

## *An encounter delayed again and again*

Elvio is not a young artist; he is an ancient artist, the only Etruscan artist alive today. I admit this is a rather strong assertion – not for Elvio, that is, who works with a steadfastness that his admirers have long appreciated, but for me, author of a piece that seeks to leave a very precise record – the record of an encounter that finally took place, after enthusiasms, desertions, misunderstandings and continual postponements.

I first saw Elvio at the Centro di Cultura Ausoni in 1987 or perhaps 1988, with Edith Schloss, who introduced him to be as “a very fine artist”. (For those who are not from Rome or are not familiar with the contemporary art scene, it should be said the Edith Schloss is a sort of monument of the American artist who has obstinately chosen to live in Rome, sometimes even against her own interests.) If Edith believed such a thing, I had no reason to doubt that this young man with his very fine looks / head was indeed “a very fine artist”.

He would come in every now and then in the afternoon, long after the evening openings. He seemed to peer in-between the brush strokes of the paintings on display, which, I suspected, he did not like at all. I waited, thinking that sooner or later he would ask me to visit his studio, but I waited in vain.

Finally one day, gnawed by curiosity as always, I asked him myself, but he didn't accept. He dodged the question, saying he wasn't ready yet. I felt bad, knowing in my heart that Elvio *was* ready, but at the time I was still unfamiliar with his absolute intolerance for himself.

Time passed, as in any self-respecting tale, until one day he invited me. His studio on via Vicenza near the Termini train station was in a cellar – large and picturesque, I must say, but in the end, basically a cave. Yet it was here that Elvio Chiricozzi's undeniable talent became clear to me. On abstract red and ochre backgrounds flew exceptional ancient birds recalling all the birds on earth, without being any one of them. His painting was reminiscent of tomb painting rendered contemporary with grace and humility. There were still certain hesitant signs here and there, a few technical solutions lacking, but each painting had a solidity that I could not have found in any of the most fashionable, celebrated artists of that period.

I don't remember what type of professional offers I made, but I do know he found them unacceptable. I don't believe he actually wanted to have an exhibition yet; maybe he didn't even intend to sell them, those paintings. Anyway, to make a living, he worked the land, there in Tuscia... There was pride in the way he defended his work but also a dignity that I had not encountered before, expressed so resolutely. After that, we did not meet again for some time.

One day some time later he asked me if he could show me an architectural project, which I accepted. He showed me a Temple of daylight, which flickered into the nave through the green and blue of the huge stained glass windows that were actually the walls of the Temple. I am convinced that the first person to enter that Temple would have a new Pentecost. I appropriated that Temple in narrative in the pages of one of my still unfinished writings, in honour of the eternal spirits.

Thanks to Ludovico Pratesi who had become involved with his work, Elvio later exhibited in the Galleria Rondanini as part of a large collective show of Roman and regional artists. He had an entire room for himself, which he turned into a *camera picta*, brilliant with yellows in superimposed canvases, and again those birds, euphoric with their dance, flying in a sky drenched in sunlight. I would have liked to live there, in that room, to make it my dwelling place, my thinking place, a place for the freest and most absolute of fantasies. I never tired of telling people just how that *camera picta* was the real event of the season.

The exhibition ended, and Elvio *destroyed the works*. Literally. They had not been sold and he did not know where to store them, so he destroyed them. When he told me a few days later, I cut him off and ran out, horrified by that Attila of Himself. Even worse, I utterly despised him. I am a curator, and an extremist; the act of destroying *beauty* can only horrify me.

For the next few years I stopped thinking about “Mr.” Elvio Chiricozzi. If I ran into him at the opening of some major or minor exhibition (which happened less and less frequently), I turned away, or at most smiled half-heartedly in his direction...

Then, Stefania Fabrizi, who is a true painter whom I adore, came to see me at the gallery. She told me

about the show Elvio had mounted in one of the large rooms of the Museo Laboratorio of the University of Rome, curated and presented by Ludovico Pratesi. She spoke with such sincere enthusiasm that I couldn't resist. There are two possibilities when one artist compliments the work of another: either the remark should not be trusted or it stems from an irrepressible admiration. This being Stefania Fabrizi, I tended to believe the latter.

When the exhibition was closing, I went to the presentation of the catalogue. There on the walls of that architecture by Piacentino were sprawled gigantic canvases, like frescoes from some indefinable era, with slightly raised backgrounds of leaves, and figures of naked men and women, and small animals – a turtle, a bird – with a palette of sepias and sanguines in all their possible variations. Another epiphany! It took my breath away. It seemed to bring the viewer into an Eden, a world of dreams and ideas where Man is loved and respected, occupying the centreplace in the elaboration of narrative themes, in a dialogue with eternity.

I made peace with Elvio in my heart. I heard that he was in the process of negotiating with a chic exhibition space in Rome that was booming in those days (and closed shortly thereafter, as always happens when something becomes too trendy). For this reason I held off from courting him, but then later I heard that the talks had come to nothing. I logged this piece of news in my mind like a sly old fox.

Which brings us to the 1996 Rome Quadrennial, where Elvio was among the artists invited. For the occasion, he created a human-sized shrine – liveable and explorable, slightly elongated upwards like a sort of vase designed to receive the cosmic energies so necessary to a man, to his woman, and to their companions on the planet. After the Chapel of San Zenone, this is the most moving shrine I have ever seen or experienced. The jury of the Quadrennial was made up of one foppish old man who seemed a bit daft and two terribly snooty non-Italian thinkers, who did not even take Elvio into consideration, awarding instead artists that exploited the “new technologies” (as if the art world had become a branch of IBM).

What's more, as if more were needed (or like a kind of “curse” that Elvio, at some point, had decided to call down upon himself), the skylight above the shrine shattered, damaging the work beyond repair.

At that point, we re-established our friendship and finally agreed on a date for an exhibition. Life takes its own course, however: my health took a downspin and complicated surgery kept me out of circulation for several months in 1997. The result: once again we put our plan off to some undetermined date. I found myself remembering the lyrics of an old summer hit, “What's to be done if we meet in the middle of the sea going opposite directions...” or something like that.

Perhaps, in all my career, no other professional relationship has ever been so complicated or suffered so many delays. I generally manage to turn my intuitions into action, but not with Elvio - which is why it all means so much to me. While I am alive, he will have his show. And it will be fantastic, among the most beautiful exhibitions that I have ever curated. But I won't discuss this; my esteemed colleague, Duccio Trombadori has already done it brilliantly in this catalogue. I only want to offer a testimony of this experience and mutual passion – a project that I have cherished for years for the most ancient painter on the contemporary art scene, the timeless Elvio Chiricozzi.

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