

A few years ago I had the opportunity to exhibit works by Piero Manai and Alessandro Pessoli in a group exhibition. It was in 2015 and the project involved fourteen artists, either Bolognese or closely related to Bologna, who had in various ways worked on the genre of still life in painting by reframing it. There is a lot of talk about globalization and cultural flattening, but it is interesting to note that there still remain strong specificities linked to cities and artistic communities, characteristics that vary from place to place and magically intertwine with a historical tradition. All this also happens in Bologna, a small city but one that even in the last century has managed to carve out a non-secondary role for itself as far as painting is concerned: that 2015 exhibition, titled *Objects on a Plane*, was meant to bring out the presence of a real Bolognese School, still alive today. Manai and Pessoli are not only part of this school but play a fundamental role within it.

Painting can still be so many things: an instrument of formal research capable of proposing metaphors for a new look at the world, a means of intellectual research, a weapon of political and social struggle, a generator of visions, an ascetic practice, critical speculation... (I could go on and on). Over the centuries it is as if painting in Bologna has evolved in a particular direction, namely in becoming a surgical instrument of metaphysical analysis of reality that, starting empirically from the skin and body of things, manages to reach the soul. In the case of Piero Manai and Alessandro Pessoli, this instrument of investigation is directed toward the self, toward one's own individuality endowed with a specific and peculiar history, toward one's own condition as human beings, toward one's own body to be vivisected, dismembered and reassembled, to see how it works and if it still works once it is torn to pieces; to find out if the soul is lost by opening this sacred vessel made of desire, pleasure, fear and splendor; or perhaps simply to understand in advance if something survives even after death.

We are still in Bologna, and the dead body of Christ in Nicolò dell'Arca's *Compianto* is always there, like an inevitable presence and from which perhaps everything begins, even painting.

Manai's untimely death prevented the two from meeting in person, but Pessoli, already a young student at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, had had the opportunity to appreciate his works at the De Foscherari Gallery. There is a striking coincidence: Piero's last exhibition was in 1988, the same year that Alessandro began exhibiting his works in a cultural circle in Parma (while his first solo show at Neon in Bologna was in 1989). In these years of the dominance of Transavantgarde, I can imagine a young artist like him searching, more or less consciously, for references and models that could open new paths. In the works on display, the very strong dialogue between the two artists is immediately evident, despite the fact that their "temperatures" are extremely different. The link is primarily in the subjects in which bodies dominate: bodies that are vivisected, that are presented torn to pieces, amputated, but without ever conveying any idea of truculence; these bodies have the naturalness of classical statues for which it is obvious that they do not have arms, or that the heads go around by themselves. But the parts of these bodies are still alive, active, perhaps because they have been the subject of a passage (painting itself?) that has allowed a shamanic rebirth, in other forms, the product of a Dionysian rite in which sex and death are inextricably intertwined. Bodies

become still life and sometimes become monoliths and sculptures resting on the same plinths on which they were sitting until just before. Manai's heads can become stones, while from Pessoli's body parts sprout exhaust pipes, wings, flowers.

In both, painting succeeds in becoming metalanguage: in Manai not only through the use of stylized sculpture as a pictorial subject (and let us never forget his many *d'après*, albeit not in the exhibition), but also and especially through the recurring presence of "painting" and "sculpture" in the form of two allegorical human figures that sometimes meet on the canvas, one (the painting) composed of infinite spots while the other emerges with its plasticity and sculptural "body." In some works Pessoli directly quotes Manai's iconography, just as he takes up a masterpiece like Mantegna's *Dead Christ*, flanked in an alienating way by a donkey and a large feline. We are confronted with an overlay of a mourning and a nativity, all filtered through a Fellini-esque, circus-like, Romagnola lens, while from the body of the Christ departs a kind of thread that leads to what appear to be flowers (almost reminiscent of some of Cy Twombly's work), or perhaps pink balloons flying toward the sky, like Warhol's *Baloons* or Parreno's.

The style of the two differs strongly. As much Manai's work appears dramatic and almost expressionistic, based on a few brown, white, grayish tones to which a dull red or blue is sometimes added, as Pessoli's is colorful and at first glance cheerful. As Alessandro himself well points out, in Piero's painting "There is an affective warmth given by the experience of painting; the painting itself, in Manai, redeems its drama"; and it is true: his expressionism is under control, we might say calm to use an oxymoron. There is a happiness in his painting, as if the latter were the lifeline of an entire existence, that which is able to make sense of the existential chaos in which we will all sooner or later find ourselves living. Again in Alexander's words, "A drawing of his has remained in my memory for a long time, a small figure summarily described, a painter in front of an easel has a lighted flashlight in his hand, there is a note of his written in italics, 'Illumina la pittura.'" Again: painting as a tool for existential, ethical, metaphysical research. At the same time in Pessoli, going beyond the cheerfulness of the palette and style in which techniques and materials are mixed in a lively way, not being distracted by a vaudeville-style, circus-like staging with a Petrolinian flavor (à la Karl Kraus?), with that lightness proper to a Palazzeschi, and focusing instead on the themes dealt with, we notice how it always falls back on the great existential, we might say biblical, questions: life, death, desire, sex, joy, sadness, hope, fear, and all the implied whys.

And these same subjects are at the heart of Manai's work, the same issues that we could sum up in three words that are the basis of every human being, of any time and anywhere on the globe: *Ghenos, Eros, Thanatos*.