

A STORY TOLD IN IMAGES

BACKGROUND

I still remember clearly the day a few years ago when I was invited to see some frescoes by Masaccio that had just been restored. In the train from Rome on my way to Florence, I tried to imagine how they would look – the brilliance of the colours and the silent solidity of the bodies, which by itself had paved the way for the art of the Renaissance, where man is the creator and uncontested protagonist. Fragments of memories fused in my mind of all the times I had crossed the Ponte Vecchio to reach the tranquil little Carmine square, where a church with a rather ordinary facade holds the very seed of the art of the fifteenth century.

In my student days, I always found Masaccio to be a rough painter, almost rocky, a stern, self-assured “Tommasaccio”, with his daring, youthful brush beside that other sweeter, more melancholic brush whose bristles held the pastel colours of autumn - indeed, the autumn of the Medieval era. Commissioned by an ambitious, learned cardinal, Masaccio and Masolino frescoed the chapel together with a series of images from holy scriptures and the Old and New Testaments - a crowded “tribute” of powerful, real people like painted statues, an expulsion racked with suffering, a dagger into Adam’s heart, while Eve’s heart too collapses inside her, shattering into a thousand pieces in the same breast that will soon nurse her children.

How much humanity there is in that transfigured face, contorted with the awareness of a new life - the same awareness that dominates the painting, distancing it from the hieratic spell of Byzantine mosaics and directing it towards the challenges of a society being re-born. In those days so full of promise and contradiction, art emerged from the shadows of the churches to walk out into the street and communicate to humanity all the bewilderment of a responsible existence. The strong and fully-conscious Masaccio was the first to haul church painting out from its quiet sacred enclosures to tell the people of Florence that the saints were men like themselves, only with a halo.

It was a shock, and the emotion intense. The chapel was unrecognizable, shimmering with new, more vivid colours – a symphony of green, blue, red, pink and orange, where Masolino’s subtle humours blended with the vital fluids of his young partner, elevating the images towards unforeseen, perfect worlds where the divine gaze manifested on earth in the form of mathematical harmonies, perspective structures, rediscovered proportions, expunged forever from the silent, golden regions of classical art. Masolino and Masaccio fought their battle together, and they won. From these glorious frescoes blossomed an art in which man was able to find the measure of himself and his responsibility as creator of the future. Driven out of the sublime world of the Earthly Paradise, beyond space and time, Adam and Eve were left to build a world ruled by reason and inspired by poetry.

PRELUDE

The first time I entered Elvio’s studio and found myself surrounded by those amber figures that inhabit spaces simultaneously abstract and real, I thought of Masaccio and the figures that dwell in the Brancacci chapel. I found the same solid awareness, that sense of poetic suspension that underlies the movements of the male and female nudes, protagonists of a story where each one demonstrates a total awareness of their pose, silent and rhythmic in their perfection.

Necessary poses, meaningful movements, thick with memories of the past and yet incredibly contemporary. They too, like the saints of the Carmine church, express a powerful will, not to exist but to be, to know the world in order to interpret it with new feelings. Just as in the Bracacci chapel, there is no space to describe nor to tell stories in this intense “*camera picta*”. The figures, so solid, almost like statues, seem to float in an empty space attuned to their movements - a space with no depth, whose only purpose seems to be to exalt the presence of the figures and their

inherent sacredness. A space truly on a human scale. Though it may sound incredible, these figures announce a renaissance in painting, where the artist rediscovers the capacity to rethink reality, in search of its very essence.

E TI INNAMORA

“AND YOU’RE ENCHANTED”

A great story for images, conceived four years ago and culminating with this exhibition. A path of initiation in painting, an ideal route, a sequence of dreams or a single story divided into five smaller dreams. Visions? I don’t know myself because in the “*camera picta*”, the eye calls on memory for help, seeking every possible reference only to reject them one by one.

For instance, the Etruscan tombs in Tarquinia with their divers and banquets and dancers and flocks of birds in flight, mysterious Etruria with its Luchmons and augurs. Yes, but that is not enough. We must move on a few centuries, to the roofless church of San Galgano and the little chapel of Montesiepi, clinging to the hill. The direction seems right; we look inside on the walls of the little church for the red sinopia, the Annunciation by Ambrogio Lorenzetti, a mere few marks on the wall, a space lacking all spatiality, the Madonna portrayed with short blood-coloured strokes. Onward, we continue onward: Masaccio, as we said, and the Piero della Francesco of the *Madonna del Parto*, when the small door of the chapel opens and suddenly the green Tuscan countryside invades the chapel, under the penetrating eyes of the Virgin Mary, “Thou shalt be mother and in pain shalt thou bring forth children...”

More. Memory searches and finds the madness of Paolo Uccello, congealed in those frescoes in the Green Cloister, the black and white tufts of hair, the crazed perspectives, a Noah’s Arc in the form of a pyramid, the poses of the people during the Flood, greenish shadows with glowing eyes like slivers of mother-of-pearl.

Does it make any sense to carry on, to find oneself among the joyful twirling of the dance as painted by Matisse, sublime expressions of a *joie di vivre* that transcends the lesson of classicism to transform it into a current of pure chromatic energy? Or to lose oneself among the frozen limbs of the melancholic portraits of Sironi, emotions of the dark, bituminous soul of our twentieth century?

No, it is useless to continue; memory itself gets lost and turns deceptive. Instead, let us enter into the work and free our eyes to the pure pleasure of the sight.

The heart of the “*camera picta*” is the central painting where a male nude leans over, pointing to a small bird. Immediately behind is another bird about to fly away, perhaps disturbed by the human presence. The brighter background seems almost monochromatic, but close-up we can see in the dense solid weave of matter, the silhouettes of some plants, of leaves indicated with fast, resolute brushstrokes. The light strikes the man’s left arm, gilding his ochre-coloured skin. The title? *E ti innamora* (“And You’re Enchanted”).

WHAT COLOUR IS THE AIR?

What colour is the air, wonders Elvio Chiricozzi as he paints. And the answer comes a bit later: “The air is coloured by the objects and sensations they provoke in us while we breathe.”

In Chiricozzi’s work, the air has no colour; it *is* colour. A thick paint like plaster, able however to transform itself into a delicate veil when it is “inhabited” by the figures. Thus more than air, we could speak of an atmosphere capable of transmitting the sensations and thoughts contained in the gestures and postures of the figures. Could it be that the colour of air is the same as the colour of poetry?

COULD IT BE EVENING?

First station

A dialogue of loving sensations. A paradisiacal vision. A standing youth waits with outstretched hand for the gentle arrival of a sparrow, while the young woman nearby observes the scene with a mildly astonished expression. Between the two is a small dog with a rather stocky body: the pointed ears and stiff tail reveal his vigilant attitude. All around, the twilight tints the subtle golden clouds on an inexistent horizon.

Nothing to add, except a brief note by the artist, dated 16 March 1992: "What to say in that regard? There isn't much; the little there is, or that is left, is everything."

Second station

The dog has disappeared; the sparrow is flying away. The dialogue becomes more pressing; she is crouching, her legs crossed, and seems to be pointing to something with her right hand. He listens distractedly, perhaps looking into the distance, elsewhere. He looks for something, a sign, a symbol. He pursues a memory. The light is more uniform, the oblique rays of the sun slowly give way to the blues of dusk. "Between a dog and a wolf", as the French call those few minutes after the sun sets and before the night takes over. One perceives a sense of waiting, of suspension. Paradise can wait.

Third station

I'm having a hard time. To introduce this scene, I decided to use another of Elvio's notes. "With the knowledge of being two, the most natural thing is to be conscious of the one when being in the other." (May 1992)

The man is not there, but his presence is foretold, though not portrayed, by the feet visible in the upper right. She leans over and point with her right hand to the small bird, ready to perch. The light outlines the gesture, enveloping it in an ancient aura, and for a moment, she is transformed into a nymph of the woods down from the slopes of Olympus to discover in awe the wonders of nature. Probably he is watching her, smiling, or maybe he is still looking into the distance, towards impenetrable spaces.

Fourth station

Now it is she who has disappeared. The blue of the night approaches, revealing the weave of the air, woven with symbols like the edge of a tapestry, or a historic banner. The bottom is empty; in the top he bends over, his outstretched arm points towards the sparrow, crouching nearby as the dog stares at it. The rest is silence, and silence cannot be described.

Fifth station (*Grand finale*)

"When beauty takes you, naturally it is violent," wrote Elvio Chiricozzi. A thought, it seems to me, that fits well with the final scene, the *grand finale*.

A sunny space with four figures, who have arranged a meeting around the slow steps of a turtle. The three young men watch in wonder, following its movements attentively, while a bit off

to the side, the girl sits and watches distractedly. Their gestures fill the space, creating a triangulation, an irregular geometric figure of lines and volumes. She seems to be excluded, distant, as always, a void filled with light. Another enchantment evoked by Chiricozzi's painting, capable of restoring to all living beings that natural dignity which humanity seems to have forgotten for so long.

LUDOVICO PRATESI