

## Sui generi

di Maria Luisa Pacelli

*And yet, the act of vision requires turning the memory towards something that is there, in front of the eyes, but that must always be remembered in some way to become visible. This is the inescapable condition for the image to develop and ultimately, sometimes, appear or reappear in a new guise.*

Federico Ferrari<sup>1</sup>

This project is in keeping with a rather popular trend in museums today, where historic collections are variously compared with contemporary works of art for the purpose of creating a new and exciting look at those collections, and potentially to renew the dialogue between the past and present in art history. In this case, painter and writer Flavio de Marco was asked to create three paintings related to three other works in major Italian museums: the Galleria Sabauda in Turin, the Galleria Estense in Modena and the Galleria Corsini in Rome. What makes this project special and particularly interesting is that the comparison has been sought entirely within the tradition of painting, and involves an artist who in the last decade has probed the depths of possibilities for forming a new tie to the masters' legacy. The canvases were presented in the museums and displayed near the paintings that inspired them. The only restriction placed on the artist in selecting the works was that they had to belong to three different genres: landscape, portrait, and still-life.

At the Galleria Sabauda, de Marco's eye was caught by the tiny but exquisite masterpiece by van Eyck, *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata*, painted around 1432. De Marco particularly concentrated on the extraordinary landscape forming the background for the two figures of the monks, which was isolated and transcribed on a larger canvas than the original. In de Marco's painting, the scene loses the illusion of reality produced by the completeness of the details and the studied placement of the natural components in the Flemish painter's work, with the rocks providing the connection between the foreground and the background, giving depth to the scene. De Marco instead emphasized the two-dimensionality of the representation; its pictorial structure seems to show the geological stratifications of terrain seen in sections. Thanks in part to the format which is three times the size of the original, a richness of signs and layers remains in comparison with the original, accentuating van Eyck's extraordinary virtuosity.

It is also interesting in the context of this exhibition how de Marco chose to work on a composition that had inspired other artists centuries before him. Scholars have identified details of van Eyck's landscape in the visual lexicon of Florentine artists of

the following generation, from Verrocchio to Botticelli and Filippino Lippi who all became aware of *St. Francis Receiving the Stigmata* when the painting crossed Italy on its way to the Holy Land.<sup>2</sup>

Like a reminiscence, de Marco borrows from another work from the Galleria Sabauda collections – a view of Turin by Bellotto which replaces the medieval city seen in van Eyck's work and serves as a tribute.

This landscape is in alignment with de Marco's research and indeed has a "close relative," almost a *pendant*, in another recent work inspired by Giovanni Bellini's *Saint Jerome* in the National Gallery in London (Fig. 1). However, the works created for the other two museums are now the focus of interest.

The thought process of the painting for the Galleria Estense, inspired by the *Portrait of Francesco I d'Este* by Velázquez, is related to the history of the painting, which was a gift from Philip IV to the d'Este duke. Velázquez apparently intended the work to be a study for an equestrian portrait which was never realized, however, due to the turn in the relations between the duchy and the Spanish crown. Referring to this event, de Marco chose to take on a genre that has now declined alongside with the historical circumstances that determined its fate, i.e. the equestrian portrait, of which Velázquez was an outstanding interpreter. In this case, in composing the painting, the artist used an approach that was quite common in the history of these demanding commissions: the custom of using pre-existing solutions and models, whether his own or others'. The result is the product of an assembly of parts from various works leading back to Velázquez and his studio: Velázquez' self-portrait currently in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia for the horseman's face; the portrait of *Prince Baltasar Carlos on Horseback* housed in the Museo del Prado for the landscape; for the horse and body, de Marco used the *Allegorical Portrait of Philip IV on Horseback* in the Uffizi, which is a copy done by Velázquez and his studio of a work by Rubens that is now lost. The composition emphasizes the various treatments and creates a rhythm in how it is viewed. Some portions of the work are painted in oil, in a style showing movement, layers and vibrancy in harmony with the master's work; other portions are painted in acrylics. The horse, in particular, was created using a stencil that was drawn and cut out by the artist and spray painted. This variety of textures and styles is reminiscent of collage and the mingling of references from high and low art forms. The electronic media icons at the bottom of the canvas definitely refer to our mass culture, but overall, the painting is true to the monumental spirit of the models.

Finally, at the Galleria Corsini, inspired by the still-life *An Elegant Snack* by Christian Berentz, a German painter living in Rome at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, de Marco chose an intimate tone, in tune with the reflective nature of this genre.

From an iconographic perspective, he has remained very close to the model, adopting an identical format, straying only to link the composition to his own daily life through the replacement of the tobacco box with his cellphone and updating the shape of the glasses which he depicts as modern cocktail glasses. From a stylistic perspective, he has rejected the specific values that contributed to the vast commercial success of this type of production, namely the hyper-realistic rendering

of the objects and subject matter through the use of varnished, seductive painting, in favour of decisive strokes and a sparing use of pigment, making it possible to see the trials and dabs of his brushwork, and a palette of almost dissonant tones.

With the paintings created on this occasion, de Marco continues along the path that brought him to an important shift in his research, documented in the exhibition *Planetarium*<sup>3</sup> which took place in concomitance with this project, where the artist presented his work of the last four years. Among the most obvious changes in this phase is the fact that the landscape is no longer the nearly exclusive genre of his research. Another is that his compositions have, for the most part, left the frame of the computer screen on which they first took shape and remained from 1999 to date, signifying the change in our perspective on the world. However, what remains is the poetic assumption of that choice, considering that the issues of seeing remain central to the artist's research, but which are now formally expressed in a less binding or explicit way.

As in the most typical of cases, the advent of this new era was marked by a creative crisis,<sup>4</sup> which caused de Marco to challenge and then change the direction taken after his last major exhibition in 2014.<sup>5</sup> At that time, his landscape work had begun to evolve in an abstract setting, where the lexicon of signs and the language that had matured with the vast pictorial project *Stella* had found a new and fortunate dimension on an exquisitely lyrical and formal plane which nevertheless seems to have quickly gone beyond the boundaries of experimentation.

With this production of groups of paintings devoted to the imaginary landscapes of Mercury, Mars, Jupiter and Venus (Fig. 2) running out, entirely new needs arose that directed his research toward subjects and ways of representation – for example, oil painting or the direct shot on reality with studio views – as the creative act flowed towards the less controlled and controllable. These choices not only cleared the way for an art that was formally freer and more intuitive, but also for a more personal approach that involved the artist and his place in the world – the latter unequivocally expressed in a group of bold self-portraits in oil (Fig. 3).

However, this type of expanded field does not signal the arrival of a care-free naïve phase. The work remains a space for the investigation and verification of critical discourse to be moved forward under de Marco's firm control. Testifying to this is the inaugural painting of this new phase, the first one after the series of abstract landscapes. *Atelier I* is a monochromatic piece playing on transparency and yet is well anchored in the world of things. Turning his attention away from the infinite spaces of the cosmos, the artist fixes his gaze on the things nearest to him, the familiar universe of his own studio, and in particular, the screen of his laptop – the same screen that at the start of his research was to be a window on the world, and which in this work, stripped of its conceptual and metaphorical nature, is led back to an empirical and temporal dimension (Fig 4).

If we look at de Marco's art in perspective, we realize that the dynamic that sees him fluctuating between the abstract – like the impossibility of seeing the world, much less representing it – and the figurative is part of what drives his research. Moreover, we can also observe how western pictorial tradition is an inexhaustible resource for

the artist that he can draw on for going beyond the problematic silence of images, by ever more fervently grappling with the patterns of tradition within the narrow confines of pictorial language.

This happened for the first time in 2007, on the occasion of the exhibition at the PAC of Ferrara dedicated to the cycle of 15<sup>th</sup> century frescoes in the Salone dei Mesi in the Schifanoia Palace; then, with *Portrait of a Collection*, an exhibition held at the Estorick Collection in London in 2009 (Fig. 5). For this, de Marco created a group of works in dialogue with works of Italian artists of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century which eventually formed one of the key tools for the research developed in the two major projects devoted to the landscape experience in our contemporary era: the exhibition *Vedute*, presented at the Maramotti Collection in 2010,<sup>6</sup> and *Stella*, a book and exhibition, hosted at the Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna in Rome as well as being shown in Amsterdam and Berlin in 2013 and 2014 (fig. 6).

Looking back at the phases of this relationship with the legacy of the masters, the exhibition devoted to the Schifanoia Palace frescoes in which de Marco first presented figurative works takes on a fundamental meaning with regard to the artist's attitude toward the tradition preceding him (Fig. 7). The substance of this discourse had already been seized and expanded upon by Federico Ferrari in his essay in the exhibition catalogue.<sup>7</sup> In that text, Ferrari developed the concept of recollection, a critical theme for de Marco's art. It was not by accident that he chose this as the title of the exhibition, and over subsequent years became closely connected with his investigation of the landscape as an eminently touristic experience.

This concept represents de Marco's mood with regard to a visual document from another era. This is an erratic, broken, inexact memory necessarily coloured with cultural and sentimental factors. On the other hand, we also find the emergence of images from the past (*sou-venir*) with movement suggesting an ideal continuum with the artist. As Ferrari wrote, "The invisible gesture that guides the hand in tracing and retracing that of which no memory is possible, but only infinite and blind recollection. No ascendance or descendance, but the simple relationship with the inexhaustible material power of an anonymous gesture."<sup>8</sup> Ferrari's reflection arises from another significant aspect of that experience, namely the inescapable confrontation for an artist like de Marco with the critical investigation method that Aby Warburg had tested and refined in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century specifically in relation to this same pictorial cycle. This is subversive thinking in the field of art history, overturning Warburg's point of view and finding "the ability to access one's own truth through the very power of images", and which had no choice but to make a strong and lasting impression. Like Warburg's method in which theory is based on images, de Marco's research goes through patterns and seeks its own synthesis in the painting's space, through a linguistic experimentation that, in short, examines the possibilities of this expressive language at the end of its historical function and therefore, more generally, on the meaning of how we see.

With regard to the historical function of painting, we must still deal with the theme of

how this exhibition dedicated to traditional genres connects with the present. On a Radio3 Suite broadcast of the virtual opening of the exhibition on April 4, de Marco illustrated, as he had done previously, the premises of his work. Basically, the artist's research moves from the observation that we are in an era in which painting must be measured by a practically unlimited accessibility to images and which finds itself, moreover, in competition with ways of seeing that not only impact the intrinsic values of the images but also the general dynamics of the act of looking; through which knowledge of an object, including works of art, comes for the most part from the cold digital environment rather than through a close encounter with the thing and therefore a multi-sensorial perception. Vision, and vision alone, is consequently over-stimulated.

Whithin this framework, showing the works in museums in proximity to the "originals" reflects a very specific choice. The promotion of live enjoyment – which on the one hand draws attention to the issues of looking and on the other, has the power to emphasize the physical and specific characteristics of the medium, precisely that which is lost along the way with digital viewing – goes hand-in-hand with the bet made by the artist in relating himself to the models. It is in this direction that the decision to count on the qualities of the painting (in the comparison with Velázquez, for example) is heading, trying to retrieve, through a thorough mimesis, the master's brush stroke when painting the red sash enveloping the Duke of Este, rather than the subject of the painting. The same holds true for discussion of van Eyck's landscape, in which de Marco seems to want to reiterate the miniaturist's touch, but expressed differently, to then introduce something discarded and recover the lyrical aspect of the original vision with the insertion of Bellotto's view of Turin. The placement of the painting plays an even greater role in the Galleria Corsini (Fig. 8). The work was displayed in the most important room of this illustrious Roman family's home, a rich, elegant 17<sup>th</sup> century setting in which the masterpieces of the collection are hung. De Marco's work is set on the wall on which still-lives are displayed and is located immediately beneath the canvas that inspired it. A youth in a Caravaggio painting hung on the next wall seems to be looking precisely in that direction (see pages 36-37). This apt display solution creates a special resonance among the paintings which accentuates the mystery within this genre and that is able to project the viewer into a metaphysical dimension, connecting the genre to the here and now, reminding us of our own mortality. In the Galleria Corsini, de Marco's still-life aligns both physically and ideally with this tradition, reiterating the spell and in so doing, bears witness to the painting's ability to speak to the present.

1. F. Ferrari, *Un solo gesto in Souvenir Schifanoia*, curated by M.L. Pacelli, exhibition catalogue (Ferrara, Padiglione d'Arte Contemporanea, November 18, 2007 – January 6, 2008), Ferrara 2007, p. 14.
2. S. Tarissi De Jacobis in *Il potere e la grazia*, curated by A. Geretti and S. Castri, exhibition catalogue (Rome, Palazzo Venezia, October 8, 2009 –

January 31, 2010), Milan 2009, p. 236.

3. *Flavio de Marco. Planetarium*, curated by M. Buonomo (Milan M77 Gallery, March 28 – May 27, 2017).
4. On this theme, see J. Costantino, *Il pittore che cadde nello spazio*, in *Planetarium*, curated by M. Buonomo, exhibition catalogue (Milan, M77 Gallery, March 28 – May 27, 2017), Milan 2017.
5. *Flavio de Marco. Stella*, curated by A. Rorro (Rome, Galleria nazionale d'arte moderna e contemporanea, June 5 – October 5, 2014).
6. *Flavio de Marco. Vedute*, curated by A. Polveroni, exhibition catalogue (Reggio Emilia, November 21, 2010 – February 27, 2011), Milan 2010.
7. Ferrari, *op. cit.*
8. *Ibid.*, p. 14.