

## Dr. Josephine Neil

Affiliated Postdoctoral Researcher, Center for the Art and Architectural History of Port Cities  
*The Incomprehensible Divine in Caravaggesque Painting*

Why, how and to what effect did Battistello Caracciolo (1578-1635), as a major representative of Neapolitan Caravaggesque painting, visualise divine absence for religious communities? Two specific paintings by Caracciolo, *Baptism of Christ* (1610, Girolamini Gallery, Naples) and the *Death of Abel* (1625, Capodimonte Museum, Naples) relate to contextual issues of representation and integration of Jewish conversos in the Christian community of seventeenth-century Naples. The project reveals for the first time the full degree of influence of apophatic spirituality. This is a mystical process which approaches God by denying a knowledge of him that arrives through the senses and speaking of God only in terms of what he is not rather than what he is. In the seventeenth century Naples was a Spanish colony, in which the monarchy mobilised Catholic faith as a link for integration and cultural communication (Galasso, 1982). In fighting heresy, the Church utilized public ritual to facilitate a perceived 'spiritual union', visually and emotionally seducing observers in attempts to win over their souls (Selwyn, 2004). However, an unusual promise and denial of divine grace, which complicates a message of presence and conciliation through ritual, is identifiable in Caracciolo's paintings, challenging an ideal of faith as promulgated by the Catholic Reformation. In opposition to the immediacy characteristic of Caravaggio's style, Caracciolo emphasized mystery, silence and austerity. This coincided with a focus on contemplative practice as propounded by the Spanish mystics such as John of the Cross (1542-1591), in which divine absence preceded union (Schütze, 2007). A fundamental component of this spirituality was negation.

In Caracciolo's *Baptism of Christ*, the ambiguous use of dense shadow stands at complete odds with the narrative and brings into focus the narrative of Christ's Passion, evoking a baptism into Christ's death (Berdini, 1997). In its profound accentuation, there is very little discernible sign of water which throws into question a sacramental route to conversion and appears to prioritize a baptism by Spirit. This raises the question as to whether the Baptismal rite has true efficacy unless it is accompanied by inner faith? This is analogous to the challenges surrounding religious discipline and the inner conformity of the conversos to the Catholic faith in late sixteenth century Naples. I will rigorously assess the similarities and divergences of Caracciolo's *Baptism* from iconographical tradition. Research will include analysis of the Council of Trent decrees on baptism and its relation to the accessibility of grace, the theory of colour in early modern art historical treatises, the historical and religious context of public Easter baptisms in early modern Naples, the role of darkness in both the apophatic tradition and in Caravaggesque painting and the historical complexities of converso integration in Neapolitan society.

The second painting under investigation is Caracciolo's *Death of Abel*, in which the ambiguity of redemptive suffering is identifiable. Believed to be commissioned for the Duke of Laurenzano, a private patron, the Duke was an aristocratic representative in the administration of the Monti di Pietá in Naples, a charitable institution designed to weaken Jewish usury. The purpose will be to determine whether there is any promise of salvation to be found in ritual lamentation, redemption that may have been found in Abel's spilt blood, or divine response to Adam and Eve's adoptive attitudes of grief and penitence. Research material will include the intellectual history concerning Abel's body as a type of Christ, the

significance of his redemptive wounds and Adam and Eve's respective relation and disconnection from Abel. I will also assess the contrasting significance of Abel's blood and the figure of Cain in text and tradition. Key research on the ritual context will include the association of ritual mourning with the heretical behaviour of the conversos in Naples. I will also look at inquisitional procedures and the role sacramental penance played in the lives of the conversos in Naples, in attempt to reform and regulate behaviour.

In 1982 Romeo de Maio demonstrated that much of the iconographical content of religious painting was prompted by practices imported from elsewhere, including Spanish Quietism (De Maio, 1982). This spirituality favoured interior passivity and blindness over pious action as a way to union with God. In order to ascertain the varying degrees of divine absence at work in the paintings, their associated theologies will be explored in parallel. How might the popular heretical publications of Juan de Valdés' *Benefit of Christ* (Italy, 1543) and Miguel de Molinos' influential *Spiritual Guide* (Italy, c.1675) have mediated viewers' perceptions of Caracciolo's *Death of Abel*, in particular among new Christians in Naples? Both case studies by Caracciolo question an accessibility of salvation through ritual and undercut the very essence of Christian sacramentality. They also offer unique insights into visual ambiguities of divine presence, the anxiety of faith, its artistic expression, and the fluidity of spiritual ideas and practices.

The project has two aims. First, it will reveal issues associated with public ritual and its relation to the accessibility of salvation. How was sacred space constructed and defined in these case studies, as a part of public ritual and in terms of interiority? The second aim will call into question the labels by which we associate 'Catholic Reformation' faith with 'Caravaggism'. In Caravaggesque painting, investigation of how ambiguity addresses the 'real' as fictive, will question whether accessibility to the sacred resides on the limitations of art and on the finitude of human perception.

This research will formulate two chapters in a forthcoming book, *The Incomprehensible Divine in Caravaggesque Painting* already under contract with Routledge Research in Art and Religion. A significant part of the research has already been done and also comprises a study on the absence of divine reassurance in Jusepe de Ribera's *Martyrdom of St. Lawrence* and the reception of grace in Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Crucifixion with the Virgin and St. John*. This resource will also provide key information on broader theological concerns bridging Catholic, Lutheran and Calvinist ideologies, which as yet are rarely brought into direct discourse in seventeenth-century Caravaggisti studies.

As part of my residency at La Capraia, I will be discussing my ideas and research as a member of the academic community and liaising with noted curators and academics specializing in the works of Battistello Caracciolo, including Maria Cristina Terzaghi and Stefano Causa. Resources will address the public Easter and Corpus Christi rituals in Southern Italy, including its complications on a social and political scale. On-site visits will include the Girolamini Gallery, Capodimonte Museum and other key sites where Caracciolo's paintings are housed. Access will also be required for the Biblioteca Nazionale and the Archivio di Stato di Napoli, for sources on Caracciolo's commissions, their context, Spanish Inquisitorial documents relating to heresy, the trials and sentences of Juan de Valdés and Miguel de Molinos and the influence of illuminism in southern Italy.