

THE IDEA BEHIND THE PAINTING: LOOKING FOR SOMETHING ADDITIONAL

Crederci, a meno di volerci credere, 1994. Paraffina e pigmenti su plexiglass e base fotografica, cm 100 x 100 x 12

Che là in fondo, 1994. Paraffina e pigmenti su plexiglass e base fotografica, cm 100 x 100 x 12



The essence of Claudia Peill's work resides in, I think, and in some ways can therefore be ascribed to, a sort of dual timing (or spirit) apparent at the very beginning of her career, by which I mean the timing (or the spirit) of her earliest artistic experiments and the timing (or spirit) of her first exhibitions. Peill started exhibiting in the early 1990s, but was already active as an artist in the second half of the previous decade—a very particular moment, when painting, having once again become of serious interest to younger artists, was almost by reflex involved in a revival of the depiction of reality that, as a principle, lies at the base of Western art.

When I think back to the 1980s and the focus on painting that dominated the decade, I am actually thinking of its early years, when it seemed that the spool of history was being wound backwards, resurrecting art's old conventions—everything the neo-avant-gardes had by then already contested. And while it may be true that Peill's early research took place in the second half of the decade, in other words at a point when enthusiasm for painting's toolkit (colour, gesture, impasto, etc.) was waning, some of it still lingered on. Besides, her formal training took place in that earlier period.

The fact that her first encounter with the public sphere (i.e. her first exhibitions) happened in the early 1990s, in a context very different from that of a few years earlier, would open up space, here, for a historical reflection, except that was precisely the moment at which an idea was gaining ground that history no longer had any value, that it no longer furnished useful instruments for the analysis of the present, let alone for peering into the future.

All in all, the 1980s had sped by in something of a rush, and, as the new decade began, a powerful desire emerged to leave them behind. It seemed easy enough to do: one had simply to renounce tradition—the tradition we had been taught was passed down from generation to generation. One had simply to focus on the immanence of the present.

But did Claudia Peill find this process congenial? One of her very earliest exhibitions—nominally her first solo show, although in reality, as we will come to see, two other events had preceded it—was held at Studio Aperto (in 1994), a venue that nowadays would be called an “artist-run space” (a fact that is in itself indicative of how soon many still-current ideas first surfaced).

At that point in time and in that particular context, a new line of thinking was emerging that put the *public* function of exhibitions at the heart of the art system. It was the clearest sign that things had moved on from the approach that had governed the previous decade, when exhibitions were seen as secondary to the creative act that took place in the *private* domain of the studio. Confirmation of this trend is offered by the catalogue text that Luca Beatrice and Cristina Perrella were asked to write for Peill's show, and its clear signals of an intention to create a form of *public environment*, to the point of framing the exhibition as a news item. Not coincidentally, the text is entitled *Cosa succede*

in città (What's Happening in the City) and it is in fact made up of a collection of approximately fifteen news stories, “taken from the communist newspaper *Il Manifesto* on Tuesday 13th April 1994.”¹ Here's the first of them: “The latest news from cyberspace, and this time it's not good. The episode took place in the State of Massachusetts, where Chelmsford police raided the home of John Rex, a 23-year-old student who had been ‘running’ an electronic mail account dubbed ‘the morgue.’”² Here are some others: “Gallery or fashion magazine? The art world's confused. Won over by the delights of the electronic age. The regimental tie is making a comeback, rebelling against the ripped jeans of the past ten years. Music made into film scores. Social-climbing painters on the hustle.”³ And shortly after that: “Single men. The immigration reception centres in Milan are set up with them in mind, and for various reasons most of these ‘single men’ are Moroccans from the Béni Mellal and Casablanca regions. You'd be forgiven for thinking ‘immigrants’ are all much of a muchness. But that's not true. Every one of these men has a different story. Those portacabins are packed with differing needs.”⁴ And finally: “And so? Beyond the cultural turmoil being unleashed by nationalists and parochialists of various stripes, there is a snivelling hypocrisy, a lack of curiosity on the part of the public, a lingering paternalism among professionals in the sector and a deaf-eared lack of concern within the music industry that have all played a very real part in shaping a new panorama. A dismal one.”⁵ The selection of news items concludes with: “Dedicated to Claudia Peill, a metropolitan artist of talent – different, brave and proud.”⁶

Even this brief extract is illustrative of the mood of the time, with its implicit criticism of a certain hedonism in the period prior to this, and of the painters who had come to represent it; but also the links it establishes with the present, and a certain, *new* engagement with topical issues, such as migrants, subjectivity, cyberspace, and the accompanying global landscape.

On the occasion in question, Claudia Peill was presenting a series of works that were very much in keeping with that new cultural mood. But before we talk about the works themselves—which effectively represent the inauguration of a line of research that she would continue to pursue for many years to come—it is worth at least reminding ourselves of two episodes that took place the year beforehand. The first of these was an intervention on Rome's Lungotevere Michelangelo, and more precisely on the bridge where the metropolitan railway crosses the river. The artist affixed her prints in paraffin wax onto the large glass panels that fence off the rails, thus creating a single artwork incorporating the tags left by the first generation of Rome's graffiti writers (who often came from the city's poorer suburbs) and the signs and signals of urban life visible through the glass.

The sense of this work depends on Peill's use of a certain type of gestural mark-making, but also the play of transparencies and the ways in which the art object overlaps with the reality of its urban context. Part of its fascination undoubtedly lies in the fact that the site featured prominent signs with the words “*divieto d'affissione*” (“billposting prohibited”) and “*pericolo di morte*” (“danger of death”), further underlining the work's conscious (and adversarial) relationship with its surroundings.

The second episode relates to Peill's participation, together with Orso, Colazzo and Canevari, in the *4 Tempi* project at Studio Stefania Miscetti. In the statement that accompanied the show we find confirmation of that cultural climate, and, above all, of the assumed centrality of the exhibition/



Installazione / *Giganti*, Ponte della metropolitana,
Lungotevere Michelangelo, Roma 1993

public event: “*4 Tempi* is inspired by an awareness of the way and extent to which a solo exhibition presents a vision of an artist’s work that may well be complete, or even comprehensive, but is also in some ways a ‘static’ one.” Although, any aspiration to free the work of art of all associations not strictly connected with the exhibition/public event itself is [traditionally] achieved by, “eliminating any trace of the various ideas, desires and even instincts that have actually played a part in the conception and physical realisation of the work.” Reiterating the importance of its own public nature, “*4 Tempi* aims to reflect the idea that artists’ work, or more specifically, the ideas and methods governing an expanded definition of it, has the potential to be socialised,” and envisages that work having “a new form and relationship with the world around it; in other words, the actions of the individual artists seek, on the one hand, to “give” something new to the observer, and on the other hand, to “steal” any suggestions, ferment and ideas from the surrounding context that might offer the material [the ideas, desires and instincts previously confined to the studio] a chance to generate something beyond this deliberately extemporaneous event.”⁷

The work Peill made for *4 Tempi* took the form of a long strip made up of over three hundred wax panels stretching, one after another, all the way around the exhibition space, overlapping with a uniform ribbon of grey to form a shimmering band of colour, a sort of route, or path, as the artist defines it, that viewers had to walk along while an actress (Claudia Frissone) performed, her voice overlapping with a background track featuring recorded excerpts from Enrico Frattoroli’s theatrical adaptation of Chapter XI (“The Sirens”) from Joyce’s *Ulysses*.

The creation of an environment in which it was possible, as she herself recently recalled, to capture, “the sense of the diverse signs and signals that overlap and interfere with one another,” was one of Peill’s central interests.

In both the episodes we have described, there is a desire to take her pictorial practice outside and beyond the studio, to render it topical, and to share it with the viewer in a sort of multisensory environment.

That these were significant experiences which problematized her own role as a visual artist is easily inferred from the exhibition that she presented soon afterwards at Studio Aperto—an exhibition that, as has already been mentioned, paved the way for the research she would undertake in the years to follow. Here, for the first time, the artist employed the medium of photography as a base on which to build her works: large photographic prints overlaid with layers of paraffin wax through which snapshots of the city’s streets are visible in the background.

The particular novelty lay, therefore, in the use of photography as a tool—one that Peill has never abandoned. The other element of novelty, albeit arising out of her earlier work, lay in the fact that every one of these pieces was formed of multiple panels in metal frames, which subdivide and recombine the images into a unitary whole.

In the case of her participation in *4 Tempi*, we should also add that the work was presented under the banner of a quote from *What Am I Doing Here?* by that great traveller, Bruce Chatwin, suggesting that its signs and signals, “have been there since time immemorial, but visible only to



Pericolo di morte, 1995. Paraffina e pigmenti su plexiglass e base fotografica, cm 25 x 25 ognuno

those who have eyes to see.” Peill’s creative imagination thus fuses and juxtaposes journeys, lived experience, presence and the gaze, but also revelations and the universal.

With these characteristics, Claudia becomes part of a chain of events that have brought us to where we are today. Her work, however, amounts to more than an event anchored in the moment, because she remains, fundamentally, a visual artist, and therefore cannot utilize form without considering its accumulated meanings.

So, if on one hand, using photography, she grapples with the depiction of reality, on the other she occupies herself with something that could be likened to Chatwin’s idea of the “immemorial”, evoking a dimension beyond time, not clashing with the present, but intended, instead, to sublimate it—a process that unfolds as the work is perceived by the viewer.

In a brief note written at the time of the exhibition at Spazio Aperto, Daniela De Dominicis wrote, “(...) these signs inspired by the iconography of the city are, in reality, blurred and made all the more evanescent by the thick substance they hide behind. Getting closer to the works doesn’t help, but on the contrary renders everything more confusing and harder to make out. And it is precisely the perceptive effort required, this need to look carefully beyond the surface, that interests the artist. Indeed, the layers of paraffin wax distance the image, and our perception of it happens gradually—the length of time it takes to read the image is prolonged. It is, in a sense, being created directly by the viewer.”⁸

This blunting of our visual perception, reducing the importance attached to the gaze and ceding ground to other senses and other sensibilities, has many precedents. To offer just a couple of examples (very different from one another in terms of intent, but alike in as much as they were contemporaries and both part of the Roman art scene), Franco Angeli comes to mind, and the “veils” with which he blurred the image, thus allowing its symbolic value to emerge; or Francesco Lo Savio’s “filters”, the function of which was to accentuate the dynamics involved in the perception of light. And there we have it: Claudia Peill’s layers of wax act as *veils* and/or *filters*, revealing something additional “to those who have eyes to see”.

All of them produced in the past five years, the works featured in this volume employ the same method but with different results. The artist recalls that the series, “evolved out of the observation and elaboration of ordinary manhole covers”⁹, which she photographed and had printed on large sheets of paper and canvas that were then used in the paintings. A method similar to that adopted in the past, when her photographs were snapshots of the everyday world, but this series differs because the sweep of the artist’s gaze is no longer horizontal, but is instead cast downwards, noting the varied finishings and patterns of objects we so often tread obliviously underfoot. But there is also another, significant difference. If, in the past, Peill took the photographs as her starting point, subdividing and recombining them in a series of frames, and applying layers of paraffin wax—or, more recently, resin—on top of them, in this case the operation is absolute: there are no longer any *veils* or *filters*; the image presents itself in all its apparent candour. The truth, however, is that the reality captured in the photographic snapshot is drawn into an interplay of micro and macro which, because it generates an abstractive mechanism, effectively produces the same effect on the viewer who is, in turn, drawn in.



1-6. Luca Beatrice and Cristiana Perrella, “Cosa succede in città”, in *Claudia Peill* (Rome: Spazio Aperto, 1994). Exhibition catalogue.

7. *Orsi / Colazzo / Peill / Canevari / 4 Tempi*, Studio Stefania Miscetti, Rome, February 1993

8. Daniela De Dominicis, *Claudia Peill*, *Artel*, 1-15 June 1994

9. From a conversation between the author and the artist, Rome, 2023

10. Roberto Lambarelli, *Segni, Funghi, Analisi & Foto trappole* (Battaglia, Garaffa, Paltrinieri, Peill). Text written to accompany the exhibition of the same name, curated by Matteo Boetti, CollAge, Todi, 7 May–10 July 2022

11. Mario de Candia, *Peill Opere schermo*, *La Repubblica / Trovaroma*, 28 April 1994

The works she has made over the past few years are for the most part diptychs formed of two modules equal in size: a photographic module and, flanking it, a painting. Where, in her earlier work, the elements were superimposed and fell within an area visible in a single glance, they are now separated, and a *drifting gaze* is needed, a gaze that, if the sense of the work is to be grasped, has to be concentrated spatially but spread out over time, requiring effort on the part of the viewer.

Some of these works were recently exhibited at CollAge, Matteo Boetti’s exhibition space in Todi, as part of a project that played with the idea of establishing comparisons between artists of different generations. Peill’s works were displayed next to those of two young artists (Elisa Garrafa and Alice Paltrinieri) and compared with those of a *historically* significant artist (Carlo Battaglia), in an operation clearly predicated on a notion of continuity and which, while not evoking tradition in the sense we alluded to earlier, obviously seeks to establish a link between works created at different points in time.

As I myself underlined in the text that accompanied the exhibition¹⁰, Battaglia always remained detached from the context he worked in, not only because of his openly declared dislike of being associated with fashionable trends, but above all because the mien he adopted was that of an erudite man, who was therefore—apparently, at least—uninterested in worldly things. This observation of mine was a starting point, a pretext for pointing out that Claudia Peill, in contrast, had always chosen to breathe the air of her times. In the works she produced at the start of her career and for a number of years after that, the fact that she engaged with the world around her allowed her to reject the vision of painting as an end in itself that had become newly prevalent in the 1980s. And this was where the particular atmosphere of her work made itself felt: in that alertness pervading the field of view, establishing a direct connection between the work of art and the viewer, between art and reality.

In the context of the present volume, however, reflecting further on her work of the past few years, I feel that assessment needs to be partially revised, above all if we are to consider Peill’s research from a retrospective standpoint.

The components of her work have clearly remained the same: the use of photography, the stratifications, the signs and signals. But where previously they were impressed with a sort of worldliness, now there is, instead, an emerging sense of abstraction both in the photographic details—caught up in that interplay I mentioned between close-up shots and enlarged prints—and, equally, in the layers of paint she lays down. A rekindled interest in painting that Mario de Candia noticed the early signs of, but which it seems to me has now become more emphatic: “Claudia Peill’s work [...] possesses a distinctly analytical character, which, without abandoning the practice of painting, does present associations with some of the more powerful tensions animating Italian artistic research from the 1960s onwards. But not slavishly. Anything but imitative or derivative in relation to those tensions, Peill’s painting seems to be one of their possible and natural evolutionary consequences”¹¹.

If it is true, nonetheless, that something has changed, that change is to be found in her approach to reality: the fact that she is a “metropolitan artist” who once boldly flouted rules prohibiting the affixing of signs, and who now politely invites us to avoid walking where we shouldn’t (“Don’t Tread Here”).