

## Saying almost the same thing

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In *Translating Cheever*, a 2016 video that is the link between her early existence as a literary translator and her current existence as an artist (two intertwining threads, actually, since the start of her career), Adelaide Cioni has superimposed important words: “In translating I live with approximation – I acknowledge the impossibility of perfection – in any incarnation of the text – Translation is the paradox of language – At every moment I see it is not possible – for me to give you John – in other words – I cannot do it – I cannot do it – but then I do.” It is the double bind known not only to translators, but also to anyone who attempts to express themselves in any language: “You must go on. I can’t go on. I’ll go on,” Beckett concluded in *The Unnamable*.

The same applies to the subject Cioni has chosen for this “concept exhibition” (in the sense of a “concept album”) which is *Drawings for Myself*. The sea, she says, is “that thing you cannot paint.” In fact, painters have never stopped trying. This, too, leads us to experience approximation, in the face of which “abstracting” gives us the illusion of being less imprecise. It means, when faced with an object, attempting to extract its essence, or as Deleuze reading Bacon put it, the “diagram”: that is why “no art is figurative,” the philosopher writes in *The Logic of Sensation*. For the same reason, it could be said that no art is abstract: even the most geometric pattern ends up evoking a series, a rhythm that is already an ordering of the real. From the outset, Adelaide’s research – obsessed with what she calls “secondary images,” i.e. ornamental motifs that lie at the margins of all figuration, and orient, most often inadvertently, its perception on our part – is located in the *terrain vague* which in Klee’s words is not form, *Gestalt*, but the vibration of the forming, *Gestaltung*. Cioni’s research, Cecilia Canziani has written, always aims at the “degree zero of the composition.”

Compared to the relative stability of land, the *perpetuum mobile* of the sea immediately exposes us to the precariousness of perception. Not only is its perpetually metamorphosing object indeterminable, but the boundaries of the subject also crumble together in what Freud, reworking a cue from writer Romain Rolland, called the “oceanic feeling”: that in which one has the experience of “being one with the world as a whole.” In 1927, the same year as the essay *The Future of an Illusion*, also Carlo Emilio Gadda, commenting, with one of his dazzling intuitions, on the famous poem by Rimbaud (in the essay that many years later would provide the title for *I viaggi la morte*) speaks of consciousness as the “deck of a reluctant ship against dark tempests. And

this ship is the ‘*bateau ivre*’ of human discords, upon whose deck it is difficult to stand, much less observe and report.”

To this *feeling* – suspended between elation and terror – is dedicated Adelaide Cioni’s reading of a short story by Rick Moody, *Pip Adrift* (which she translated in 2004 for minimumfax, in the volume *The James Dean Garage Band*), which builds on an episode from *Moby-Dick* by Melville. The little black cabin-boy of the whaling boat Pequod, because of his cowardice and inexperience, is abandoned by the whalers in the ocean for very long hours, and retrieved when his consciousness is now liquefied, like a language that has become of the same fluctuating nature as the sea (Moody, in fact, adopts a form of stream of consciousness on this occasion). But Pip warns us in clauses, “my sickness is not mine alone not my sickness alone.”

In fact, according to Freud, the *oceanic feeling* is but the primary form of religious feeling: that which each of us – whether or not we believe in some form of transcendence – senses when faced with the boundlessness of the sea. In his diaries, Baudelaire calls the sea “a diminutive infinite,” although for him this is primarily a source of anguish (in a letter he declares that he finds “freely flowing water” unbearable: “I want it imprisoned in a straitjacket, between the geometrical walls of a river’s banks”). The same oscillation is also conveyed by Leopardi, who sees shipwreck as “sweet” in the conclusion of his most famous poem: that *Infinite* that symbolizes the boundlessness of the rhetorical vanishing of the subject in the *oceanic* dimension of “such a sea.”

Well aware of the ambiguity of this feeling, it seems to me that Adelaide Cioni leans more towards the latter interpretation. If the sea suggests the infinite it is because whatever portion of it we try to “frame” (as Calvino’s *Reading of a Wave*, in *Mr. Palomar*, showed once and for all) refers back to its inexhaustible whole: but Adelaide – like Pino Pascali before her – appreciates the irony of this fate. “Any decorative motif alludes to the infinite,” she argues: for its precisely inexhaustible replicability. I don’t know how ironically a title like *Attempts to Find Happiness* (which paraphrases the most unintentionally ironic lemma in the U.S. Constitution) should be read: but, staying in the maritime imagery, the drawings that order her “secondary images” into elegant geometric compositions resemble festive banners of color that, from the top of the mast, greet a landing now in sight.