

## Clouds over the mainland

Clouds are marvelous, one need only raise his or her eyes to them and erase every thought. They give wings to our minds. Clouds have always spoken to us. A person in the clouds is unrealistic, though they have not forgotten the terrestrial world entirely. The close relationship between the sky and the earth that has given clouds their role as an intermediary. Rationality is on the earth, fantasy is on high, utopia is somewhere else. Those masses of condensed water vapor are our guide, ferrying us toward the infinite. Their lack of substance and their continual comings and goings are, to our collective imagination, a guarantee of other opportunities, a possible alternative to that of having to walk on the earth. Aristophanes used them to mock Socrates and the sophists. They have been mentioned in a myriad of ways in literature and poetry. One of the most touching endings in the history of cinema is the final shot in Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Così sono le nuvole?*, in which the puppets Totò-Iago and Ninetto-Davoli-Othello see them for the first time and once again smile.

In art history clouds are a way of decodifying moods. In the middle of the 1400s Antonio del Pollaiuolo painted the powerful work *Ragazza di profilo*, rational down to its most minute detail. The young woman has a haughty and sure expression, aware of her own perfection. There is no need for any external elements to support her strength. The background is a clear almost transparent sky. Tiny perfectly painted clouds float above the horizon and restore depth to the landscape, almost invisible but decisive in supporting the sitter's character.

In the Baroque period the objective was to touch the spectator's emotivity through grandiose and monumental forms. In Baroque landscapes the skies and the clouds become architecture to accentuate, through light, the dramatic and invasive effect of Nature. Then in the 1800s the hieratic landscapes of the Neapolitan school coexist with tempestuous visions of marine-scapes of many French painters. In the former school the clear skies and clouds sign the harmony in the relationship between man and nature, while in the latter it is the strength of the clouds that overwhelms and dominates all. The new century was approaching, shortly artists would experiment with many new languages, the sense of art itself was being revolutionized. The relationship with the landscape is subordinate to the project. The idea of the work becomes the work. In his paintings chock full of things and colours Alberto Savinio cancels the differences between inside and outside, clouds, which are always present, become objects as if they were enormous toys, geometric shapes or architecture. The direct link between the representation of reality fades away leaving space for one to imagine reality. Some years later in his numerous paintings entitled *Paesaggi Anemici* Mario Schifano uses clouds as an expedient to resolve chromatic equilibria that become larger or smaller areas of colour to balance the landscapes the artist wishes to paint.

In 1977 in New Mexico Walter De Maria produced his spectacular Land Art *Lightning Field*, 400 metal poles were buried in a field of several square kilometers. The work is exactly what the

metal objects would lead one to presuppose. These serve as lightning rods that attract an unusually high number of lightning strikes in the area. The visitor, metrological map in his/her hand, is assigned a prepared location at which to await that the phenomenon occurs. The actual work of art is not the poles but rather the sky, the clouds and the lightning bolts.

Yet, the most imposing work dedicated to clouds and the sky is by Tano Festa, and it is from the late 1980s, *Monumento a un poeta morto*. It is generally known as "Window on the sea". It is a cement frame which is almost 20 meters high painted in light blue. It is placed on a Sicilian beach and its only sense is to furnish a frame to clouds.

Recent research by artists has painted, carved, photographed and attempted to reproduce clouds, atmospheric phenomena and the entire sky including rainbows. All are attempts to read inside the artist's overall poetics.

Elvio Chiricozzi is a meticulous artist who has reached an agreement with Time, in his works it flows outside its normal path. There is no definite limit to thinking out, planning, working on and terminating a project. Every time his research finds new and different times. On the other hand there is no precise time to enter into his works. Those who approach his work are aware of this, it is important not to be in a hurry and I suggest you not look at your watch. In recent years the artist has mostly worked on large imposing projects that needed unlimited preparation. His investigation of the human figure, the work on birds are mentioned for the immense amount of work needed to finish them, though it seems his works never finish. And it is difficult to separate the intermediate phases of his work from a finished work. One possible way of relating to his works is to observe what the artist chose to present keeping in mind the entire process that brought him to the single artefact you are observing. A virtuous assembly line of creativity that brings back a creative process composed of operations that are both minute and patient and where everything is done by hand. Technology, with the thousands of expedients needed to accelerate the process of execution, has never entered Chiricozzi's studio. Rather, when one enters he or she is submerged by hundreds of pencils, sharpeners, sheets of paper and many books of poetry. Confusion and chaos reign, though only apparently. The calculation and rigour in the large paintings on the walls, still unfinished, tell us much of the finished works. Using the term of artefact to describe this artist's works is not in any way demeaning, though recently it has come to be understood as such. It is the manuelelement which in his case is the decisive one to comprehend the complete poetics that is at the base of all his research. His ability to describe an entire life is his particular relationship with art. The minuteness of his execution is not solely to astound those who look. That is only the first level. The photographic aspect of his series of skies, clouds and lightning is immediate. The trompe l'oeil is a technique that good artisans can learn, but this is not what interests this artist. What emerges from these enormous and powerful paintings is an invitation to go beyond the optical trickery, which is present. As we approach the painting it opens and reveals aspects that are less visible from a distance, the obsessive regularity of the brushstrokes is not just manual ability, the clouds stop their knowing illusion and start to reveal themselves as the artist

wanted. The coal-black surfaces that form the dark night sky are the result of incredibly regular and precise brushstrokes. This rigour in execution is a mirror of the artist's personality which does not admit shortcuts and instead chooses to lengthen the process without setting any objective so that the finiteness of one work opens his commitment toward the next. The large canvases, though unique and autonomous, seem to be photographs of a single sky above an immense horizon. They come together seamlessly, here is the strength of this project. Chiricozzi has no interest in being taken for an old master, the power in his skies is in his brushstrokes, repeated, obsessive but never gratuitous. This is no little thing in today's world where slowness is out of fashion and only those whose works tell of the syncopated race toward nothing belong, and the word itself seems to apply only if it is deprived of vowels and consonants but even more of sense. And the word, in poetry, is another of the fundamental elements of the artist's poetics, it tells us of his poetic vision of art in those constant and minuscule signs. A sign that presupposes culture and research, here nothing happens by chance and there are no immediate gestures, even in describing the tumultuous movement of the clouds and in designing the moment lightning strikes the earth.

The works of Chiricozzi appear to be still images of grandiose terrestrial and cosmic events. The theory of chaos was discovered in the 1900s starting from observations of atmospheric phenomena. Weather forecasts outside a limited time horizon are not possible. The ability to forecast are only approximate and limited because it is impossible to consider all the details that contribute to giving a phenomena life. It is impossible to know if a butterfly beats its wings, causing a hurricane on the other side of the world. What is immeasurably beyond man is to stop the image of an event, suspend what is occurring, dilate the temporal dimension of an instant and make it explode on a canvas whose production might last years. The artist's hand thus seems to have become a time machine which is uninterested in the future, but with no interest in venturing into the past either. His is a time machine which stops things to render them infinite. His art manipulates things that happen, suspending them and consigning them to the meticulous work of his hand which year after year recreates every single infinitesimal trace of the event through the pencil marks. Millions of signs, like a landscape that decomposes into microscopic bits to become grandiose on his canvas. The canvases seem to be windows that open a room's perspective to the universe, to a sky frozen in position a moment before it explodes and becomes alive. In other words: get ready, everything is about to start.

A close connection with tradition is evident as is the artist's knowledge of the most refined techniques, but his decision to take the sky and clouds as his theme was not chosen by the artist only to celebrate esthetic beauty or even as a symbol of our search for somewhere else and their possibility of lightness. The space that Nature assigns the sky is also another. The iconography of the landscape is no longer composed of light blue and delicate tonalities of white, but has become monochromatic and in concept creates a contradiction in the choice of depicting the sky without colours. Grey is the idea of the sky and clouds, the tabula rasa before the blue, with everything this means. Nature, thus the life of individuals, cannot limit itself to an unaware search for gratifications and transcendent aspirations. For centuries clouds have

been portrayed as emblems of happiness, sometimes they become heavy and it is not always easy to walk along them, when they are as heavy as lead. When in psychoanalysis one reaches a certain level of awareness of oneself and his or her own limits, many routes become suddenly visible, also those closest to us, which previously were only blind alleys and indecipherable. This state is defined as a point of no return from which one is condemned to see. To see the part in shade of what is quintessentially brilliant, no longer theorising damage or error, helps one instead give some sense back to it all. The light and the promise of the future that clouds give us is truer if we know of their dark sides. In this trying and tiring project Chiricozzi has attempted a difficult operation; he has violently catapulted his clouds to earth, he has interrupted the magic of their lightness and the references to the fantastic they can offer. He wants them on the ground so we can see our dreams well and up close. He has analysed and interpreted them with the instruments available to him here below. He has understood how to look at them, with almost microscopic detail, from all sides recognising their limits and enormous potential. Then he released them again.