

1

Shape, color, taste, sound and smell is the title of a double solo exhibition that suggests the assonance and resonance possible between two artists of different locations and generations whose practices revolve around the concept of painting as pure presence, and as relation to exhibition space and the viewer's body; painting that is not done by brush, and yet is entirely material.

The first room presents recent production by Adelaide Cioni (Bologna, 1976) in flannel, wool, fabric, acrylic on paper, that belongs to two different bodies of work: the *Go Easy on Me* series she began in 2017, and her latest research entitled *Secondary Images* (2019): *Il mare; Il sole; I buchi neri; La scacchiera; Colonna*.

Go Easy on Me results of the possible permutations and multiplications of color within a given form. The forms have outlines – revealing the extent to which her practice is rooted in drawing – that are filled with solid pure seductive color.

Flat and matte on paper, this modern color squeezed straight from the tube summoned to fill the simple – and happy – shape of an ice cream, surprises in the way it evokes a fresco: this pink that fills a nondescript ice cream cone form is Giotto's pink, Piero della Francesca's rose. Because this shape in front of me is so banal and featureless, I see it not as subject but instead as vehicle, the means of color in all its seductiveness.

Thus, it becomes possible to even abstain and refrain from painting the canvas, and therefore wield scissors in place of brush and trace a form by snipping it out from a swathe of color and sewing it onto a support. The qualities of the color are summed to the qualities of a finer or thicker weave, a harder or a softer texture, and then reproduced on large scale. In this passage, color 'takes form' as material, object, as space, or better, as *thing*.

This aspect becomes even more evident in the *Secondary Images* series. The subjects of the four works on the wall and the one sculpture are archetypal images that are parts of both vernacular language (tarot cards, emblems, and coats-of-arms are all images Adelaide Cioni investigates) and Modernist culture (the grid, repetition, sequencing). Aby Warburg calls these occurrences *Nachleben*: survivals, and in the same way as the chessboard, the waves, the column, the circle, the oval, they are subjects that we recognize without bothering to ascribe meaning of any kind, neither literal nor metaphoric or even figurative. These images are even more available and familiar and less surprising than an ice cream cone, and it is precisely because they are so recognizable and require no further interpretation that they hit us so directly, in the same way that an icon never describes an idea but invariably positions itself as the impossible incarnation of an idea.

A circle can be a sun or a black hole. A chessboard is an alternation of red and white, and the waves of the sea repeated

in sequence are another possible version. In each of these works, the choice the artist makes lies in giving a color, giving that alone and nothing else, and in giving it one precise form and not another. (It takes courage to state complex things simply and to declare that all painting is an abandonment to color).

1. G. Didi-Huberman, *Fra Angelico: Dissemblance and Figuration*, University of Chicago Press, 1995.

In his study on Fra Angelico, Georges Didi-Huberman writes 'Painting often bewilders. It offers to our gaze colors, clearly evident or rudimentary shapes - but often unexpected colors and shapes.'¹ The images that the tools of art history offer us no help in seeing, these *parerga* or accessories are places that we – says Huberman – should look at with closer attention because they often help us redefine our categories of interpretation and refocus a sited gaze on the works. Therefore – he continues – wherever color is not a *figure* as a story but instead as a sign conceived to represent the supernatural through a body, the power of painting, the ability of color 'that no longer colors objects' to burst forth and overturn 'the correspondences of visible aspects' can be seen.

In Adelaide Cioni's work, color bursts forth and strikes us: it is a body-color that incarnate in a form, becomes volume, surface or threshold and fills up the space. The display follows the same rule, it saturates the room and offers itself full body (in this understanding of the relation between work, space, spectator, the legacy of Pascali, more than that of Novelli and Merz, is made evident).

The shape, color, taste, sound and smell of the exhibition's title are those of the spectator invited to an immediate encounter with color without intermediary. An encounter which is also corporeal: my bulk before the work's bulk, both sharing the same space. An encounter that is experiential, physical, and human – the meeting of two fragilities, but also of one depth meeting another, and in the end, intimate.

2

From the extensive production of Guy Mees (Mecheln, 1935 – Anvers 2003) whose work is here being presented in Italy for the first time, a nucleus of work done in the second half of the 80s and 90s that starts from the series of what might be termed – reliefs in paper ? or paintings done without brush? – entitled *Verloren Ruimte* (Lost Sspace) has been selected.

Verloren Ruimte consists of paper and cloth or canvas cut-outs installed directly on the wall – an outflow of pure color from the canvas – presented in this show alongside two works that are part of two later but contiguous cycles: *Imaginair Ballet* (Imaginary Ballet), fan-shaped cut-outs, dancing skirts, freeform, almost choreographic compositions, and *Skirting board*, originally painted on baseboard, then reconstructed in pastel-tone photographic prints (it's worth noting that the photos were taken in a domestic environment, and therefore an experiential, not abstract space).

In addition to indicating the series presented here, *Verloren Ruimte* is also the name Mees had given to a preceding series of works he did in the 60s: two-dimensional or three-dimensional structures over which layers of white lace were stretched and occasionally back-lit by pink, blue, or white neon bulbs. The surfaces that come to our gaze offer themselves as objects; thanks to the opaque but permeable quality of the material however, they also let us see through them at the same time. These works are a distillate of two of painting's irreconcilable propositions: the Modernist painting, and painting as window.

They invite us to pause on the threshold, on the surface, while considering the possibility of a space outside the canvas. (Threshold space is also what separates wall from floor, and once its gap has been illumined by color, it can change the entire space's tonality.)

Following a 'structural phase'¹ and a number of works that show an interest for the environment, during the 70s Mees resumed considering painting as a series of large and airy sheets of tracing paper lightly tinged in oil pastel that recalled analytic painting. This was followed by works on paper freer form in which the corners were rounded.

Lastly, in the works done in second half of the 80s, support and color coincide, and the shape is drawn directly with scissors on paper, on fabric, on the pages of a newspaper. Despite having apparently residual nature only, these vast fields of solid color arranged one against another, presented through accumulation, or sometimes exhibited only in their purity are capable of defining and delineating the space around them, and recall the spacious frescoed surfaces of Italy in the 1400s²: color as form, as light.

In these works, as in the first *Verloren Ruimte* done in the 60s, surfaces and volumes are two structural parts of the work. Volume is compressed as if in a bas-relief, bringing the layers of lace and the curvature of the sheets of paper back to painting's two dimensions.

The works done in the 80s and 90s seem to explore territory also investigated by Richard Tuttle, an artist with whom Mees appears to be engaged in a long distance dialogue from an

1. Dirk Snauert in the conversation published in Lilou Vidal, *The Weather is Quiet, Cool, and Soft*, Sternberg Press, 2018, p. 160.

2. Dirk Pültau, 'The Lost Space. Facet of a Concept', in D. Snauwaert, *Guy Mees*, Ludion 2002, pp 252-255.

entirely personal position, just as his 1960s *Verloren Ruimte* seemed to communicate with Manzoni's *Achrome* and Fontana's *Tagli* and *Ambienti*. In both bodies of work, a domestic dimension is clearly evident, as if the materials Mees uses in his work had emerged from a kitchen drawer (his works always seem to betray a certain happiness, a contentment with daily life, family life, and banality, if we know how not to be afraid of it all – and irony. Taking ourselves seriously is fine, but never to extremes). So lace is – no question about it – just lace. Paper cut-outs are no more, no less, than paper-cut-outs. *Things*. Things that a gesture – stretching a lace doily, cutting out a color sample – transforms into ineluctable presence.

Verloren Ruimte is also the title of a text written by playwright Wim Meuwissen to which the artist returned, requesting the intervention of copywriter, Willem-Joris Lagrillère, and a translation by Henri-Floris Jaspers, revising it through notes and changes in sentence order. The space to which these lines refer is a room in his house with no furniture but a table commissioned from Yves Klein for a show and an armchair covered by a sheet as white as the walls, a room that serves no purpose – neither as study or extension of the same – other than the access it gave friends of his. *Verloren Ruimte* is therefore this room where 'artifice is more difficult, tactility more simple', lost (or wasted) space that 'defines only the body: shape, color, taste/sound, and scent.'

3. Lilou Vidal, *Lost Space*, Paraguay Press, 2018.

In a precious book published by Paraguay Press³ on the occasion of the recent Mees retrospective, curator Lilou Vidal reconstructs the procreation of this short text with precision, recognizing in its phrasing – non-authorial and impermanent – and in its physicality, its four type-written pages with annotations, wrinkles, dog-ears (read and reread, folded away and opened up, but also – I imagine – paper as a form of its own) – an evocation or prefiguring of the poetics of Mees, a sort of manifesto.

This exhibition takes its title from that text, *Verloren Ruimte*, which seems to offer itself as a key to the reading of the two bodies of work that from a distance of twenty years conduct different interrogations of pictorial space: as imaginary space and physical space, and its narrative or real relationship with the architectural space occupied by the work.

The text's meaning remains suspended, like the second *Verloren Ruimte* cycle's swatches of pure color, pure light, which by barely touching the wall also create shadows and seem to dance in space.

The works of Guy Mees and Adelaide Cioni, arranged alongside each other but each in its own place, shed further light on a common idea of painting as color freed from support, pure autonomous form, non-narrative image, that is manifested in its direct and immediate relationship with the viewer, in space. Simple only apparently, thanks to the light grace of immediacy these poetics bring to the seriousness of play, apparent spontaneity, the preciseness of the gesture, and the fragility and modesty of the material a monumental luminosity.