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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★★ POETRY

Illuminated Heart: Love Songs of a Zen Romantic

Joe Pulichino
Julie Higgins
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A love match progresses, matures to fruition, and inevitably ends as life does, in imitation of the growing season. These poems of engagement and sustenance are organized into three chapters: Melody, Rhythm, and Harmony. Sixteen of the seventeen pieces work perfectly well, even one rendered in both English and Italian, though “The Hands of Rodin” succumbs to bland repetition.

The Zen Romantic shows in “Elk Island” that he’s been to places like Gary Snyder’s Maverick Bar: “on Elk Island we grow / three day beards and dream / of bursting into crowded bar rooms / looking for women / and chanting the names of stars.”

Not to take an ounce of credit from a fully capable poet, but this book’s prime competitive advantage rests with the truly gorgeous pastel plates. The illustrations feature lustrous color, iridescent archetypal figures (some nudes, some clothed) and curvilinear divisions of farmscapes. Several images reveal the ground level as an equator rather than a floor, with underground activity just as fundamental to the message.

Several schools of art factor in, including elements of Dalist surrealism. Symbolist components such as burning hearts and calla lilies recur. Expressionist Marc Chagall’s substantial influence is acknowledged indirectly by an opening epigram extolling the value of love. The closest tribute, a plate called “Heels Over Head” harkens back to his “Acrobat” with its back-bent contortionist’s pose. Feminine fertility sustains the agrarian organism throughout. The more rarely appearing male lover appears satiated and at peace in the presence of the female; the implication is that his own nature, though positive, isn’t sufficient for continued growth.

Pulichino began life in the hometown of William Carlos Williams and now resides a short walk from the iconic independent bookstore of Lawrence Ferlinghetti in San Francisco. He’s a former instructor of poetry and creative writing at Douglass College. Northern California-based Julie Higgins incorporates the folklore of the Northwest’s native peoples. The layout and design by Theresa Whitehill of Colored Horse Studios further cements an impression of quality professionalism, integrating the components for maximum synergy. One tiny gripe though, the page numbering uses nearly invisible ink.

The poems of *Illuminated Heart* create a mood by blending metaphors with concretions, couching it all in the kinds of deceptively simple language which takes a great deal of mental work to achieve. A wedding piece called “Miracles of the Vine” demonstrates how a celebration of the oldest and most universal theme somehow comes off cliché-free, sans irony: “what astonishes me most about you / is your living at the edge of the miracle, / creating the best out of a long, late harvest / making it last.” This little treasure deserves a spot on anyone’s shelf.
TODD MERCER (January 28, 2008)

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