

FLAVIO DE MARCO. THE PLACE OF PAINTING

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Piano should not be played with fingers but with head
(Glenn Gould)

Painting is a problem that you carry in your head when you do not see it anymore, when
you do not have it before your eyes
(Flavio de Marco)

Conscious experiences

Flavio de Marco was born in Lecce in 1975.

When he was a child he was not a drawing virtuoso but some experiences made him understand the importance of art.

From his childhood he remembers when he used to go fishing, he remembers when he used to stare out at the horizon.

During high school, while he was on vacation with his father, he first met art: in a small gallery in Cortina where he saw a painting by Lucio Fontana, that “was revealing another world”.

A few years later, during a trip to Switzerland, a walk in the mountains was imprinted on his mind as an almost paranormal vision, “the feeling from which my poetic on the screen-landscape arose”.¹

After graduation he decided to study Pharmacy at university but, at the same time, he was painting and spending time with artists. Finally, when he realized he wanted to dedicate his life to painting, he chose to pass to the Academy of Fine Arts.

During the years spent in Bologna attending the Accademia, while his companions were turning to new media, and were discussing about photography and video, he was reflecting on the problem of painted surface and decided he could use it as “opposite perspective”, as critical space, as a synthesis of the already-seen, as if he were a collector of images.

The first tests (1993–1995) were a series of works with stylized figures in the space of the picture and they should be considered as a period of preparation: they were attempts to find the way to a new and personal language.

In 1996 he began to research on the painting surface, on canvas meant as boundary line of vision and as an image that is able to refer to another one (titles are indicative of what will follow: Chiuso, Retrostanti, Parzialmente visibile).

This preliminary stage lasted until 1999, when he began to paint computer screens that will lead to what will be his personal synthesis: “The way we perceive reality has changed, through a daily digital bombardment, and automatically leads me to reflect on a few things... these things make it impossible for me to paint in the enchantment of the surface, I do not believe it, I do not need it. We must critically assume this, take it and resolve it. Of course, I can also choose to ignore how much this bombardment has changed the relationship we have with images, the way we see, but how can we leave the paint out, which is where all the problems of the gaze converge, the place par excellence of the gaze? The painting can not be a parallel eye to the world, it must be on the world”.²

New horizons

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, the artist’s words come from recent conversations with him

² Interview with Flavio de Marco by Lorenzo Taini in the exhibition catalog edited by Giovanni Maria Accame, *La Superficie Inquieta* (Rocca di Bentivoglio, Bazzano), Edizioni Aspasia, Bologna, 2003, pp. 89–96

“On de Marco’s painting one could properly write dwelling on his first and evident qualities, focused on an operating rigor which is, essentially, intellectual rigor. These qualities, by themselves, deserve attention, but I’m interested in aspects which may contribute to potential linguistic enhancements”.³

Thus begins the essay by Giovanni Maria Accame that accompanied the first de Marco’s personal art catalog that included his artworks between 1997 and 1999. Then Accame keeps on talking about the artist’s ability to stand on the line of painting and breaking its circle, that is his capacity to bring new oxygen from the outside avoiding a re-reading of painting.

In those years images of electronic circuits and operating system’s windows were entering into the picture; today Flavio explains that they were pictorial “device” through which represent other images: images of present everyday reality but also of memory.

Sandro Sproccati, in the same catalog, talks about the artist’s early works (1997–1999), he analyzes them and describes his painting as a threshold, as well as distance.

De Marco’s painting is a traditional and rigorous practice done in layers, however, “It is not the surface itself he is interested in, it is not the painting language to be the sole object of his investigation. But if anything, he wants to understand the relationship between this language and its historical (or meta-historical) purposes, the ability of painting itself to be openness, a glimpse on somewhere else” Sproccati says. “For this reason the subjects of de Marco’s work are not pigments nor their life on canvas (‘texture’), so we should not analyze only surface’s shape”. [...]”There is here, in these pictures, in these grave walls, in these closed and then ripped curtains, a clear reference [...] to the other world, that different dimension painting opens to, to a break towards a real/unreal space that is at the heart of the painting: ‘an act of force’ that de Marco describes as the real problem of the artwork, since only when the artwork owns this heart that it beats”.⁴

According to these words, Spazio privato pubblico pittorico [Private Public Painting Space] or one of his many paintings titled Paesaggio [Landscape](1999) turn out to be a perfectly successful contamination, because the work about the computer screen becomes the horizon of a contemporary experience of landscape; the screen, the operating model, present themselves as a new window on the world.

Through the paintings showcased at the Bologna-based exhibition at Studio Ecolani, entitled Orizzonte [Horizon], de Marco investigated the possibilities of this new window by enlarging it, shrinking it, or putting it on top of another. According to Roberto Daolio who wrote the exhibition’s introduction text, in Flavio de Marco’s work the problem of the image “... can be placed on the threshold of a procedural abyss, where the place of artifice becomes the mental horizon within which the artist chooses to live and to maintain or preserve the ‘pure’ reality of language. The horizon is back in the difference of margins and in the ‘measure’ of a distance of a conventional estrangement, which reconverts the terms of visible and invisible. The actual and worldly size, veritable critical area where the technological fusion of contemporary being and feeling takes place (from an anthropological point of view as well), can be accompanied the internalization of a practice, maybe extreme and difficult as that of painting, perceptively and critically contemporary, by virtue of a field resource where employ a rigorous and flexible ‘operation of thought’”.⁵

As evidence of this tension towards the creation of a new pictorial horizon, we can add that, since 1999 (and until 2007), the artist has begun to use modified canvas frames,

³ Giovanni Maria Accame, Flavio de Marco, riflessione e contaminazione, in Flavio de Marco, tip Martano, Lecce 1999, snp

⁴ Sandro Sproccati, Titolo aperto per Flavio de Marco, ivi

⁵ Roberto Daolio, Orizzonte, in Orizzonte, exhibition catalog (Studio Ecolani); Bologna 2003, snp

whose lateral edge had an angle measuring less than 90 degrees with respect to the surface and thus becoming slightly oblique inwards. The intent was to reduce the physicality of painting that, once set up, it would create an effect of greater suspension of the painted image.

Art History

According to Flavio art history is “the strong and necessary relationship with ghosts” it is “the recovery and continuation of a gesture which passes from the hand of one artist to another. The gesture that changes shape over time always recalls the same feeling”.

His declared reference points are Leon Battista Alberti and Lucio Fontana, but also Bellini, Matisse, Courbet, Malevich and other contemporary painters ranging from Reinhardt to Stella, with whom he compares and measures himself.

“My investigation is always on picture interpreted as a window on the world, as theorized by Alberti, and the act of painting is, to me, a conversation about what you see from this window”, stated the artist, who from 2003 to 2007 has undertaken a series of works and related exhibitions called Mimesis.

“When I painted the first Mimesis 00, I did not think about extending it in time, then I realized that it was a project that could be developed. These various projects are very different from one another, except perhaps the first two. Through different stages Mimesis has become a laboratory on the idea of representation, tackling the problem of copy and model, moving away from my original intentions”.⁶

Along the way Flavio has invited other artists to meditate on this idea and exhibitions have become the place where to reason on it (as in Mimesis 02 with Luca Pancrazzi).

The final step, and perhaps the summary of the project was Mimesis 04 when de Marco dialogued with the work of Giulio Paolini within an exhibition held in Rome by Pino Casagrande in 2006.

There Flavio de Marco made a wall painting that incorporated the window (real) and painted contemporary, empty but linear, defined and rigorous landscapes on the wall behind Paolini’s classical sculptures.

In a sort of comparison between two universes of thought: the classical mimesis’ extreme ratio was compared with the numerical and digital mimesis: “I think that in terms of representation Paolini ends a discourse on the analogical nature of mimetic gesture, reasoning in terms closed to Greek thought. Then, in recent years, we got to know tools that translate physical objects through numerical sequences”.⁷

In 2007, de Marco was invited to realize a project for the PAC of Ferrara on Schifanoia’s frescoes.

“De Marco then started his journey inside and around Schifanoia. Predictably, the visits to the Salone dei Mesi [Hall of the Months] and being in front of a historical document, facing a masterpiece so full of history, a relic from another world – which tells stories about transmissions, translations, transformations, and betrayals of meanings, from one era to another, from east to west – produced an effect of blindness and a feeling of irreducible distance” as Maria Luisa Pacelli explains, “ Then de Marco gradually found a way”.⁸

Comparing, almost physically, his expressive language with the ancient one of the frescoes, Flavio alternated rational analysis and instinctive inspiration, imagining a new attitude, creating a new method and adopting a new gaze: that of a tourist.

Thus, the exhibition Souvenir Schifanoia was born: “[...] a souvenir triggers a memory that

⁶ Interview with Flavio de Marco by Martina Sconci in the exhibition catalog edited by Rosalba Paiano, Luciana Prati, Premio Carmen Silvestroni 2008: 5th edition (Fabbrica delle Candele, Forlì), Il Ponte Vecchio, Forlì, 2007, pp. 15-17

⁷ ibidem

⁸ Maria Luisa Pacelli, Souvenir Schifanoia in Flavio de Marco. Souvenir Schifanoia, exhibition catalog (Palazzo Massari, PAC, Ferrara), Sate edizioni, Ferrara, 2007, pp. 8-11

is, by definition, partial, sometimes it faints, sometimes it is exact, in a few words, it is always a way to be a “tourists”. With this in mind I chose to keep the images instead of choosing others, to pick them up and mix them with my figures, highlighting the fresco’s lost portion than the one that is still visible”, the artist declared.⁹

According to Francesca Pasini, in de Marco’s works dedicated to the Palazzo Schifanoia’s *Ciclo dei mesi* [Cycle of the Months] he introduced “a figurative reciprocity between the functions of the instrument and the recovery of historical memory connected to the frescoes of Schifanoia”. A similar connection is the one described by Gerhard Richter who, since the ‘60s, had translated in his works the relationship between painting and photography: “de Marco stands in front of computer technology and uses this medium to mix paint, techniques of image composition and reproducibility of memory”.¹⁰

In a particularly effective palimpsest Flavio mixed the photographic copy of the frescoes with the space of the room and screens of his paintings.

“De Marco carries out a specular process” – according to Pasini – “He mixes into computer primal space both the photographic copy of Schifanoia’s frescoes and the process by which he created his original painting “[...]. The fresco occupies the full screen and coincide with the physical boundaries of the picture, but it is never fully visible, because it is overlapped by windows with which de Marco represents the space between personal and photographic memory, including the mobility of the screens and their translation into painting”.¹¹

It is important to highlight that here, for the first time, figurative images appear within the screens–frames; what remains of the cycle of the Months is translated into a structure that alternates representation and memory in an ideal continuum with the technique of a fifteenth–century painter.¹²

Framings

In 2009, de Marco exhibited at the Estorick Collection in London.

While working on artworks showcased in this exhibition titled *Portrait of a Collection*, the artist looked at 20th–century Italian painting conserved by the institution in London. Thus moving directly from the works of these artists (Balla, Morandi) he used their different pictorial languages.

Through these paintings the artist began to build an “alphabet of signs” related to the elements that form the landscape (sky, sea, soil, ..) and then he re–used them – with different techniques and styles – in the composition of the picture.

Flavio started from the homepage of Estorick’s website and extrapolated its “frame” that remained the constant element of the 11 *Portrait–Landscapes* belonging to the series. Ten of these were dedicated to ten different painters while one was dedicated to Eric and Salome Estorick, where a colorful crossing – the – boundaries tangle wanted to be a sort of anamorphosis which make us to think about the ambassadors’ skull in Holbein’s painting (which is part of the collection and which inspired de Marco).

In 2010 it took place the exhibition *Vedute* [Views] at the Maramotti Collection in Reggio Emilia.

This was a great project through which the artist investigated the “view” as the fundamental concept of landscape’s modern vision throughout art history (from Canaletto to Hockney).

Flavio began with places where he lived, but he did not represent them in a direct way.

Berlin (where de Marco is now based) was represented through photographs and

⁹ Interview with Flavio de Marco by Martina Sconci, cit.

¹⁰ Francesca Pasini, *Paesaggi spaziali*, in Maria Luisa Pacelli, (edited by), Flavio de Marco. *Souvenir Schifanoia*, cit., pp. 18–25

¹¹ *Ibidem*

¹² Federico Ferrari, *Una sola mano*, *ivi*, pp.12–17

advertisement posters; London through maps and satellite navigation systems; Milan and Bologna (where the artist was trained) through images from art history and postcards; Rome through antique prints and brochures; Lecce (where he was born) through tourist guide books.

The code chosen to describe each city has become the lens through which we look at the image.

This method allowed the artist a free linguistic experimentation and an increase in the iconographic repertoire from which to draw images; but also has allowed him to create contemporary views that surprise us and make us think: “What we see of Bologna, Lecce, Rome, Berlin, London, Milan, their partial, and sometimes tormented views, are images that we edit conceptually and visually, and that not only make us reflect on these cities’ state of things and on the ‘tourist aspect of urban experience’” – as Adriana Polveroni wrote in the exhibition catalog – “The vision of those big paintings and the attention that we need to pay to the postcards that accompany them, provoke a ‘deep questioning about ourselves, about what we see, on what the action of seeing and its bumpy grammar mean’”.¹³

The island that does not exist

“I believe that the term Landscape originates where the term Nature ends” declared Flavio de Marco in a video interview following his exhibition held in Emilia Romagna.¹⁴

I believe that this statement is the key to understand the project which led him to create Stella (a corpus of works showcased through three exhibitions and a book).

It is not my place to talk about this project here but I can not help but mention it referring to the artist’s journey so far.

The corpus consists of over 60 paintings and many drawings (more than 200).

The frame to be filled is still the same, that of the computer screen, but here “it is accompanied by classical landscape” that becomes the protagonist of the project.

The language of the content has changed: the many drawings (preparatory or not) and the many paintings of different sizes made with various techniques describe all the different aspects of the imaginary island. L’isola di Stella [The Island of Star] is a huge painting software you can draw liberally on” has repeatedly written and said Flavio, and I add that it is a huge archive containing everything that the artist has seen, drawn and painted so far.

If in his early works de Marco wanted to limit the number of elements to make the vision essential, now he puts elements back in their place, adding iconographic references (historical artistic and otherwise), brush strokes and colors.

Thus, by adding, Flavio intersects and overlaps other elements of the vision and of the landscape’s experience and stimulates our memory and our ability to perceive.

The further gesture

Flavio de Marco, known and distinguished among contemporary artists for the practice of painting and for his landscapes, writes and has always written; reviews, reflections, and finally books (as Stella).

“Writing has always been present in various forms, such as an uninterrupted love letter” he has written to me.

De Marco’s other faithful companion has always been music; from Bach to Rossini to Glenn Gould who share with the artist rigor, need for concentration and an all-encompassing interpretation of the artistic experience.

Perhaps this is why, after Lecce, Bologna and Rome, today Flavio lives and works in Berlin.

“Italy does not respect the identity of the artist, seen as someone who lives his life to

¹³ Adriana Polveroni, Dall’esperienza interrotta allo sguardo critico, in Flavio de Marco. Vedute, exhibition catalog (Foundation Maramotti Reggio Emilia), Silvana Editoriale, Cinisello Balsamo (MI), 2010, pp. 82–93

¹⁴ <http://www.talkingart.it/studio-artista/flavio-de-marco/>

build, through his ideas, the nation's identity, as someone who builds an imaginary that scars society".

What I'm interested in, here, is the meaning Flavio gives to his work. Because this is what has led him to choose where to live.

Flavio first asked himself what should be his position in relation to what preceded him and then what should be the further gesture. Then he chose to paint: "Painting has saved my life but it is a feeling I have looked for and built", he explains.

It is a matter of awareness of one's role and responsibility towards society.

But perhaps it is also a matter of distance: necessary to defend the chosen position, and an essential condition to see clearly without distortion or complacency.

Therefore Flavio de Marco in his Berlin-based studio is both watching himself and ourselves from a distance. Only among other people he accomplishes his work as an artist, or better as a painter.

However, "Firstly you need to figure out where the place of painting leads to: why to pierce reality through the painting?" – he questions himself – "Painting is a particular place and its purpose is not to push for an aesthetic experience when the eye flows over the surface, in other words: the problem is not to present painting as processuality, his workmanship is bound to a matter of gaze's reversal, to extend the surface beyond its own boundaries. The image from which the viewer starts, the represented image, let the viewer go towards a place of imagination"¹⁵

Therefore, the vehicle is the same used throughout the entire history of art, but contents are new. In the frame chosen, the screen of the PC, de Marco has inserted objects that are always different from each other.

"A painting must lay the foundations of a problem, then it automatically becomes a good painting", he explained to Taini in 2002.¹⁶

It seems to me that from the darkness of the empty screen of his first works until the last landscapes of Stella [Star], Flavio has always remained faithful to this commitment. With contrapuntal method he queried himself and the viewer about problems to which perhaps there is no solution, playing on an oblique plane that combines the bottom and the top, the memory and the fragmentation of the current vision, the technological and touristic experience with great existential questions and needs that only the language of art can bond together.

¹⁵ Interview with Flavio de Marco by Marcello Carriero, partially published in Marcello Carriero, *Note sulla pittura di paesaggio*, www.merzbau.it (section "Appunti d'arte"). The whole text is held in the archive of the artist, 2001

¹⁶ cit