



ARTS

JANUARY 1989

\$4.50

M A G A Z I N E

FOCUS: SITUATIONIST INTERNATIONAL

Into the Garden

The Paintings of Porfirio DiDonna

Addison Parks

This is such a simple story in so many ways, and the drawings and paintings tell it so well. Porfirio DiDonna lived and died. He had parents who brought him up close, and he stayed close. He drew and painted. He said what he had to say with marks and shades and colors, and he put it down with touch and with something more than confidence. Something more like foreknowledge, if it exists. Something like faith. And he was awake to it all. Love, light, god, joy, darkness, evil, pain, the physical, the musical, the mystical, dreams, smells, the building, the garden, the road, the home. The paintings tell his story. How could it be any other way? But it is also our story, because it is a voice we need to hear. A voice that just isn't there often enough. That Porfirio DiDonna is dead, sadly, makes the story that much more alive, and that much more vital. This stuff talks, but there is no more where it came from. If you find these paintings, they will find you.

This is also kind of an unusual story. Very intense. Very much a reminder of and a challenge to our fear and what a hold it has on us. Porfirio DiDonna had a vision, and he had it a little different. Not fancy, just different enough to allow him to go after his vision, and realize it before he died.

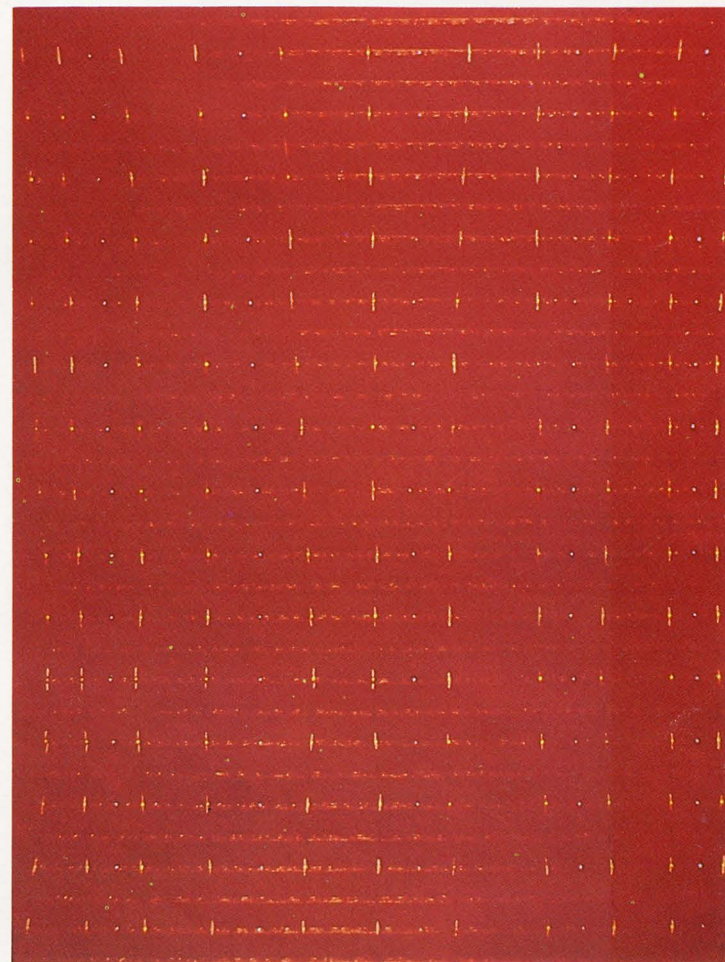
What was catching in the work when I first saw it about three-and-a-half years ago in Boston was the quality of surface and color in a few abstract oils. Something peaceful and wise about the pictures as well. The surface was calm yet vibrant. The color was deep and like the garden. The light was glowing and quiet. Then in the summer of '87 I saw the works on paper of '85, again in Boston, and they were quite different. There was very much a feeling of air, and, finally, flight. They were like the view from a cathedral bell tower: birds, sunlight, sky, and the realm of the spirit. They breathed life. Filled your lungs. Whispered in your ear. Uplifting. When informed that he had died the year before of a brain tumor, it was hard to believe. The work was just too fresh. Too alive. So powerful was its generosity of

spirit. Now, the religious aspect of this work is too difficult to comment on, but it can't be overlooked. He believed it. It supported him as he supported it. Like so much about his painting, it is a personal thing.

Looking at the drawings that go all the way back to the early seventies, the pattern of his meaning and method is plain. The elements are all there. What changed, and finally gave his work the dimension it achieved in the end, was something always pointed to but never realized, referred to but never unmasked. Color had a hand in finally defining this dimension. It is worth examining the development and progression of his work to see just how this dimension came into being.

First of all, the seventies were Porfirio DiDonna's complete decade, the fulcrum at the middle of his life's work. In the late sixties he studied at Pratt, and then Columbia. In the eighties he achieved his mature style, but died in August of '86. In the seventies he experienced a full decade of style, and explored it from one end to the other. This was the period of his dot paintings. It is a body of work that holds together like a train of box cars. He exhibited these paintings well and frequently, mostly in New York.

The dot paintings were life-size, clean images of one field color. Patterns of dots, and lines, broke the surface. They hung on the grid, creating space and light and movement. All of the possibilities were directed toward that end, and he chased down every one of them. Looking at the drawings from this period, one



Porfirio DiDonna, *The Visitation*, 1979, Oil on linen, 60½" × 48".
Courtesy Nielsen Gallery.



Porfirio DiDonna, *Untitled*, 1985, Mixed media on paper, 41½" × 29¾".
Courtesy Nielsen Gallery.

thing jumps out at us. DiDonna went after marks like an athlete goes after the ball, the way a Jordan or a Connors would, like a magnet, but with more force. The way Mozart composed, according to legend, without a trace of hesitation or doubt. And there is nothing calculated about any of it. DiDonna was also a musician, and the dot paintings have that sense of notation, mathematics, sound. The motion and gesture in this work is so quiet when compared to the sweep and magnitude of the last works.

The dot paintings had a kind of control to them that was limiting. They imposed and expected a certain kind of response from the viewer. In this respect they were demanding, and no matter how generous and giving they were in return, this limited the scope of their audience, and experience. They were true to the times, and that is probably important. The shift that occurred from the seventies to the eighties put an end to the quiet and in this case benevolent tyranny that this kind of work imposed, and DiDonna made that shift as well. All along, the drawings had about them something different from the paintings, and everybody felt this. Where the dot paintings demanded a certain posture of contemplation, stillness, and thoughtfulness, the drawings took you as you were. And how they take you! Everybody loved

DiDonna's drawings, and apparently this was a problem. They flew with his drawings, and he wanted them to take the train. When that shift took place he started to listen to his drawing, and by the time he became ill, his paintings were the triumph of what he had heard.

It was all there in the seventies in the drawings. All of the shapes and the marks. They were the language of signs that would later shape his expression; hammer, lift, and illuminate. And what appeared as openness in the dot paintings, and was born in the drawings, slowly became realized in the new work. Something else new in the work was a sense of struggle, something that was natural in his student work, but sublimated by the formula of the dot paintings.

Porfirio DiDonna was born in Brooklyn in 1942, and grew up there, living at home with his parents until he was thirty-five. That is unusual in this country. He had brothers and sisters, and in an apparently quiet and uncompetitive way, he was something of the chosen one. He had a very close and loving relationship with his mother, who seemingly nurtured him completely. At thirty-five he moved to Manhattan, but stayed close to home. At the age of thirty-eight, in 1981, he made a trip to Italy. His mother gave him foundation, support, and religion. Italy gave him space, color, and light. When you look at his drawings, you can see that this was not a person searching for connection, reacting in confusion, striving to prove something. This was a person fulfilling a vision with the rapid fire of dominoes falling. The hunger for marks evident in the drawings tells you he was on to the next drawing while the last one was still faint from the fury of his fusion. He had roots like rock that gave him the freedom to serve his vision. Freedom we pick up on and appreciate so much in the drawings.

The painting had not come together before he went to Italy. It is no coincidence that he achieved a conviction in his expression of color and space following that trip. It was enough to get him on track. Evolving this vision, which clearly culminated in the final works on paper and canvas of 1985, DiDonna combed through the rich soil of his art and experience, pushing and pulling it all together. The curving lines, hilly like waves, were so simple, and yet so powerful and effective. They became his hands, allowing him to shape and hold his love. Still, DiDonna had not come to them immediately, even though they were always there in the drawings. First he had tried starting from a solid, stable form, something he called a "castle," which was a masked-off area of white lead. This formed the target for his responses, working consciously and unconsciously within and without the form. He would introduce dots and windows to help gather the light and

realize the space. The drawings still shined and lit the way. It took five years to get from those first heavy pictures to the final large oils, and with each year the drawings became more relevant, until, finally, they merged. DiDonna unloaded the mantle of oil painting and turned to what could no longer be denied, paintings with the spirit of paper in them.

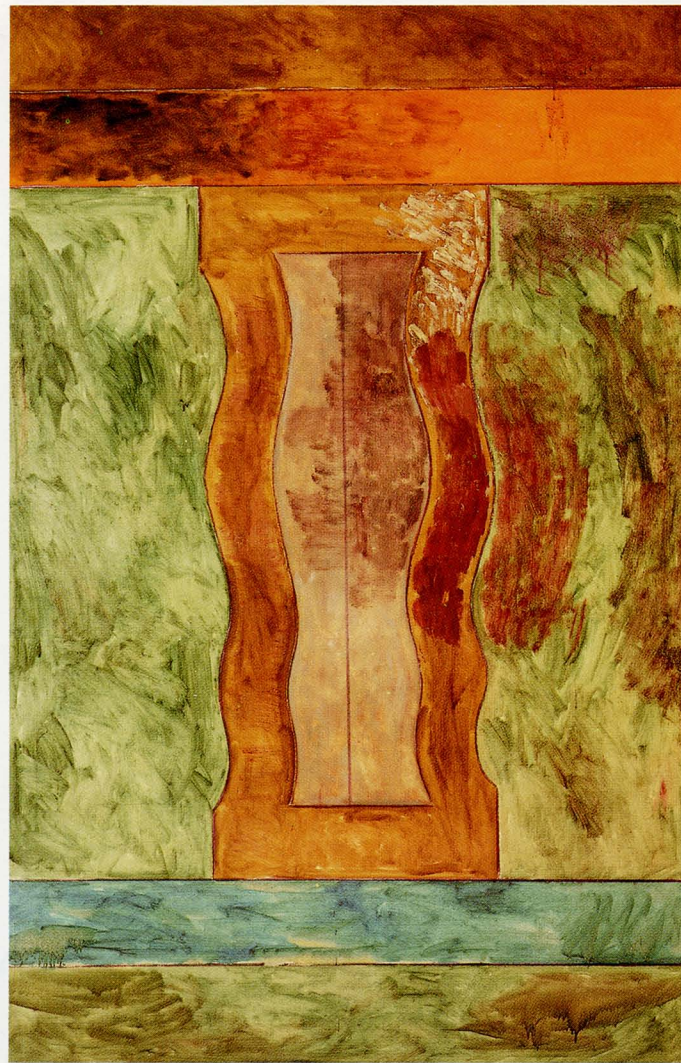
This period, especially compared with the earlier work, does show struggle. But it is not the kind of struggle that leaves the shadow of itself over the work. It is a patient and accepting one that knows it will arrive in the end. For the first time in his life, DiDonna was living away from home, but not so far that his faith lost him.

There is something familiar about this work. The generosity and openness is a big part of that; it also creates a dialogue that talks and listens. We can do the same. The last works extend a hand so gently that we can hardly refuse it. It is so firm and steady that we take it.

These works exploded onto paper and canvas in 1985, just before something exploded in his brain. They possess that intensity of almost unbearable proportion. The less gentle ones have colors and edges that can cut us open and burn into us. There are images of love, and then ones of an almost possessed vision, pressing evangelical action. The chalice and the sword. Which is it? Are we the guest, or the meal?

Certain paintings are clearly the chalice. They bear us love. One is the red and green radiant vitality of the garden. The centered shape becomes the tree of life. A trunk we can put our arms around. It is also the male shape, and equally the female shape; but then, which is it really? Another becomes more the fresco. Shadows washed with light. A cup on an altar. A Roman frieze. Blood and redemption. Hope and the light green sea.

Other images, however, are the sword; sometimes feverishly so. All cut out. The hard edges of stained glass or patchwork cloth. Cutting. Take this sword. More blood than wine. Male. Vertical. Swift justice. Fiery vision. Glory. Irrational image in a rational suit. The former hiding in the latter. I don't believe this painting. Sometimes it's more benign. The sword divides the canvas. Fire on the left. Green earth on the right. Three pink windows perforate the sword. It is the sword put to rest. These last paintings are all roughly life-size and vertical. Doorways. Their brush marks have spring in them, carrying lightness and darkness, color and feeling. They dabble, and dapple; shimmer and sparkle; march and marry. They swim in the canals created by DiDonna's curving lines, steering left and right, and sometimes flooding the painting. When they join together and offer the chalice, we cannot refuse them; the sword, and we tend to shy away.



Porfirio DiDonna, *Untitled*, 1985, Oil on linen, 60" x 48".
Courtesy Nielsen Gallery, Boston.

DiDonna stopped serving form about the time it started to seem appropriate for so many painters. His shifting curves, so beautiful and strong, so physical and sculptural, so female and earthly, started defining a space that became more and more something of this world. Planes in the drawings that described a mysteriously unearthly dimension out of reach, and washes that created places we only suspected existed, became something with color and shape in the last paintings. They came into the garden, where we could step into them, embrace and be embraced by them. A dream realized in paint.

One of his very last paintings tells it best. It is a lightish brown vertical vessel with those sweet, fast, curving lines containing each side. Around it are thumb-sized flecks of blues and browns and ochres clustering and dispersing space and light. The form is suspended in the center, hovering closer to the top, as though levitating. It is looking at us. It is him. It is her. Christ and Earth Mother. Buddha and angel. Self and selflessness. It is tree, fish, bird. All things. It is us. There are those who believe Porfirio DiDonna said what he had to say before he died. If it is possible, I would have to agree. Porfirio DiDonna arrived. □

Addison Parks is a writer living in Providence, Rhode Island.

