

## *After de Chirico*

Without doubt, the painting titled *The Disquieting Muses* 1917 by the Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico is one of the masterpieces of twentieth-century Western art. As Joseph-Émile Muller once wrote:

“It is an odd fact that, during the very period when the Futurists were in revolt against the art of the past, another Italian painter, Giorgio de Chirico, was haunted by the presence of Antique statues in the world of today. In 1911 he settled in Paris, and, at a time when all other modern painters were disclaiming Renaissance perspective, saw a “disturbing connexion between perspective and metaphysics.” But although Chirico used traditional means, his aim was not to present the spectator with reassuring images but to bewilder him. The cardboard architecture, the squares, which made an impression of emptiness, even though they are peopled with stray statues and solemn dummies, the sharply outlined shadows – all have an enigmatic, obsessive quality like certain dream landscapes.”<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, it was those early so-called “metaphysical” paintings that attracted the Surrealists who considered de Chirico as one of their masters, but just as this was happening, de Chirico himself was evolving an ever more literary, even Academic style. Many thought his genius had mysteriously evaporated. So, what is called his “Late” period spans the period from about 1920 to his death in 1978, 58 years in which he was regarded as some kind of “turncoat” or “pariah” in the international art world. The Australian art critic Robert Hughes once, memorably, when asked what should be done with his late works, replied bluntly: “Burn them!”

After his death, however, de Chirico was hailed as the precursor of several contemporary art movements including “Postmodernism” and even, by some, of “Pop Art”.<sup>2</sup>

De Chirico himself painted at least 18 versions of his iconic image – *very exact variations* – at different moments throughout his life to the widespread consternation and outrage of his audiences. In the twenty-first century I have painted four versions so far, three of which are in this current exhibition. De Chirico’s imagery was, in fact, one of the first to be included in my canvasboard works, in the so-called *Book of Power* in 1981, and has been a constant important source of inspiration for me in the following 40 years. And yet it is a journey that is still “endless, long and unexplained.”

“So we come to the metaphysical aspect of things. By deduction one can conclude that everything has two aspects: the current one which we almost always see and which is seen by people in general and the other one, that is to say the spectral or metaphysical aspect which can be seen only by rare individuals in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction...” Giorgio de Chirico, Rome, 1919.

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<sup>1</sup> *Handbook of Western Painting*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1961, page 295.

<sup>2</sup> For example, it is not widely known that Andy Warhol paid tribute to de Chirico’s works in an extensive series he executed in 1982 which included several versions of *The Disquieting Muses*. In contrast the influence of de Chirico’s oeuvre on Phillip Guston is well known!