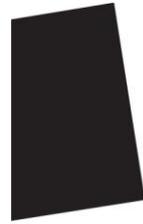


# Andrew Mania: COMMA 09

## Essay by Norman Rosenthal



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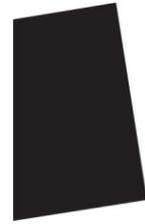
Andrew Mania: COMMA 09

**Andrew Mania and the Art of Longing**

*Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt,  
Weiß was ich leide!  
Allein und abgetrennt  
Von aller Freude,  
Seh ich ans Firmament  
Nach jener Seite.  
Ach! Der mich liebt und kennt,  
Ist in der Weite.  
Es schwindelt mir, es brennt  
Mein Eingeweide.  
Nur wer die Sehnsucht kennt  
Weiß was ich leide!*

Only those who know longing  
Know what I suffer!  
Alone and cut off  
From every joy,  
I search the sky  
In that direction.  
Ah! He who loves and knows me  
Is far away.  
My head reels,  
My body blazes.  
Only those who know longing  
Know what I suffer!

Goethe's poem is one of the most famous in the German language. It has been set to music by many composers, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Tchaikovsky among them. A painful yet exquisitely beautiful sense of romantic longing permeates the self that it so eloquently describes. What makes Andrew Mania's work special in a world of art dominated either by irony or at best, psychological selfanalysis, is that this young artist is happy to share with us his own feelings of longing and romantic pain. Longing is a very complex emotion that is at the very centre of the



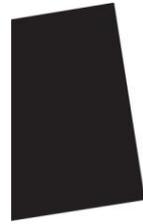
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romantic era in both poetry, music, and of course, art. In England, one merely has to think of the Pre-Raphaelites, for example, Dante Gabriel Rossetti. Longing speaks not of hope, but of the unattainable, of a self-indulgent beauty, of a certain kind of suffering, of which it is far too easy to disapprove of today.

The German word *sehnen/sucht* is a composite word much used by German writers that perfectly analyses the depths of emotion contained in longing. 'Sehnen' implies painful longing. 'Sucht' is the German word for druglike addiction. Such senses permeate Mania's art in a highly personal and original way that both depict a landscape of dreams and repay our own empathy with them. They seem to speak of an unfulfilled and unrequited love for persons and also for place, and even for a lost and therefore equally unattainable time past. 'Mania' in English seems a name too perfect for an artist. In fact the word is of Polish origin. Mania's father comes from Silesia in what is now Poland, but which for long periods of history, was German, even until 1945, until the Second World War. For a young artist born and raised in Great Britain, there is a real sense of longing for a lost Central European homeland that in reality barely exists today. It is at the very centre of Mania's spectacular installation for this exhibition, one of a number that he has already managed in a short career and that have been a leitmotif of his work.

In these installations, the setting of each painting and drawing becomes of great importance. At his exhibition in Chisenhale Gallery in 2006 he placed in the centre of the space, a large 'gingerbread-like' hut which he called *Gogolin* – the name of his father's village before the vicissitudes of European history blew him to the shores of the West of England. The house was hung with Mania's own drawings as well as various votive images that recalled his unattainable dream of the past, yet felt strangely contemporary to the viewer. The same is true of the environment being presented in this exhibition. It consists of part of a light brown room made of 19th Century French wooden paneling such as might easily be found in a Central European house. At least it is certainly not an English place that we are looking at. Into the paneling, a hole has been bored for looking through, hung with framed drawings. One is a found landscape painting, hung on its side, and on which Mania has drawn a portrait. A hole has also been bored into the painting so that it can be hung over the hole in the paneling. In the room there are two elements, one is a female white mannequin figure from a shop window, painted and scribbled over with thick blue marks. The model holds up an empty frame, suggestive of an empty image for the viewer to supply in their head. The second element is a wooden table onto which Mania has placed a window frame divided horizontally into two sections, one of which has been 'boarded up' with a drawing.

Of course this environment recalls, in its own original way, almost a century ago, worlds invented by De Chirico in his then highly original metaphysical paintings made before the First World War and of course the found objects and readymades of Marcel Duchamp. The object on the table seems to amalgamate in miniature Duchamp's famous *'The Large Glass' (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even)* of 1915-23, with its complex programme of sexual role-play, and the smaller readymade conceived in 1920 called *'Fresh Widow'* (a pun on the expression: French Window.) The hole in the paneled room of course functions like Duchamp's last work *'Étant*



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*donnés*' through which the legendary tableaux of the eroticized naked female body, lying in a strange, illusionistic landscape may be spied.

Through the hole in Mania's environment, we too can spy, but also choose to walk around to a large painting of equal dimension, loosely based on Matisse's legendary masterpiece of 1906 called '*The Dance*' commissioned by the Russian industrialist Sergei Schukin for his house in Moscow. The painting was recently seen for the first time in London. Its bold blue, green and orange composition still caused a sensation. Even now, it seems a veritable premonition of Stravinsky's '*Rite of Spring*' composed only three years later, and another work of astonishing boldness in its time. Mania's '*Dance Painting*' paraphrase will be largely black, recalling an earlier painting of his, done very much in the manner of De Kooning's '*Black Painting*'s of the late 1940's. It is curious to anticipate what the effect of this installation will be, especially when one recalls that the Chisenhale environment was accompanied by an extract of a loop of a black and white film of a dance routine featuring Fred Astaire. The dance painting, in its deliberately more primitive way, will surely have a similar function in this show - on the one hand, wild and exhilarating, on the other hand, another aspect of nostalgic longing for the unattainable. We can neither dance like Fred Astaire, nor can we go back to the natural state of the '*Rite of Spring*'. But dancing and empathy with dancing, is as good a way as any to forget pain and longing. But in Mania's art, perhaps it is the framed portrait drawing that holds our interest the most. Any portrait of a true artist, even of the so-called 'other', significant or not, is always ultimately a selfportrait. The portraits of Andy Warhol exemplify this perfectly, whoever is the sitter, be they she or he, a star of stage, screen, fashion, art world, economic or political power, or a relative, friend, or object of love, each is ultimately an aspect of Warhol's persona and being. The same is true for Mania. Each face is ultimately a self-depiction and an expression of his own perhaps fragile personality. Indeed, they beg the question of how particular they are. It remains ambiguous as to whether they are recollections of specific longing for a person, or the manifestation of a more generalised emotion. The depiction of the eyes and mouths are always the main focus of Mania's drawings, and in a group of new ones made on board, they are almost the only features left, floating gently above a Gainsborough-like landscape, ghosts and witnesses to love both eternally present, and forever lost.

Frames too, are a highly individual aspect of Mania's work, and contribute much to its mood. The frame is also part of the 'staging' of each drawing. We may imagine Mania scouring the antique shops of Bristol, where he lives and works, looking for used, cheap frames, on which he paints or draws Twombly-like marks that evoke again, his own particular world. Recently, Mania showed work in an exhibition in Paris, in which he could be seen alongside once radical, now romantic and historically evocative works by artists such as Duchamp, his brother Jacques Villon, Picabia and Man Ray. His work in their company must have looked comfortable. We can imagine it sitting in its own contemporary way, quite happily in the great tradition of these great French Dada and Surrealist artists of a time lost and past.

*Norman Rosenthal*