

# The Coded Painting of Flavio de Marco

by Michele Bonuomo

To encode with symbols, numbers, or other signs, takes for granted, to use military language, the intention of hiding the meaning of a text in order to make it secret, to keep it away from indiscreet eyes, and to make sure that it is not readily understandable. It is a “calligraphic” artifice aimed at protecting information which, with a decoded and unfiltered reading, might otherwise pose a risk for those who are unable to handle it and to be advantageous for those who take possession of it and use it for inappropriate ends. A code for protection and secrecy, like the expedient for military use, is what Flavio de Marco has perfected for his painting by inventing a language that allows various degrees of analysis and interpretation. Successively, as in a game of Chinese boxes, a meaning that is immediately revealed is associated with another one that is hidden, one that needs to be brought to light. Without ever putting an end to an unstoppable and labyrinthine process of inquiry and invention.

As used as he is to undertaking “adventurous journeys into four-dimensional situations” - those that a hasty traveller could never achieve (“journeys give fools instructions that only increase their stupidity” was the prescient view of Edoardo Persico already in the 1930s when tourism was not available to the masses) - de Marco traverses lands of painting that he knows well in order to trace out and reinvent secret places: lands and islands that, even if they do not exist on a map that has already been completely codified, he is capable of modelling and measuring in every detail. De Marco has in some way made explicit (or perhaps made things even more complicated?) this “map making” of known and unknown areas of painting with his *Stella* project. He began this in 2013 with a show at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin, which then went to the Frankendael Foundation in Amsterdam and, in 2014, to the Galleria d’Arte Moderna in Rome; the project was then collected together as a “theoretical” and visionary whole in a book that was published afterwards. For this complex operation, organised through painting, words, exhibitions and this definitive “code-book”, and on the pretext of compiling a kind of travel guide to an artificial island he had invented and located in the southern Aegean Sea, de Marco gave a form to the surface (the landscape) of “another” land (or rather a “non-land”, given that we could never manage to pinpoint it on an official map...), one colonised by an improbable society habituated by now to measuring and recording the places with the means of low-cost flights and with the codes of the world wide web: respectively the formula and tools that produce accumulations of views to be deposited in the memory of a Smartphone. The creation of “lands” populated by the visions produced by a mechanism that is more lysergic than utopian (the “non-places” made immobile and luminous as though on a video screen) has forced Marco to think about what the solidity of the idea of landscape in painting might be today: that is, the surface of painting itself when it is acted on by painting. And, as a result, to deal with it with the tools of painting in order to give it once more the formal consistency of representation.

De Marco seems to hypothesise that if landscape today – in other words, the idea of representing the mental space which art history has staged – has become only a succession and superimposition of still images, then the painter has the task of formulating its visual codes and, at this point, of remodelling the very practice of painting itself. Only in this way can imagining and inventing new “lands” be truthful and testify to a new and unknown dimension of space and, as a result, be able to extend the inquiry to all of painting and to the use that one can and must continue to make of the memory of painting itself: “This is to pass from imagining extraterrestrial landscapes to living at first hand in an

unknown landscape. You can just imagine how an artist feels on a certain day when, for the first time, the studio is no longer a work place but a possible model for a painting. I am that extraterrestrial...”

In organising his highly personal cosmography, one in which references to planets (Venus, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Saturn, Neptune, and Uranus) are nothing more than a narrative and sensorial expedient for making visible the matrices of his art language, de Marco poses for himself the problem of going beyond the idea of a certain twentieth century painting which has searched, step by step, for its motives and necessities in the depths and in the surfaces, in the abyss of the subconscious or in mental rarefaction, in the pleasure of the obscure and the inexpressible, or in a frivolity exhibited through marks reduced to worn tattoos useful only for identifying their affinity with pre-established groups. At a time, ours, when representation of reality and the needs linked to it have been articulated through encrypted signals in which even the most basic feelings need a binary system to be transmitted, the motives for painting have to be verified by searching for a new meaning to give to the concept of surface. In the second half of the twentieth century - a century which, despite the advanced stage of the millennium in which we live, never seems to have ended – the control and knowledge of painting’s two-dimensional surfaces went far beyond the visual and conceptual illusion produced by Renaissance perspective when Lucio Fontana, by cutting the canvas, “found” space: a gesture that has deeply changed the status of painting as it had been understood up to that point. In other respects that gesture, which is no longer ahead of its times or iconoclastic, forced painting to come to grips with a complexity intimately interwoven with the very idea of surfaces. A complexity that, from the painted walls of Lascaux to the Romanelli grottos in Salento, has reached the screens of the most sophisticated computers of our times, thus confirming that painting is still an amazing question of surfaces: a surface is a place that is no longer utopian and that can be measured with our eyes or that can be spoilt by the imprint of a hand, that can be filled with a thought or emptied with a silence that is impervious to words. The “de Marco code” hides and protects the surface’s secret: a mysterious place in which we can immerse ourselves, even at the risk of drowning. In order to ensure that painting continues to be a necessity. And not the faded makeup of boredom.

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