

Amy Eileen Koester

AES+F

The group AES+F has a distinctive style and approach to creating their artwork. I am going to explore their history and consider the work that made them well known internationally. They have an interesting creative process, clearly seen in the way they developed their Liminal Space Trilogy. By considering one of their works and comparing it to the painting that inspired the series we can understand the meaning and symbolism in their work.

AES+F began as the AES Group in 1987. Named for the founders, Tatiana Arzamasova and Lev Evzovich who are conceptual architects and designer Evgeny Svyatsky, the group considered their collaborations to be a sideline, as they each continued their personal work. In 1995 the photographer Vladimir Fridkes became the “F” in AES+F. When Fridkes joined their group they began their current work which incorporates all their skills. They create sculptures, paintings, paper collages, ceramic statues and architectural objects. Their groundbreaking videos are where all their talents intersect.

It is easy to follow the thread of inspiration throughout their work, which is based on writings or paintings or engravings from the distant past. They consider the meanings inherent in the work they choose and then reimagine those concepts in 21<sup>st</sup> century terms. Their overall outlook is rather dark, they seem to be announcing the apocalypse, but instead of dark and dreary images they use bright colors, familiar objects and people you almost recognize. The cheeriness of their imagery is disconcerting, the viewer feels like they have fallen through a rabbit hole into a world where things are definitely inside out.

The Liminal Space Trilogy began with “The Last Riot.” This video was shown in the Russian pavilion in the Venice Biennale in 2009, and launched their careers into stardom. They followed with the second video series, “The Feast of Trimalchio” which was shown at Venice in 2011. The final video, *Allegoria Sacra* was completed in 2013 and has been in galleries all over the world.

The inspiration for *Allegoria Sacra* is Giovanni Bellini’s painting of the same name which hangs in the Uffizi Gallery. Bellini’s painting is a mystery to art historians, although some people believe it depicts people waiting in Purgatory. AES+F spent time studying the painting and then used it as the inspiration to construct their view of the modern world.

*Panorama #2* from *Allegoria Sacra* is a digital collage that has many things in common with Bellini’s painting. Both works convey a sense of waiting, a moment frozen in time. Both have children, mythic figures and animals. In Bellini’s painting a figure that is thought to represent St. Peter carries a sword which is mirrored in *Panorama #2* by a man who appears in uniform with a fierce broadsword. While both pieces have a horizontal composition, the Bellini is set outside, on a patio or terrace while the modern interpretation holds all the characters in an airport waiting area. The airport building is oddly modern, and the people inside are completely cut off from nature. While Bellini has a Madonna figure, AES+F portray a woman clothed in scarlet that seems more sinner than saint. In the airport a group of men wearing loose clothing reminiscent of Africa or the Middle East are watching a young man that resembles Christ, he is nearly nude and pierced by an arrow. Interestingly while Bellini’s painting seems to be a Christian story, the priest in the airport is fast asleep, not engaged with the people around him. AES+F choose to transform the everyday reality into a mystical journey abundant with symbolism and thoughtful commentary on the modern world. They make the common place extraordinary.

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