

Souvenir Schifanoia

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*Whenever we are in front of an image, we are in front of a moment in time. Like the poor illiterate in Kafka's novel, we stand before the image as we stand Before the law: such that being in front of the canvas is like being in front of an open door. Nothing is hidden, all we need to do is to enter, but the light within is almost blinding, and so we keep our distance. This same openness, not to mention the guard, holds us back: seeing is desiring, and we wait, face to face with time. But what is the nature of this time? What plasticity, what fractures, what rhythms and what conflicts of time are entailed in opening up to the image?\**

I first talked with Flavio de Marco about a project for the PAC (Padiglione di Arte Contemporanea) a year ago. In the beginning, I envisaged an exhibition based on landscape, which has been the central theme in this artist's quest. His previous works query the rules of painting, touching on the delicate question of the *stronghold* of traditional genres. In recent years, his work shows the use of a rigorous, coherent poetic to challenge these canons.

During these early talks, we came up with the idea of tying the project to the frescoes of the Salone dei Mesi in the Palazzo Schifanoia. In fact the videoartist Alexander Hahn was already working on a project dedicated to the cycle portrayed in the frescoes. For De Marco to also base his work on this extraordinary monument was an interesting possibility, but one to be explored cautiously: basing work on the masterpieces of Palazzo Schifanoia is risky for any artist, but especially so for a painter. However, once the artistic imagination is unleashed, it is difficult to rein it in, and once the idea was suggested, the die was cast.

De Marco began his artistic voyage in and around the Schifanoia. As to be expected, the initial confrontation with the Salone dei Mesi was rather daunting. Finding oneself up against such a rich historical and artistic record, a record from another world, that in turn tells of transmissions, translations, transformations and betrayals of meaning, from one era to another, from east to west, had the initial effect of *blinding* and creating a sensation of indomitable *distance*. Then, slowly, De Marco saw the path he wanted to follow.

Creating and, in a certain sense, re-creating, a method day after day, he found a way forward that was both controlled, yet open, drawing from within himself and putting into play his own expressive language, which crystallized in *Paesaggi*, building a montage of computer operating system windows.

Looking at the saturated, vibrant even, surfaces of the works made for this exhibition, one can see that grappling with the Schifanoia has forced the artist beyond the confines of his own quest, redirecting him towards warmer, richer, looser tones than those used in his earlier works. The result is a fluid yet ambivalent arrangement which, during moments of rational and speculative analysis over the course of the project, interchange and enter the realm of pure instinctive inspiration, personal and empathetic.

In the seven canvasses shown on the ground floor of the PAC, dedicated to the portions of the frescoes that are still legible, the sequence of elements from each composition have a quick

syncopated rhythm and a format that, beginning from the base level of the framework on which the reproductions of the frescoes are printed, rises up through various layers of paint that, like a theatrical backdrop, leave part of the underlying structure visible, until the image is captured in a final window. To a certain degree, the vocabulary is the same as in *Paesaggi*: superimposed “snapshots” of computer screens showing grids and other features of the operating system. But here, the introduction of images, even though incomplete, of fifteenth century paintings intimately subverts this language, transforming it from being closed to open. We are dealing with figures or other details, opaquely veiled like a vague memory (even if these veils don’t show a formal preoccupation, a certain “aesthetic” modesty), fragments, poor souvenirs, that which remains of the brilliant epiphany of a structure that embraces heaven and earth, yet which is no more attainable in its wholeness.

The canvasses are hung in way that isolates each one, allowing them to be read independently; thus negating the collective vision and therefore continuous narrative of the Salone. Reading these works presupposes shifting the way in which we look deeply, yet this depth conventionally renews the expressive unity; indicating the profundity of the discourse, focussing less on linear rhythm and superficial storytelling, but rather on a dynamic yet layered diachronic, which is the enigma of the iconography of the Schifanoia as unveiled by Warburg.

When we first discussed the project, De Marco began with those parts of the frescoes that are no longer legible, and the large mural installation that stretches along the walls of the first floor of the PAC is dedicated to this. A propos of empathetic proximity, it is without doubt De Marco’s sensitivity and his feeling for modern art that led him directly to those portions of the frescoes which had been damaged the most by time, such that we find ourselves in front of a nearly monochromatic surface furrowed by faint tracks, making one think, for example, of works of art that are historically closer to our times.

The intrinsically ephemeral nature of the installation, which won’t outlive the exhibition, resonates with the changing and non-enduring nature of the frescoes, while their organic component, the cause of their ongoing metamorphosis and disappearance, echoes the palpating rhythm and apparently tactile matter of the installation. Here also, like the canvasses on the first floor, the montage starts at the lowest level, that of the wall, where the west and south walls of the Salone are represented in scale. In this case, however, the work acquires a depth that is also physical: the painting spreads out on the wall and onto the papers which have been printed and pasted onto the wall. Onto this base, some pictures chosen from those made by De Marco between 1999 and today are hung. The technique of collage and assemblage, along with the drawing and painting, becomes instrumental in creating an all-embracing contemplation that, as well as recalling the depth and the complexity of Palazzo Schifanoia, literally makes a game of its art, rendering it potentially vulnerable to further more radical changes.

\* G. Didi-Huberman, *Storia dell’arte e anacronismo delle immagini*, Torino 2007, p. 11.