

Michael Pisaro/Reinier van Houdt
Shades of Eternal Night (Gravity Wave; 2018)

Listening to the Furies while standing in the *Shade*

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Judgments of beauty can have catastrophic consequences. Some have led to wars. Cy Twombly's *Fifty Days at Ilium* (1978) consists of ten panels depicting selected scenes from one of the most epic wars fought over beauty: the Trojan War. Twombly's paintings, based on Alexander Pope's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, recreates the final days of the ten-year conflict and presents a chronological unfolding of the story, "progressing from the scene of Achilles pivotal decision to join the fight against Troy (Ilium) to an almost blank canvas imbued with the silence of death."¹ Michael Pisaro's preoccupation with Twombly's *Fifty Days at Ilium* compelled him to create *Shades of Eternal Night* (2015-7)—a three movement Wandelweiserian meditation on Twombly's cycle and a companion work that adds an audible dimension to the original series.

Pisaro's composition takes its name from a text inscribed on the ninth canvas, after the defeat of the Trojans. Pisaro remarked: "It has that text [*Shades of Eternal Night*]...written across the center of the canvas, kind of scrawled across the center of the canvas, and then shades of black, gray, blue and purple on white canvas. It's sort of layered in a way that you can't really separate out all the colors. It's a kind of mass of color in the center. I've been really preoccupied with this painting for quite a while."² *Shades of Eternal Night* belongs to the tradition of music that was inspired by paintings such as Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* after Hartmann and Rachmaninoff's *Isle of the Dead* after Bocklin.

Some critics have admired Twombly's ability to capture the devastation that resulted from this war over beauty while others have accused him of perpetrating a devastating war on beauty. On 7 January 1979, in one of the first reviews of the paintings, John Russell described Twombly as "a graffitist of exceptional elegance who has learned how to mate writing with painting in a way peculiar to himself."³ Pisaro's exceptional elegance is not as a graffitist but perhaps as an integrationist—of silence and nature into a soundscape of limitless scope, and this makes him the ideal composer to give expression to the enigmatic meanings of the images that "have a richness and a variety of texture that never give up their last secret."⁴

Twombly's paintings exhibit a shocking absence of style that often illicit ambivalent responses from viewers, leading many to ask: do these enigmatic images represent tracings of ancestors long-past into oblivion, or, are they mere myths: ancient imaginings from an extinct culture created to explain an unrecoverable history? Pisaro's music poses similar questions but reverses the scenario while transposing the argument to the plane of acoustics: are these sounds echoes from a non-existent source or are they entirely the ephemera of a mind intent on creating a reference-less dimensionality? According to Pisaro, the paintings "represent more dimensions

¹ <http://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/85718.html>

² <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/04/michael-pisaro-interview>

³ <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/07/archives/gallery-view-three-striking-current-shows.html>

⁴ <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/07/archives/gallery-view-three-striking-current-shows.html>

than the three or four that we live in.”⁵ For Pisaro the powerful mythological references contribute to their contemporary resonance: “These ‘Fifty Days at Iliam,’ it feels absolutely present, even though it happened 35,000 years ago or whenever it’s supposed to have happened. This, for me, it’s always been a curious folding of time. Like, if time was not simply a linear thing, but could fold backwards and forwards, there’s certain moments in the so-called past that fold forward into the future, and it’s almost as if you can touch them. I started to see that these two things, this weird ultra-dimensionality and this preoccupation of time, are actually versions of the same thing, or at least they cooperate together.”⁶

When he first conceived of the project he described wanting “to deal in some way with a multi-dimensional mass of sounds that feel like more or less one thing, but that have all these kind of embedded fissures and colors already in them.”⁷ What resulted is a deeply moving triptych that closes the historical distance of the events in the paintings and turns measured time, and the linear narratives that exist as chronologies, into rational impositions that prevent us from experiencing the scenes as contemporary.

The first part, originally title “The Site” but changed to “Ghosts of the Site”, is an ethereal prologue that begins with disembodied screeches resonating across the battlefields of history. The original language has been distorted and it is impossible to tell if the voices were declaring victory or crying out in defeat. Pisaro provides a cast of characters and the first of these is heaven suggesting that, perhaps, these ghosts once resided in a glorious land (Elysium) that has been reduced to ruins. The original ruins have been replaced with many subsequent attempts at reconstructing paradisiacal gardens, followed by another catastrophe. The ghosts now overpopulate these decimated lands while their ancestral cries move slowly through the cracks of time and occasionally seep into our young ears that are too susceptible to the more soothing sounds of recent utterings. Our contemporary cities and sounds are layered atop these ancient sites and distant soundings but evidence of their existence can be excavated from the landscape and spectral vibrations are heard within the wild mutterings of modern language and music. Pisaro acts as our medium to these voices and translates them into waveforms that resemble music in the same way that Twombly provides a devastatingly accurate account of events that resemble history. As Russell observed, fundamentally what we see (in this case hear) “is not so much the ghost of Achilles as the ghost of history itself.”⁸

Pisaro begins Part II: “Event Storm”, with field recordings of wind and water (two additional elemental characters from the cast) which were collected on the island of Syros, Greece. They represent the white squalls of Twombly’s largely blank canvases that are violently scrawled with the images and inscriptions from the Trojan War. The first chord enters at approximately 2 minutes into the movement (which lasts 20 minutes) and is heard above the field recordings. In fact, Part I: “Ghosts of the Site”, is derived from overtone analysis of this same chord. But this chord, like all subsequent chords in this part, is not so much a combination of consonant notes as it is a rumbling collection of pitches – the thundering sky that precedes the event(ual) storm. The real tempest arrives at about 13:40, which is very close to the golden mean which can also be

⁵ <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/04/michael-pisaro-interview>

⁶ <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/04/michael-pisaro-interview>

⁷ <http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/04/michael-pisaro-interview>

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/07/archives/gallery-view-three-striking-current-shows.html>

observed, in similar proportions, in the spiraling eddies of tornados and hurricane patterns. The same ratio applied to Twombly's set leads the viewer to (approximately) the sixth canvas of the series: 'Shades of Achilles, Patroclus, and Hector', representing the three characters of Homer's cast who are at the nexus of the conflict. If history is beyond our reach and its consequences rain down upon us while we stand in the eternal shade of our ancestors, perhaps Twombly and Pisaro have positioned us perfectly: as descendants in a storm of events that occasionally drench us with its calamities. "Event Storm" is the shockwave music of history resonating through time.

Part III: "The Poems of Names", consists of abstracted and layered versions of the chords of Part II (using spectral analysis) along with recordings Pisaro made of voices and other samples. It begins with the most significant of sounds: a brush upon a canvas. Here, touch and contact are made audible and elevated to a multi-sensual experience. Presented in such an intimate fashion it allows us to hear each thread of the canvas as if it were a string on the most ancient of instruments. These sounds are occasionally punctuated by the delicate ringing of death tolls, the 'Heroes of the Ilians', followed by a return to the rushing sounds of water. They are the unforgiving tides of history that wash away the grains of memory left on the shores of our long-lost past. The piano returns as well—trembling as it did before, a last sounding of an ancestral ghost.

On the last canvas are the names of the 'heroes'. Hector and Aeneas are just barely visible while others, probably the defeated, have been scratched out. Some are too time worn to be legible. The last name to appear is Rhesus, who was killed in his tent when Diomedes and Odysseus attacked the camp in the night, killing him and stealing his horses. He died as a kind of collateral damage, without ever getting the chance to defend his honor or that of Troy's. In the concluding sounds of this poetic music Pisaro makes Rhesus' dirge our dirge and a fitting conclusion that reminds me of what Russell stated in his initial review of *Fifty Days*: "We are all Troy-watchers, whether we know it or not."⁹

⁹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/01/07/archives/gallery-view-three-striking-current-shows.html>