been reduced to uniforms (soldier, gendarme, manservant, delivery boy, barman, priest, gravedigger, station master, policeman) thus representing categories rather than real individuals.

All together the males make a double mechanical movement: below them there is a mill whose blades push them to rotate on themselves while moving back and forth as if in an act of coitus. Above them the two overhanging sticks open and close like scissors, forcing a piston movement on the carousel’s undercarriage.

This whole movement is generated by the object sitting at the centre of the lower window: the chocolate grinder, a symbol of physical desire, of gluttony but also licentiousness. Above it there are a series of cones or filters, for purification. The sliding block that turns the male moulds can also be viewed as a contour shape in perspective and, seen like this, it appears to be a sarcophagus.

This image hints at one of the main sources of the painting: the theme of the Assumption of the Virgin who, with her body intact, rises from the grave towards heaven, surrounded by the apostles. Duchamp treats the religious subject matter in a philological and desecratory way.