

Going back to a book to revisit a thought; listening to music and lingering on a feeling; smoking a cigarette by the window; or, bent over the sheet, letting oneself be absorbed by the gestures of drawing. De Paolis' utterly still portraits seem to reinterpret the genre according to an alternative etymology of the Italian *ritratto* - 're-trahere': to draw back, to withdraw. A subtraction, a step back before the image, distancing it from the self-evidence and necessity of encounter. Not "drawing from life" but exploring a distance, weaving a filter, or allowing oneself too long a time, all the way to overexposure.

For Georg Simmel, the paradox of the portrait could be expressed in sociological terms. "[...] in ordinary reality, a person's pure surface appearance is by no means self-evident. Among our ordinary interrelationships, including even those proceeding solely from people's outward marks of appearance, psychic dimensions have such sovereign importance that our perceptions immediately move beyond exterior features toward psychic elements whose symbol these features are or appear to be". In short, "a person's movements and actions, social background, and general contingencies of life, not to mention our own shifting perspectives and interests as spectators – all these things inhibit a clear and unambiguous picture of appearances". The portraitist's talent would thus lie in remaining on a purely visual and formal level whilst at the same time evoking – as a symbol does – the existential complexity of a person. "Appearances must yield a soul, and yet a soul must yield appearances!" Written in 1918, these words accompanied portraiture along the post-avant-garde era, once it had become *abstraction* in the form of signs, out of the confused mixture of senses and feelings, of the soul, something mute, metaphysical, inaccessible. Hence the numerous strategies of inversion and divergence between image and identity, from the distortions of Expressionism to Dadaist assemblages, from De Chirico's mannequins and statues to Casorati's fictional personalities (and perhaps all the way down to Diego Marcon's prosthetic close-ups). But a century earlier, Antonio Canova was already sculpting 'ideal faces', which were the subject of a beautiful exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte Moderna in Milan a few years ago. In those busts, almost all female and greatly admired by his contemporaries, the polishing (the subtraction of marble) coincides with the elimination of physiognomic features from every surface, line and symmetry, a process that imbues these impossible figures with charm and magnetism.

De Paolis's *Ritratti ideali* ("Ideal portraits") revisit these issues, though they do not aim for regulatory, harmonious or absolute forms. He already used the adjective "ideal" in the past years for wardrobes, stoves, clocks and cups, with their pure and geometric design. Unique and capricious objects, yet also generic, left to float in a curious haze – the very same haze that, in the new portraits, erodes the "significance, precision, necessity" evoked by Simmel. Once the person's identity is set aside, what remains is the suggestion, the allusion, the very idea itself, captured in a fixed gesture, in a particular angle of the gaze, in a play of light. Like the images that descended from the Platonic Idea, deteriorating, these portraits lose their definition; but it is what we do not see and do not know (what book is our character reading, what music is he listening to, and what is he drawing?) that triggers the 'ideal' flight of imagination.

But it is precisely the faint appearance of the drawings that draws the observer close to the sheet, as they try to dispel a delicate atmosphere that renders them illegible from a distance. On closer inspection, the figures are one and the same: Stefano, who has cast aside the whimsical costumes (already vague in his previous

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works) of the Pilota Intergalattico X. They are self-portraits only in a practical sense: some selfies serve as mood boards and for arranging poses; then as an underdrawing for the execution, which is soon submerged by the simplification of details and the lengthy unifying work of hatching. The figure of the self is, paradoxically, the most generic, the least idiosyncratic: De Paolis does not seek autobiography or a reflection on autography (though he engages with Salvo's photographic disguises or Giulio Paolini's reflections). And yet, to be honest, a gentle sadness remains in the postures and intentions as a residue of the self.

De Paolis's drawing stands on a par with painting when judged in terms of the resources and possibilities offered by a precious and versatile medium—graphite—which is called upon to cover the entire surface and modulate tones with unyielding precision. The artist, a 'young man looking to Lorenzo Lotto', but also to Correggio and Giorgione, now focuses particularly on the issue of light, on rendering the air that swirls around heads and slips beneath elbows and wrists, even floating between fingers—an *ambiance* that remains undiminished even within the challenging confines of a chiaroscuro of light-only tones. One can lose oneself in the washes that pass over and return to the paper, binding themselves to the paper's grain, always as controlled as the rhythms of the pencil lead. It is often where the hands are that the plastic form is accentuated, though sporadically, so that gestures already of abandonment or support are rendered even more immobile. In the most recent drawing, the exploration of light is revealed in the challenge of backlighting, that is, the problem of silhouetting a figure within a window against the white of the paper, and letting the cigarette flicker on this side.

In a large, horizontal drawing, a pensive young man, in a Manet-like pose, seems to be listening to his own thoughts rather than the sound of the gramophone beside him, also motionless, perhaps a plastic model itself. The composition is thus drawn towards the smooth disc of the instrument's funnel, upon whose perfect curve De Paolis's entire tonal scale is reordered, from white to the dense strokes of a B-lead.

This ensemble is (inevitably?) sealed by a *mise en abîme*, a portrait of the act of drawing itself that has a certain anachronistic quality, if its simplicity recalls the earliest images that have come down to us of drawing on paper in the modern era, such as certain sheets by the Florentine Maso Finiguerra and his workshop from the mid-fifteenth century. The draughtsman appears tense and focused as he traces a sheet with a stylus, his elbow acting as a compass, bringing his eye to within a few centimetres, pressing the sheet with his left hand as if to hold it in place. The entire figure is squeezed against the lower edge of the vertical format. A forced and almost clumsy gesture, an unnatural movement of the body, declaring a drawing devoid of instinct, shunning sketches or strokes, holding back, and with-drawing.