

**“Overlay”:** Antonio Petracca  
at Kim Foster Gallery  
By Jonathan Goodman

May 16 to June 20, 2009  
529 West 20<sup>th</sup> Street  
between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues  
New York, 212 229 0044



Pantheon, 2009, oil on canvas on wood, 23 x 23”

In “Overlay,” Italian-American artist Antonio Petracca continues to work through his complex ideas and feelings about his heritage. In previous shows, he played with stereotypes associated with Italian-American culture; his perspective in “Overlay” consists of a broader, more historical focus—for example, he offers an image of the Pantheon contextualized by superimposed lines of paint accentuating the architectural outline of the building. Sometimes the humor is broad, as in *Naso Romano* (2008), an oil on canvas on wood; for this work, he writes “Roman Nose” on the wall of a palazzo, next to colossal fragments of a sculpture of Constantine (the first finger of his giant hand points to the epithet). The graffiti is both funny and enlightening in regard to Petracca’s sharp sense of his historical past. At the same time, there is also—at least for this writer—an element of acute regret for the low comedy associated with stereotypes in Italian-American culture.



*Naso Romano*, 2008, oil on canvas on wood, 23 x 23”

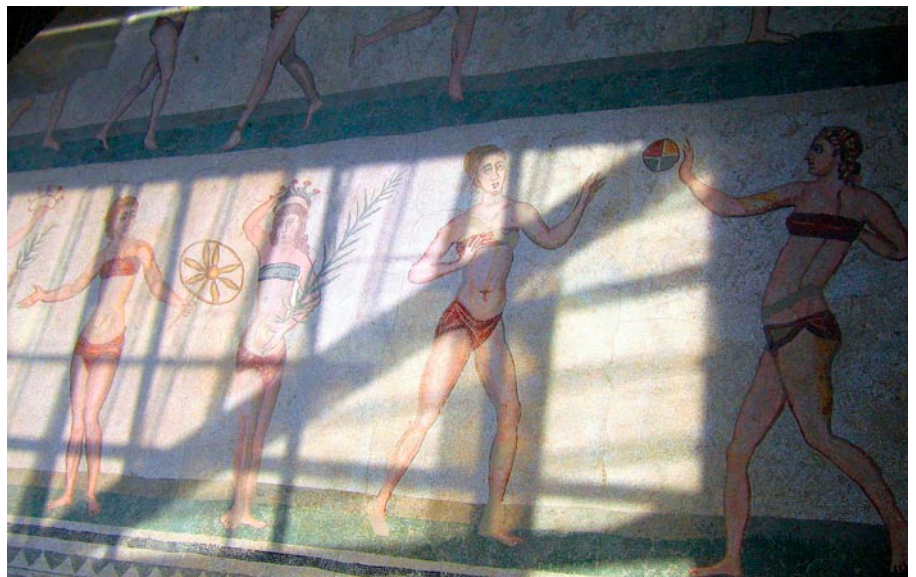
It is clear that Petracca loves historical, as well as contemporary, Italy. In *Pantheon* (2009), a 23 inch square oil on canvas on wood, the artist gives a partial view of the front façade of the Pantheon, whose famous dome and architectural front is disturbed by the presence of three painted lines (one green and two red). These lines force his audience into seeing the Pantheon not as the great, historic structure that it is, but rather as a building in dialogue with such recent artistic acts as graffiti. In the case of this painting, the lines bend and curve on top of the building’s front and roof, reestablishing an objective—and 21<sup>st</sup> century—image of one of the icons of Italian architecture. This bit of distance or dissonance, resulting from a displacement based on the three superimposed lines, show Petracca to be an artist full in keeping with contemporary art. The visual distortion, then, created by the lines corresponds to the thematic distortion they introduce into the scene.

In *Inka-dinka-do* (2009), Petracca takes the nonsense phrase made popular by the Italian-American comic performer Jimmy Durante and invests it with a classical atmosphere. The long, horizontally aligned painting shows a courtyard in shade, whose shadows are broken up by the presence of three arched bodies of light. The bright areas correspond to light let in by large architectural forms, while in the shade, on the right, we see a line of broken capitals, nicely painted in brown and rust colors. But this view of historical architectural detail is thrown into question by the very contemporary title, which distances us from the austere references Petracca makes to Italian greatness in classical buildings. Introducing as he does a contemporary dissonance or note of levity into his paintings, the artist can have it both ways: an earnest classicism that rides alongside an ironic postmodernity.



*Inka-dinka-do*, 2009, oil on canvas on wood, 14 x 36"

Sometimes, then, it appears that the most effective homage is conveyed not by simple imitation, but by changing the rules of the game. In a series of prints Petracca has manipulated on Photoshop, we can see the artist constructing images steeped in antiquity, without which the pictures might only be traces of a distant past. In *The Games Begin* (2009), three bathing beauties in two-piece suits gambol in a field criss-crossed and framed by shadows; the women clearly belong to an ancient era, although it is one that is easily understandable to a current audience. In *Natturmo Veneziano/After Turner* (2009), we see a diptych print, whose left image consists of the campanile of the Piazza San Marco, as interpreted by Turner. On the right is a contemporary photograph of the piazza, with the result that each image contextualizes the other, across history and into the present. This is of course what Petracca wants generally and what he does so well; his changes invent a new history, but one that is open to past accomplishments.



*The Games Begin*, 2009, giclee print on archival paper, 19 x 25"

by Jonathan Goodman, contributing  
critic for Art in America, ArtAsia  
Pacific, Sculpture and Artcritical.com  
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