

HYPERALLERGIC

ESSAYS • WEEKEND

The Quality of Mercy, From Caravaggio to Conceptual Art

Like art, morality persists despite dramatic cultural transformations.



Caravaggio, "The Seven Acts of Mercy" (c.1607), oil on canvas, 390 x 260 cm (Pio Monte della Misericordia, Naples, image via Web Gallery of Art)

I have been writing a book about art in the historic center of Naples. And so I've thought about the greatest painting there, Caravaggio's "Seven Acts of Mercy" (1606). Partly I am concerned with the unprecedented way that it depicts the seven distinct acts, but also I'm interested in the ways in which our concept of mercy has changed.

Matthew (25:35-36) offers the brief:

For when I was hungry, you gave me food; when thirsty, you gave me drink; when I was a stranger you took me in to your home, when naked you clothed me; when I was ill you came to my help, when in prison you visited me.

The picture shows these six actions: feeding the hungry; giving drink to the thirsty; taking strangers in; clothing the naked; helping the ill; and visiting those in prison. And the medieval church added a seventh, also shown by Caravaggio: burying the dead.

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According to Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), mercy is heartfelt sympathy for another's distress, impelling succor if possible. It is not the greatest virtue, however, which Jesus defined as love. Love unites us to God and so is a higher virtue than mercy, which relates to the needs of others, and by implication, it puts the merciful in a superior position to those afflicted. As Aquinas put it:

But of all the virtues which relate to our neighbors, mercy is the greatest [...] since it belongs to one who is higher and better [able], to supply the defect of another, in so far as the latter is deficient.

God, who has no defects, doesn't need mercy, but neighbors do. This moral vision presupposes a social hierarchy and also, as we see in "Seven Acts," a division between the earthly and heavenly realms. Caravaggio's visual culture has become distant.

Bill Beckley (b.1946) is an important pioneering conceptual photographer and a significant art writer. Beckley's 2019 exhibition of new work at Studio Trisorio in Naples was entitled *In The Land of Lemon Trees* after Goethe's line in his *Roman Elegies*, "Do you know the land where the lemon-trees grow?" Naples, the German poet wrote

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in *Italian Journey* “is a paradise; everyone lives in a state of intoxicated self-forgetfulness, myself included.” Beckley has for decades been visiting and showing in the city.



Bill Beckley, “Horse Thieves” (2019), C-print, printed on Fujiflex, mounted on Aludibond, 95,5 x 250 cm, ed. 3 + 1 AP (photo by Francesco Squeglia, image courtesy Studio Trisorio, Naples, Italy)

The large four-part photographic panels that he showed *In The Land of Lemon Trees*, each the scale of a medium-sized easel painting, are arranged vertically or, as with “Horse Thieves” (2018) horizontally. Let’s describe this artwork, in a way that will reveal its meanings, but first we should note that Beckley based his works on a large group of vintage postcards that Studio Trisorio had gifted him. He selected a few, enlarged the image and original, often banal handwritten note on the verso (“Many best wishes and affectionate greetings”) and then added his an original text and image.

The first thing we notice is a postcard reproducing “Seven Acts” in the last panel on the right. Then, looking right to left (as if we had gone through the looking glass, reversing the normal order of left-to-right reading), the next thing we see is the address and the canceled stamp, accompanied by the travelers’ “*saluti affettuosi*” to a friend in Naples. The card, is dated 1948, was sent from Santa Elisabetta, a town in Agrigento, Sicily; it was mailed at a time when everyone used postcards. Normally there is a weak if nonexistent relationship between the image on the card and the written message.

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Bill Beckley, "Horse Thieves" (2019, detail: two right panels), C-print, printed on Fujiflex, mounted on Aludibond, 95,5 x 250 cm, ed. 3 + 1 AP (photo by Francesco Squeglia, image courtesy Studio Trisorio, Naples, Italy)

Continuing leftward, we find Beckley’s deadpan commentary about the relative ease of stealing art rather than a horse. And finally we see his recent photograph of a bicycle.

Scanning this sequence of words and images is something like reading a comic strip. Like comic book artists, Beckley is interested in the relationship between words and images in a narrative sequence. As we look from image to text, and again from text to image, moving left to right (like a Japanese manga), it’s natural to ask how to understand this work.

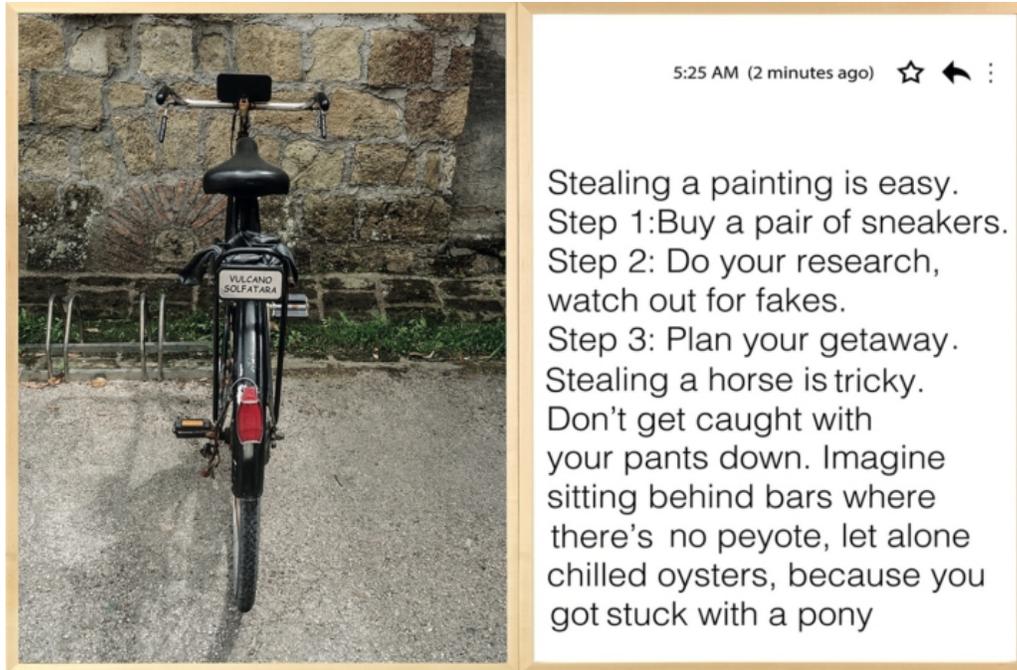
Identifying the relationship between Caravaggio image and verso of the postcard is easy enough, but connecting Beckley’s shaggy-dog story about art-and-horse thieves to his photograph of an old-fashioned bike, not to mention the relationship of the two panels to the ones on their right, takes more ingenuity.

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When looking at a picture or reading a text, our usual unreflective assumption is that every detail fits into place: at least that's the case when dealing with artworks. We expect (or hope) to find some unity.



Bill Beckley, “Horse Thieves” (2019, detail: two left panels), C-print, printed on Fujiflex, mounted on Aludibond, 95,5 x 250 cm, ed. 3 + 1 AP; photo (photo by Francesco Squeglia, image courtesy Studio Trisorio, Naples, Italy)

Contrast a quite different image-word relationship, in Roberto Longhi’s *Il Caravaggio* (A. Martello, 1952), a book featuring marvelous color images and an evocative text. He describes “The Seven Acts of Mercy” as, in my homespun, gawky, Google-assisted translation:

[...] an ancient, communal, Romanesque subject that inevitably came to him, as soon as he arrived, at some famous crossroads, mixed up between rich and poor, between misery and novelty.

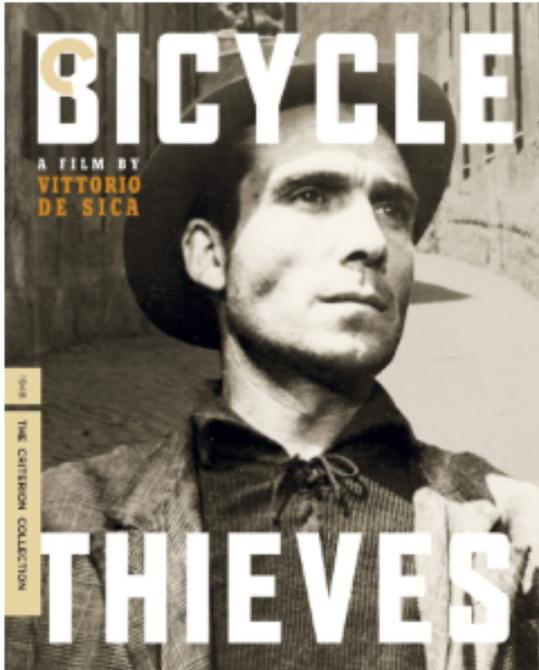
([...] *un soggetto antico, comunale, romanico che gli sarà venuto inevitabilmente, non appena giunto, in qualche croccicchio famoso, rimescolato tra ricchi e poveri, tra miseria e novità.*)

This is an admittedly eccentric if brilliantly inventive account of the painting’s inception. It is what we expect to find in an art history book — accounts that are clichéd or original,

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"Bicycle Thieves" (1948), directed by Vittorio De Sica (image via criterion.com)

convincing or implausible. Longhi's interpretations are famously stylish but nevertheless ring true.

Beckley too is a stylish writer, but "Horse Thieves" is a work of visual art and the relationship of its text to its pictures is elliptical. Here, then, are a few of my thoughts; yours might be significantly different.

Stories about the theft of Caravaggio's are commonplace, the subject of numerous deceptive stories. His "Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence" (1609) went missing from a Palermo chapel in 1969 and its whereabouts are the subject of ongoing speculation. It's been

often suggested that some Mafia kingpin enjoys solitary possession.

Caravaggio's painting is bookended in "Horse Thieves" by Beckley's photograph of a bicycle parked in an outdoor rack. The image, combined with the work's title, calls to mind Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* (1948), one of the most famous Italian films. In fact, De Sica's original title is *Ladri di biciclette*, or *Bicycle Thieves*, which in the translation, approved by the director, become singular, *Thief* (see Gian Piero Brunetta, *The History of Italian Cinema*, Princeton, 2009). Its depiction of the poverty and devastation of postwar Rome is echoed by the neglected neighborhoods of Naples that form the setting for Roberto Saviano's *Gomorrah*, the current Netflix series based on his 2006 book of the same name and its 2009 film adaption.

Could "Horse Thieves," then, be considered a freestyle interpretation of Caravaggio's "Seven Acts"? Not exactly! There is, however, a slippage of interpretation that opens up between the instructions on theft juxtaposed with the photo of the bicycle, and Caravaggio's depiction of the destitute, which De Sica evoked so brilliantly.

Also, in Beckley's photograph there is a small signage plate attached to the bicycle's rear carrier rack that reads "Vulcano Solfatara," the name of a crater volcano in Pozzuoli, near

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Naples. Could it be an oblique reference to Mount Vesuvius, the volcano that devastated the region two millennia ago?

In a way, “Horse Thieves” can be viewed as akin to Pablo Picasso’s painted revisions of Old Master pictures. With the elliptical relationship between his text and photograph, mirroring the elliptical relationship between a typical inscription on the back of a postcard and the image it bears, Beckley offers a poetic employment of “Seven Acts, one suggests a unity of the ancient past, the Italian Baroque, and the current era.

“Seven Acts” is permanently displayed in a church, the setting for a confraternity devoted to acts of mercy. It reads as an instruction manual for the dire circumstances faced by the Italian nation in its greatest crisis since World War II.

Just as Caravaggio’s picture continues to impress and inspire viewers, even if it can be seen only in photographic form for the foreseeable future — a future unwittingly evoked by Beckley’s artwork — so does the ideal of mercy survive, apart from that particular Catholic historical context. Like artworks, morality persists despite dramatic cultural transformations. And it is the power of art that a slyly conceptual work like Beckley’s “Horse Thieves” can catch us by surprise with newfound meanings in a wrenching new context.

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