Fabrizio Biferali and Massimo Firpo. *Battista Franco "pittore viniziano" nella cultura artistica e nella vita religiosa del Cinquecento.*
Studi 10. Pisa: Edizioni della Normale, 2007. 465 pp. index. illus. €25. ISBN: 978–88–7642–230–0.

The work of Battista Franco, a Venetian admirer of Michelangelo active in Rome, Florence, Urbino, and Venice, exemplifies the fertile intersections and tensions between the great regional schools of sixteenth-century Italian painting. Further, his career provides a case study of the diffusion and transformation of Michelangelo's radical art across Central and Northern Italy, and may — as argued in this dense and erudite book — reveal his attraction to heterodox religious beliefs. While Massimo Firpo is a historian of religious reform and conflict in sixteenth-century Italy, *Battista Franco* represents only the most recent of his significant forays into art history. For the current book, however, Firpo collaborated with the art historian Fabrizio Biferali to elaborate a self-conscious interdisciplinary dialogue that weaves an account of Franco's artistic development together with readings of his relation to the rapidly shifting religious climate of mid-sixteenth-century Italy.

After formative years in Rome and Tuscany during the 1530s and early '40s, Franco was offered a major fresco project for the Urbino cathedral, an *Assumption* and *Coronation of the Virgin* (largely lost), which was deeply indebted to Michelangelo's *Last Judgment*. Following a brief return to Rome he was back in Urbino to work in the cathedral's Cappella del Sacramento; but late in 1551, he was mysteriously asked to consign his drawings to ducal authorities and depart. In their analysis of the possible reasons for Franco's dismissal, Firpo and Biferali paint a fascinating picture of reformist tendencies that had been tolerated and even encouraged in the duchy but were, at the opening of the 1550s, beginning to be policed in a changing cultural climate. Discussion of Franco's work in and around Urbino also occasions one of the book's most extended art-historical analyses, a close reading of the tabernacle altarpiece for the confraternity of the Santissimo Corpo di Cristo in Osimo in 1547 (125–34). The authors present a compelling case for the visualization of doctrinal polemics in the altarpiece — and thereby highlight the complexities and ironies inherent in studying an artist who may have cultivated sympathies with heterodox individuals and positions even as he executed commissions that expressly defended Roman orthodoxy.

The final chapters focus on Franco's association with potentially heterodox figures after his return to his native Venice, in particular the jeweler Giuliano Taverna, accused of heresy in 1557 (after, however, he and Franco had had a violent falling out). The lack of any pious bequests in Franco's will may be revealing, and he worked for institutions such as the Fondaco dei Tedeschi, suspected at the time of harboring Lutheran adherents among its members (though he worked as well for the Venetian state). The authors paint a rich picture of the range of heterodox beliefs in circulation in Venice and the concern they generated. Further, while they admit that the evidence for Franco's personal beliefs is limited, they offer intriguing arguments for his acquaintance with, and possible sympathy for, at least some positions that

were increasingly suspect by the middle of the century. It is again emblematic of the complexity of religious identities in mid-sixteenth-century Italy that one of the two richest art historical analyses of these chapters involves a project that seems to have defended orthodox positions, the great *Baptism* altarpiece for San Francesco della Vigna (209–49). The other extended discussion, meanwhile, highlights the stakes involved in religious self-fashioning, as the authors read the difficult iconographical program of the Grimani chapel in the same church as an elaborate, allusive defense of Giovanni Grimani, Patriarch of Aquileia, who combated persistent suspicions of heresy that could never be substantiated but denied him the cardinalate to which he aspired (303–35).

This is a rich book, with much to offer readers from several disciplines. My only wish is that the art history and the history could have been interwoven throughout the text as thoroughly as they are at several points, as in the fertile discussion of the Osimo tabernacle altarpiece. At times the two discourses run in parallel, and while the authors frequently offer dense iconographical readings, on occasion the visual evidence of stylistic and compositional choices might be interrogated more closely to pose historical questions. For instance, given the overt Michelangelism of the surviving fragments of the Urbino cathedral frescoes, is it perhaps significant that the angels are winged and clothed, anticipating some of Giovanni Andrea Gilio's "Counter-Reform" critiques of the *Last Judgment*? More generally, Franco's relationship with Michelangelo and his art might bear further probing, especially as recent work, such as that by Alexander Nagel, has offered new perspectives on Michelangelo's style and its relation to his deep investment in religious reform. And must the "mannerist" style with which Franco is associated be read only as an "art of state" (253), or is there a possibility to read it as in some sense transgressive, following recent suggestions in work on Roman-Florentine Mannerism by scholars such as Stephen Campbell? Nonetheless, I understand that documentation for Franco's career is elusive, and I found myself frequently applauding the authors' reticence to push evocative connections too far, and admiring both the sensitivity with which they approach delicate and limited evidence and the determination with which they pursue it through remarkably difficult historical terrain.

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