

Puncto by Christina Maile

Puncto. P-U-N-C-T-O. It's a philosophical word I found by accident. It means to encounter an area or an object of un-intended significance. For example, say you're looking for lost money. And way in the back of your closet, your hand closes upon a scrunched-up piece of paper in the pocket of a coat you have not worn for years. When you pull it out, instead of the ten dollar bill you hoped for, you unfold a list in your handwriting... "Cigarettes, beer, ice cream". It's been years. You no longer smoke. You no longer drink. Ice cream makes you fatter. That list is a puncto – an object of un-intended significance. A piece of your past that somehow comments on your present.

So for the interview next week, I thought I would try out this PUNCTO idea. I have found that the best way to deal with questions about my paintings is to be enigmatic. What I want to do with you now is a practice run. I'll show 3... 4 images and you tell me whether this puncto idea works.

CLICK

Let's see, focus. Big surprise. Not a painting. Actually its a an old black and white photo of me and my sister which I almost threw out. Then I realised - puncto, this photo was an object filled with unintended significance. I'm about 6 or 7. She was about a year younger. She's the one on the left, the one who is crying. Its the front yard of our house. I know, we look like two lost dots. That's the way they took pictures in those days. They tried to get everything in the shot. I think its spring because of the pale little flowers pinned onto our pale little coats. Pictures were only for special occasions. So we must have been going to a party, or to a funeral. But take a look at that white shape - there on the third step of the stoop, painted on a black rectangle. The short serif, the flat line, the sweeping curved downstroke, a 7for 714 Lexington Ave. Now I'll show you what it is about those numbers. Look at the second monitor.

CLICK. This is the painting you like so much. ..Oh yeah it is upside down. Doesn't matter. Still works. Now do you see the resemblance? All these years I thought I was painting the interplay of constellations against the black night. But ... in one painting after another, 7,7,7 CLICK, 171 CLICK 477114 all over the place. They're not the white trails of galaxies on the black cosmos. Not "Study in Stars" which by the way is the title of this one. No, it's the same white numbers on black over and over again. Maybe a curley cue is different here and there. But those numbers on that stoop are already what my paintings will be. It's remarkable.

But there's another puncto in the photo. Look at the wall behind us. It's the back of the corner bar and grill. You know I used to think they were called bar and grills because they had bars and grills on their windows. No I never ever got to go inside. I did know a kid. His name was Freddie, who lived above it. He had a withered arm. It was strange looking, like a broken doll's, hanging from his shoulder. My sister said it was great for shoplifting. People would look at him and his withered arm . And they'd never see my sister stuffing half the store under her coat. After that, they got into breaking and entering , but that has nothing to do with anything.

What's important is ... CLICK...a close-up of photo... those sharp pieces of brick lying on the ground next to our feet. They were constantly falling off the wall of the bar and grill. We used to pick the sharpest ones and press them inside dirt bombs or snow bombs . God, people would get all cut up when they'd get hit by them. But get this, the color of these sharp pieces of brick is what painters call cadmium It's also the colour of the capes used by matadors to hide their swords. That's the puncto. Colours are weapons. CLICK Look at this painting. The reds. Everytime I fill my brush with cadmium red or actually any colour it's war. CLICK Cobalt blue - carmine red, cadmium yellow, lead white.

All weapons, and poisonous to your system. Perhaps that is why painters have this rep for being mad as hatters. All those poisonous colours getting into the skin, into the lungs, into the open wounds of the eyes. They slowly kill you. How often have I, myself, picked up a banana which was resting inadvertently on top of a glop of chromium green - a colour now banned - and ate them both. To think these pieces of rubble photo hold such unintended significance.

CLICK closeup of the photo. Now look at the area on her right. Uh? I don't know why she is crying. Maybe it was the hat. They made us wear these scratchy hats which gripped our heads like steel pincers. I must have taken off mine. I'm sure I had one. They always dressed us alike. Okay, but let's get back. Look at the rhythm of the windows. The cellar window, a small elegant square, then the golden rectangle of the first floor window. That? You mean the thing hanging in the first floor window. That's a picture of the virgin mary. Would you believe it, my mother, my father, my grandmother, my 8 brothers and sisters lived all jammed together on the first floor behind the virgin mary. You didn't know I had so many? I know. I don't talk to any of them. Once was enough.

CLICK. So look at the sizes of my canvases. They are the exact ratios of those windows. 2 by 2 CLICK; 5 by 7, CLICK 16 by 24. Puncto - the unintended significance of... What? Well we all lived on one floor because we had a boarder who lived on the top floor. She had like 4 kids. I remember once coming home from school, and there she was holding her new-born baby out the window, like... like Rapunzel about to throw down her hair. And she is yelling to her boyfriend, "Johnny, Johnny," she says, "you better get your ass back here, or I swear I'm gonna let go." But Big Johnny who hung out at the bar and grill, maybe even owned it, just got into his big black caddy with the and zoomed away CLICK

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Okay so here's the last puncto. a closeup of those flowers in the photo. See, just above where my sister's hand is clutching at my coat?, do you see the corona of pale petals. I know, it looks abstract with all the shadows. Here I'll go back to the bigger photo CLICK . See how she's leaning into me, her face anguished with the tears, her hand grabbing my coat, pulling. As if asking me to do something, as if wanting me to do something. But , I always stared right past her, right past all of them, really. CLICK back to the closeup. At first I thought the puncto was the long needle buried in the flowers holding them to the coat. No. CLICK Look at my recent landscapes. Amazing isn't it. CLICK. It's not just the poisonous colours and the sharp edges hidden. Look at the actual pattern of the shadows. CLICK. CLICK CLICK. The pattern of shadows are exactly the same as in those flowers. CLICK. CLICK Its as if I have been haunted by this photo from the day it was taken, even though its been decades since I stepped out of that house never, to return.

My sister? She never left. Even when they threw her out of the house. She came back. Even when they barred the door, and called the police, and told her they couldn't take it anymore . She'd come back. She'd disappear. But then she'd come back. She'd always come back. One night she broke in though the cellar window. The next day, my mother found her, dead on the dusty floor, matches, cigarettes, a needle still stuck in her arm. Hey, I never noticed this before on the photo. One, two, three of them. I wonder. Yes, tears. They must have fallen down her cheek and landed on the back of her hand. No wait, there was a fourth tear. You can still see the trail of it on her skin before it slid out of sight. Perhaps it has landed on my coat.

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