

I was immediately intrigued by Elvio Chiricozzi's paintings the first time I saw them in an exhibition curated by Ludovico Pratesi at the University of Rome a few years ago. I was pleasantly surprised by his apparent taste for mural painting, which stood out from the light-weight feel of so many contemporary trends. Those athletic bodies that could have been lifted from the silhouette in a mosaic by Severini - half twentieth-century models and half ancient Roman statuary - appeared like demigods praying for shelter, like exhumed bodies that had suddenly returned into the white heat of over-exposure. The outlines defined by browns and sanguines seemingly sketched on the white wall clearly suggest an intentional archaism, which corresponds less, however, to the affectation of citation than to a contemplative vision of the image's enigmatic value. Thus conceived, the figures are surrounded by an air of poetry in search of an original "way of seeing".

Today Elvio Chiricozzi has given greater depth to the content of his painting, masterfully formulated and executed with a compositional rigour that defines its stylistic identity and establishes a more explicit affinity with the modern "Italian standard". The colour of dull earth, diaphanous surfaces as clean as pebbles in a mountain stream, or pure like the opaque reflection of a cuttlebone in the faint glittering of sunset over the Adriatic. With this chromatic watermark, Elvio Chiricozzi's paintings exert their narrative flair, moderated by a sensation of cool self-control and a silent yet eloquent search for visual balance.

The effect is not unlike that hazy moment of awakening, still surrounded by the spirits of the night's dreams. Images seem elusive and dodge the precision of details, yet one has the distinct impression of an idea with definite outlines, of an emotion just experienced in all its many colours. A terrible feeling of time inspires this painting, appearing in the masterly form of a fragment or vestige of a story that has been interrupted, like a hint of a signal or the track of an inscrutable path.

The deafening silence of the space with no vanishing points that envelops the figure proclaims the inclusion of the image within the noble race of art against time – a theme central to all artistic heroism. Chiricozzi immerses his drawing in a perspective void so the human bodies float in a kind of ether, or in an amniotic liquid, which is also the metaphor of a cogent dialectic between memory and cosmic fury. His vision is fixed on the point of relative equilibrium between the stable coherence of the form and the sensory experience of which only a pale echo remains filtered through dreams.

There is a way of remembering that expresses the pathos of total disorientation. Chiricozzi closes his figures in the ritual convention of the shrine where man appears stripped of skin and blood while his animal life still circulates within. We are in a shadow kingdom here, where the drawings enact a performance with no subject whose essential parts are missing. And yet, these parts, erased by time or by chance, are almost perceived conspiring for a new identity on the surface. The representation binds what remains of the figure and what does not in a poignant procession.

There is a religious tension – of mystical devotion to the unknown – in this wilful reduced expressiveness that constructs mini-stories in the dialectic of absence and presence, where eternity is guaranteed not only by the returning presences but also by their disappearance. Thus, a "mysticism without God" seems to speak the profane language of a New Age accompanied by sad milongas or by monotone eurhythmy, echoing the flow of existence. We stand before a Villa of the Mysteries that has lost the code of its initiation ritual and wanders like a shadow with no centre or borders to mirror the world out beyond the bounds of pretty aesthetic trends.

One senses an atmosphere of waiting, a rarefied luminosity, and distinguishes an outline of forms in frozen poses, as if caught in an unexpected eruption. From the sacred shrine which conserves the paintings emerge elements recalling a figurative culture that assimilates primitive simplicity and ecstatic practices, human vigour and symbolic rituals. In these images and some of the formal solutions emerge motifs belonging more or less directly to the vigour of Masaccio or the proportion of Piero della Francesca, or again to the purism of Casorati or the roughness of Carlo Carrà.

In dialogue with other art forms, poetry reduces the method to a pretext. If there is an artistic madness in Chiricozzi's painting, it is lurking in the skilful, painstaking enterprise of evoking words from a dead language and retrieving the power of primal, metaphysical questions from oblivion. What surprises here is the void (there being no gods left to represent) and the fine luminous dust that swaddles the bodies, giving no hint of its source. The barely outlined man, essential as a sinopia, leans over lovingly towards a canary; both remain suspended, arranged in perspective, in a totally empty space. Then other human figures make an appearance: seated or twisted bodies looking diagonally towards the sky, or running on different planes of the painting in undefined directions, with distinct shifts in scale, ambiguous proportions, and visual references.

The painter works with ancient ways yet expresses new ideas. Like characters conceived by Beckett, the figures are disassociated from the plane of reasoned, conscious experience. This wandering of simple souls in complex bodies (which recalls certain Michelangelo-like positions but even more classically mannered, in the style of Poussin) imbues the action with a chilly irony and arouses the feeling of an essential unreality. The paradox of the missing presence, evoked by disassociating the personality in the monotone exaltation, coincides with an aesthetic position that does not aspire to movement, but rather blocks energy in a contemplative stasis.

Thus we have set out upon a delicate path where the rhythm of beauty is translated into the paradigmatic echo of disembodied figures. These, in turn, become “images of time”, beyond the pursuit of pure representation. The pictorial elegance of certain apparently chance elements (for example, the touch of yellow defining the canary, the sole chromatic legacy in the mastic of a lean and formally strengthened figuration) completes the plastic synthesis of painting and sculpture which manifests Chiricozzi’s expressive intention.

Eliminating the effervescence from matter, the painter consolidates a formal arrangement that evokes the power of life and glorifies its reverberations. And yet, the idea of a silent and safe container for the images and their rhythmic combinations stirs up the unfathomable feeling of mystery. Protected within an ideal bell jar, the painting celebrates itself as a magnificent ideogram in the shrine while the vain appearances in a broken mirror of Narcissus elevate loose pages of an abandoned diary to a ritual dignity.

It is the feeling of precariousness that wins out in the intimate conflict between existential-temporal lines and the ecstatic-atonal figuration. Paraphrasing the live world in pictorial metaphors, Chiricozzi alludes to sidereal distances between words, men and things, voids of expression that art can express but not fill. Indeed a modern dramatic aspiration is asserted in this mute narration of time regained and lost at the same time in “vestiges of image”. The poetic core that makes itself felt cannot be reduced to a simple question of elegance, as fashion and style would have it: instead the precious, elegantly minimal painting becomes a sign capable of summoning up an unfamiliar sacredness that veils, beyond art, the very secret of life.

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