

Becoming a drawing, flying through the air

Black clouds on a white background spread over larger than life surfaces. We recognize an irregular, inconsistent shimmering before our eyes, which clumps together in some places in a deep, thick mass that looks like you can reach out and grab it to then turn light again in other places and fade away completely in the white. The thick blackness looks as if it is coming towards us, it gets close to us and in parts it is even somewhat threatening. The brightness of the airy spaces however opens out into an expanse, which lets us draw in a deep breath - infinity opens itself.

With his latest works, Elvio Chiricozzi seems to be putting everything in oscillation. The large pieces are rhythmically arranged, they are reminiscent of a slow harmonious dance inviting the viewer to sway instead of standing still and drawing him closer to the work. What at first appears like an abstract composition from a distance, then becomes more real on closer inspection: our gaze remains fixed on the bright spaces hanging on individual black points and in recognising their irregularity we see that it does not deal with the abstract, but small, black silhouettes of birds. Thus our curiosity is piqued even further and we get closer and closer to the work where we see that the black clouds are made up of thousands and thousands of individual birds grouped together. An enormous flock has gathered on the image before us.

The bird motif had already emerged in Chiricozzi's work in the late 80s. "Etruria", as was the title of the series, includes several paintings, which are held in warm earth colours and represent individual birds in flight across the open sky. In this series the artist was dealing with his homeland, more precisely the Etrurian sky, which for him is naturally connected with memories from his childhood and youth. As so often in Elvio Chiricozzi's work he does not deal with a theme just once and so even here, approximately 20 years later, the birds dive in a newer, different form. Now however, the sky of the northern Latium is no longer the reference and inspiration, instead it is the sky of Rome, the city that had in the meantime become the chosen home of the artist since many years. Whoever has lived in the eternal city or has only been a guest here for a short time knows of the flocks of starlings that rise into the sky in the evenings. Flocks gather in the Piazza dei Cinquecento in front of the Stazione Termini at sunset in the large pine trees, in order to ascend together and draw bold cloud shapes into the sky in magical manoeuvres. These flocks of

starlings entice a mysterious fascination, as the dance they move to seems to be guided by a hidden hand and thus creates a moment of magic.

When it is not breeding time starlings live in large flocks that can go up to their thousands in number. In the evening they gather at their places of sleep, found on exposed areas, high trees or power lines and even in the city centre. The dances of the acrobatic flyers are thereby their defence: if a bird of prey attacks, they envelope it like a thick cloud, which looks a little like a tornado, so that the aggressor cannot focus on an individual prey and in the end it falls out of the flock. This defence manoeuvre is rehearsed by the starlings every evening in case of an emergency and it bewitches those who chance to pass by, as it seems incomprehensible at first how a body, made up from thousands and thousands of separate individuals can be in such perfect synchronisation.

With all this whirling together how do the starlings manage not to crash into each other? Scientists have pondered this question for a long time and have finally found out that each individual bird aligns itself with about six to seven of its fellow birds who are in its direct surroundings and field of vision. As an organism the flock is coordinated without any hierarchy from the inside out. This special form of auto-organisation does interest not just ornithologists, but also scientists of other disciplines. Biologists along with physicists, behavioural scientists and economists all took part in an interdisciplinary research project that covered five nations in Europe. Because the behaviour of a flock of birds can give information about the dynamics of socio-economic groups: how fashions develop, in addition, how a stock market can crash, these are examined on the basis of the model of a flock of starlings.

Although it would be desirable if the researchers of the project would consider also the art as its own form of science, Elvio Chiricozzi for now goes his own way. With the making of the works he found a way to get particularly close to the natural model. He does not paint the birds on white surfaces, but uses small birds punched out of black cardboard. Following a small-scale design compiled beforehand, he throws these on the large, white wooden panels spread on the ground. In this way they do indeed fly before they land on the preparatory background of the image and find their own place there, becoming a drawing.

The performative gesture, the throwing of the birds, is the determining element of the image as the movement with which they fly on the background is engrained in the work and forms the dynamics of the final piece. The artist, throwing the small adhesive birds on the image background is reminiscent of a farmer working in his field. In both cases it has to do with an action that makes something come to life, which is thus a component of an organic life process. Without the farmer no harvest could be reaped in the summer and without the artist there would be no pieces of work to sharpen our view for certain phenomena surrounding us and open us up to new experiences.

For Chiricozzi it is just as important how a work comes into being as to know where the piece will be located. He always adapts his work to the context in which it is issued, for which it was devised and meant for. The best example of this is probably the installation "Ciò che non muta", which was shown in 2010 in the Volume Foundation in Rome. The entire walls of the exhibition space were thus covered by enormous flocks of birds, which almost made the viewers lose their bearings. After this piece that was decisive and very intensive for the artist (the preparation and realization of the installation took almost two years up) followed a further treatment of the bird theme. Chiricozzi created seven new pieces for the Castello Rivara near Turin, commissioned by Franz Paludetto, under the title of "Un brusio d'ali". The flocks of birds spread over several large canvasses, which were installed inside the library of the castle. They found their ideal location in the library, if one considers that an open book, from narrow side resembles the silhouette of a bird. Furthermore books are a symbol of freedom just like birds. With the help of literature we can go on mental journeys over borders and times, move inside other worlds. In a regime, books are often the last island of freedom and it was from there that the political ruling powers have tried to strictly control the literature available. As for the birds, they have always epitomised the dream of flight for human beings. Because only they have the ability to move without aids noiselessly through the air, they alone control the skies and have, from the bird's eye view, a greater overview on things.

In the new pieces, Elvio Chiricozzi's flocks of starlings in Rome are now pulled north and have found their new residence. They will surely feel at home in the company of John Armleder, Man Ray and Pino Pascali, which are also presented next to the work of many other important artists in the Castello Rivara collection.

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