

MARCELLO SMARRELLI : I don't believe in geographical definitions any more. Saying that an artist is Italian or French or Jamaican means erecting boundaries that are more and more ephemeral, both geographically and culturally. *Document 11* shows that there is a supranational way of doing art, and that art is genuinely without boundaries, and is boundary-breaking. But in Italy, at least – presumably because of a type of cultural dominance that must have come down to us from Vasari, it would seem as if the formation of an artist or a critic can't avoid an academic kind of education. What's your experience as an artist, and what sort of a relationship do you have with the great names of Italian art?

CLAUDIA PEILL : In the years when I was at the Academy, I used to feel the comparison with the greats, the classical artists, weighing heavily on me. When I decided to free myself from this burden, I felt I couldn't really remove it, but just face up to it with a greater degree of *disobedience*. I began to dig into it, to whittle away at it; it was a task of appropriation. I was this tradition; it was my story; I couldn't repudiate it, nor could I free myself from it, but I had to drag it out into the open, and make use of it as a constituent part of my work. Once the anxiety of the confrontation was over, what was left was simply the pleasure of belonging, culturally, to a certain type of history and tradition. In *Onde* there are two or three pieces in which – even though there was no previous intention to make use of quotation – it's easy to meet up with certain classical elements. Carla Accardi, when she visited the exhibition at La Sapienza, noticed to my great delight that one piece in the composition – with a hand and a jewel – which was a beautiful yellow-gold colour, reminded her of a fragment of a Renaissance painting. In another image in the same work, there's a woman whose head I've removed, and only her neck, bedecked with a pearl necklace, remains; she reminds one a great deal of Leonardo's *Dama con l'ermellino*. I get a great pleasure out of discovering how, over and beyond any intention, this image stands out, and I think that classical culture can be a source of richness for Italian artists, not just a limit and an obstacle.

So since you're unable to be an "uneducated" artist – and maybe don't want to in any case – it's better to use this culture to the advantage of your work. I've noticed that your most recent works have abandoned the severity of black and white, which was typical of a good part of what

[18]

21



[19]

you have produced. This return to the use of colour – should it be attributed to a life-giving action which, as we were saying earlier, tradition can undertake once it's freed from the fetters of the past and of nostalgia?

The revival of colour in my most recent works is an attempt to merge the sensuality of the pictorial shading used by Raphael with the acid and artificial tones of our contemporary image-making, seduced as it is by digital video and the TV. Despite the use of synthetic materials – resin and photographs – which I use almost exclusively in my works, I never forget the *idea* of painting. I spread the coloured resins on to fragments of image, following the same technical principle as clouding, which reveals as it veils. I proceed by stratifications, one after the other; I begin from nothing, from the empty plane, and I build layer after layer, I give the image material form. It's a *modus operandi* which is a metaphor of the way that the city in which I live and where I grew up – Rome – was formed: a city of layers created over the years by successive superimposing of buildings and styles, but also of our culture, in which so many elements are deposited, like "conceptual" pictorial shadings, almost deprived of matter; which in their infinite sequence are capable of producing an image.

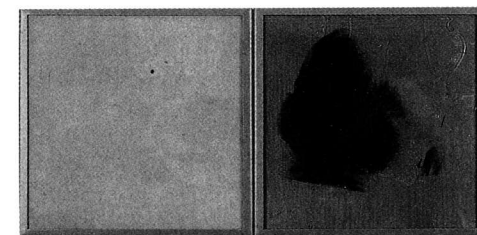
Acid colours, shading, prescriptions for the use of traditional materials in relation to new aesthetic values, and the help of technological and digital means; reference to the media, the new palette of the contemporary artist. In your work there's a sophisticated, delicate technical capacity, handled with great ability. What value does this way of doing things assume as far as you're concerned?

The technique is simply functional; it's a means of expression. I remember that when I was a student at the Academy of Fine Arts, one of my classmates asked the professor of painting to teach us the egg-tempera technique, and he replied – reducing the whole class to laughter – that eggs were better if eaten, why didn't he go and buy a few tubes of good colour paint – so much simpler and quicker to use! What counts is the notion, the ideas: technique, like tradition, must not become an obstacle but a tool which makes one's own expressive capacity easier.

Which artists have contributed to shaping your painting, and do any of them still provide a reference-point for your work?

Since I was very young I've been very taken with the personality of

22



Blinky Palermo, with the dry character of his severity and at the same time with his strength. Then there is another painter, the Portuguese artist Julião Sarmento, because of his images, where there was nothing and yet an absolute dramatic quality emerged from them. I'm fond of synthesis, severity; splatter artists don't interest me with their works representing the idea of sex or pain, while the real sex and the real pain are missing, lost in the evidence of their representation. In Sarmento's imagery there's an atmosphere of apparent serenity, but all of a sudden you become aware of an absence, like a missing finger or head, or again of a dramatic element like a knife pointed at the neck. Since the concept of absence and of emptiness are important in my work, I could hardly fail to be attracted by this capacity of his for giving power to the void.

In *Convergenze*, the 1996 exhibition in the AAM Gallery in Rome, you had shown *Tutto vero/tutto falso*, two portraits of large dimensions, placed in specular relation with each other, in which the characters turned their gaze towards the entrance of the gallery, directing a clear invitation to the spectator to participate actively in the work, thereby justifying its existence. A reference to Giulio Paolini comes immediately to mind; do you recognise the part played by the work of this extraordinary artist in your own search?

I've always admired Giulio Paolini's work. I'm intrigued by the value that he gives to the sense of doubling the image, of separation and the separated element which reflects its own double. In *Il giovane che guarda il ritratto di Lorenzo Lotto* the work exists because there is someone who is looking at it; if there were no-one there wouldn't be the work, either. In my work too, every time that I insert an emptiness, a caesura, a mute part, I am referring to that necessity of circular communication between artist, work and spectator.

Another artist whom I feel conceptually close to is Bill Viola. In his work and his writings I have found a confirmation of my vision and my perception of time. When he arrests the instant: "*It only takes an instant for an impression to become a vision*" – as he mentions in his notes – or traps the cry in a silence, in a slowed-down or repeated gesture or movement, he conveys us into a world without time, where perception becomes a place of fantasy to inhabit, which he himself describes as: "*the visionary landscape of perception*".

[20]

[21]

Gilbert & George maintain that: "True art comes from three main life-forces. They are: THE HEAD, THE SOUL and THE SEX. Do you agree with them?" Completely! If there's too much head in a work, the result is too rational and analytical. If there's too much soul, then it becomes mystical. And if there's too much sex, it becomes pornographic – both soulless and brainless. Art is everything, body, eros, energy.

I like Gilbert & George's works, even though I'm a long way from their social commitments, nor do I appear cheerfully in my own compositions as they do. But I love their artificial and fractured images, like that of a wall-screen.

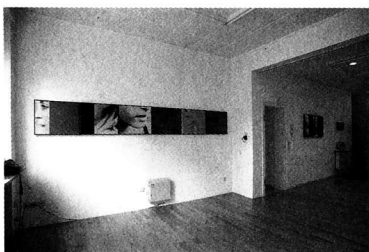
Do you agree with their practice of breaking up the photographic image and circumscribing it, as it were in a frame, but also of recomposing the parts in a narrative form related to the story which you want to tell? What meaning do you give to your practice of isolating a detail – sometimes an anonymous and almost invisible one – which ends up by becoming the true centre of the work?

The snap is the moment when I grasp the instant of the flow of becoming, and trap it and dilate it. The image ceases to be an instant; it becomes fixed, a fixed image, free from becoming anything else; it aspires to immortality. The fragment is linked to the poetic of emptiness. It is a cutting, a piece torn off our body, in which – as in a genetic map – the person is preserved intact. It is a double which in my positive vision, I aim to recompose into a unity. The fragment is a departure point for a new vision; it's the minimum from which to begin reconstructing, and filling the void; it's an embryo. The mute area, the black resin, flat and imageless, is the place for the projection of the new future. It's the unknown, projected into the future.

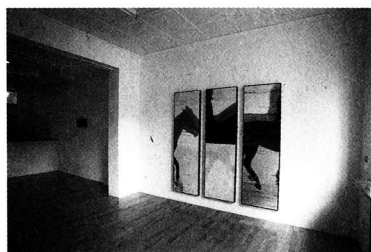
From the way you talk about it, it seems as if your work responds to a necessary autobiographical narrative with analytical roots, which contrasts with the outcome of your search, clearly distant from surrealist notions and grounded profoundly in reality.

I don't want to talk about my bellyache; that's not my ambition; it would be like recounting a dream: one becomes utterly boring. I try to present the emotion which the dream has provoked in me. I want to be a filter, I want everybody to be able to recognise my personal experience, cleansed and synthesised. The concept of emptiness and lack is mental;

23



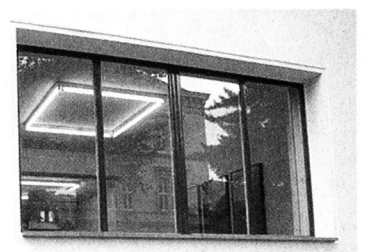
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25



26



our life is made up of absence because, paradoxically, there's too much. It is this phenomenon that I describe as "cultural anorexia"; having too much leads us to a lack of desires, and they die out. To desire is energy: when you don't have any more desires there's an emptying, a hole, a void of memory.

Lack and emptiness as an existential condition, a reality crystalised and filtered by a process which is presented as an optical tool of perception. You point us to a new way of looking at things, which enables everyone to recognise, even in the ordinariness of a gesture, something of the absolute which can become imprinted in the memory. You think down the image of the superfluous and transform it almost into an idea of a platonic type, which forms the common nucleus of human knowledge. Memory – is this the arrival point of your work?

It would be better to say that memory is the departure point of my work rather than the arrival point. When you walk around in the great chaos of a city – in the noise, and distracted by a thousand perceptions, what you see is often not reality. We look about us, but what do we actually see? And what stays in the memory of what we have seen? I look into the mechanism which allows us to select from reality the small part which becomes fixed in the memory. The memory is important, as Octavio Paz used to say: "*to desire is to remember*"; in effect, we only desire things of which we have had some experience. Memory and desire are closely linked; they have both been important themes in my work, which I dealt with, for instance, in a 1993 exhibition in Stefania Miscetti's gallery. But memory not as nostalgia for the past but as conscious opening to the future.

[22]

27



28



29

