

CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA PEILL



Stella Santacatterina: Before dwelling on the development of some phases of your research, such as the relationship between photographic image and colour matter, I would like to make some observations. I shall begin by pointing out that the word painting comes from the Latin “pictus”, meaning the structure of vision, of imagination. That’s to say, going beyond the merely visual, beyond the relationship of canvas to colour. The “*exempla picta*” are in some way the basis to create poetry in any work concerning vision. “*Exempla picta*” enable the dynamics of realization, as Degas said, not of form itself but of the way of seeing form. The artist’s vision owns an almost magical capacity to capture to give form to what would otherwise remain unseen. I would like to ask you about your experience and about the relationship of photography as a basis, a support for the realization of your works.

Claudia Peill: In the early ‘90s I was working with paint, but for me it had become a screen, a delimiting space, bound to the dimension of the frame itself, as a limited visual field. However, I envisioned the possibility of crossing it, of passing through it like a window, until you lose your gaze towards infinity. I glimpsed the two-dimensional potential of photography, that is very close to painting, so I spontaneously combined them. This allowed me to work on different surfaces, overlapping them. Tracing something deep down, in the underlying levels, means unveiling the different layers that photography itself allowed me to suspend.

SS: Roland Barthes speaks of photography as a temporal suspension which certifies an absence in its stillness, while painting or rather colour is always in movement, it is elusive and cannot be tamed. Which challenge did you mean to launch between these two opposing spaces?

CP: The challenge for me was precisely to create a dialogue between two languages by combining photography with a monochromatic painting that enhances the sense of lack: Focusing on an absence, colour evokes a presence, it produces movement and lets the true sense of the work emerge. In its own iconographical indeterminacy, colour represents a pause, a void filled with undeclared and silent meaning, reinforcing the value of the detail revealed by photography.

SS: In your works the colour establishes an intense and ever-changing space, it regains its main role as a language that cannot be tamed. It asserts itself as the last possible value for non-representational painting that is not easy to read, and awakes the surprise of seeing.

Facing the increasing externalization of mass language, your work, far from conceptual awe, is a world whose interiority value is preserved. It is a body of ideas, passions that touch a more complex and essential reality than the one that seems to be recreated by art in the contemporary massified society and communication systems. I would say yours is a slow yet relentless challenge against the abasement of aesthetic and ethical values that lack substance, vitality and language. Your work emerges as pure material, or rather as “primary matter” where, as in an alchemical ritual, surface and



abyss, stasis and movement coexist in a harmonious rhythm. Such cadence has a fluidity that expands or ascends and questions the elusive potentiality of colour and its dynamic battle between light and darkness. Unfixed, ever shifting, colour stretches from a distant point beyond our knowable thoughts. Everything acquires the dimension of a perpetually opening and closing universe. The materiality of your colour sometimes becomes translucent, almost intangible, translating itself into a diffused abstraction.

CP: Photography, to quote Roland Barthes, was born as a self-certification of reality, but in my work, it takes an abstract form.

Last year in Como I was invited to an important historical exhibition on abstraction curated by Elena Di Raddo, since my work, -though employing iconic, figurative elements coming from photography- cannot be defined as narrative or realistic, but leads towards an abstraction from the present.

SS: I agree: the concept of abstraction (etymologically *abstrahere*), which means separating the essence of things from the rest, is not connected to the presence or absence of the figure; abstract art is linked to non-representation and repudiates any type of narration. For example, in the works of De Chirico there is the figure, but we cannot define them as figurative in the sense of a narrative representation, they are undoubtedly abstract. At the same time, in many of the so called abstract expressionist works developed in the USA, we rarely find abstraction. Pollock's works rely on the result of the mechanical gesture, not only the figure but also the symbolic referent is missing. They do not lead to abstraction but to naturalistic representation.

CP: My work is not rooted in the past, perhaps neither in the present, but rather in the future. What you see, therefore what has been, it is not actually presented as such, but for what it will be. Through photography I capture a detail, something real, yet the fundamental objective is to transform it, transfiguring what has been into something that can be. From the combination of the iconic, more figurative part with the aniconic part of the monochrome painting, a sense of silence or colour pause asserts itself, giving life to the static element of photography, producing a unitary image projected into the future.

SS: I believe that the poetic underlying all your work, is utopian. You are never satisfied with letting the images rest on the surface of the painting because you are aware that there is another world, an abyss, beneath the skin of the picture, vast, richer and unknown. You challenge time with the Utopia of your images, since Utopia is by definition a non-place and therefore always elsewhere, unreachable by any existing knowledge. In your work, the underlying Utopian desire does not proceed from a particular meaning, but rather tries to produce it. As Roland Barthes observes: "in the face of the present [...] Utopia is a second term that allows the sign to be activated: a discourse about the real becomes possible".¹

CP: Yes, it is precisely from this dialectical tension between visible and invisible, between presence and absence, that the Utopian and uchronic character of my work springs. A good example for this, are the works I exhibited at the Andersen Museum in 2014, focused precisely on the comparison between



Giulio Paolini, *L'altra figura*, 1983. Due busti in gesso e 33 frammenti di busto

Claudia Peill, *Senza fine*, 2010. Tecnica mista e base fotografica su tela, cm 60 x 120



past and present, such as “Extra-terrestre” or “Pianeta solitario”, which I specifically conceived in dialogue with Andersen’s visionary image of the ideal city. In line with the Utopian tradition, hope is immanent in my work, while the horizontal and vertical cuts made in the subjects aspire to the reunion of the whole.

SS: The act of creating is very different from the process of making something; we make something that we already have in mind as a finished object while creating is a step into the dark, with no knowledge of what might be brought into existence. From this point of view it is significant what Derrida wrote about this aspect of painting. He introduces a paradoxical idea of manifestation, affirming that painting is the result of some kind of blindness whose power derives from the dazzling unknown that creates it. It is the sign of the invisible. The theme of blindness in the image of art would represent the unrepresentable. It is enough to recall that Leonardo da Vinci was the first one to speak about poetry for the deaf and painting for the blind.

CP: This sense of transformation or reinvention that I face, somewhat as a demiurge or an alchemist, stems from my desire to make the ordinary extraordinary. A fragment, something unimportant, ignored, neglected, which is before our eyes but which we do not see, basically refers to ourselves. In this process I mean to grasp what I feel. I am certainly not a visionary, in fact I don’t like science fiction films or books, but I pursue the idea of the sublimation of the real, the beyond-ness towards the remote of the existent.

SS: Getting away from the present is certainly important. The nature of art is to overcome daily reality and be transgressive. According to Genet, the zero point, the photographic support, enables things to emerge, to generate thought, and implicit in it there is a sense of things drawing near, as a force field that the mind strives to grasp.

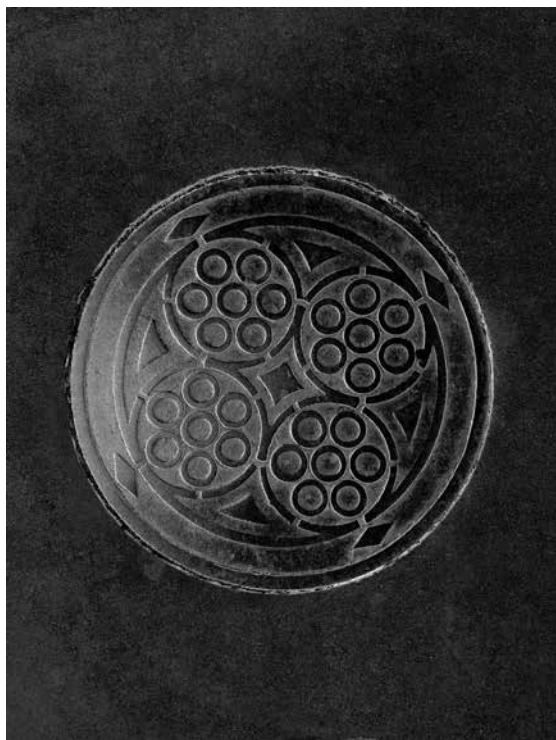
Pianeta solitario, 2013. Acrilico e base fotografica su tela
cm 130 x 300. Collezione GNAM

London 10, 2023. Fotografia su alluminio, cm 120 x 90

Pag. 20 dall'alto

London 9, 2023. Fotografia su alluminio, cm 120 x 90

The Princess 1, 2023. Fotografia su alluminio, cm 120 x 90



From this distance, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the idea that the near and the far, in their indescribable disparity, form a system of relations in a total field that is a perceptive truth: “to perceive and imagine are nothing more than two ways of thinking; the thought of the visible and the thought of the sensible.”² The poetics of art demonstrates how the unfounded is the only foundation possible for aesthetic experience, because this experience is indeed founded on the zero point. Like the wild broom that blooms in the desert, art has its truth in the fact that it is not preceded by any logic that would give it foundation: it is its own truth. Your work is permeated by a feeling which embraces itself in its doubt, which seeks a trace capable of carving historical perception of aesthetic phenomena to make a critical measure of the being and its existential continuum. In my opinion it is important for you to remove the familiar archetypes from painting in order to make the vision vibrate with renewed intensity and interior energy to be revitalized in a space of perceptual possibilities, of action and of transfiguration.

CP: From the detail I arrive at totality. Through the splitting up of what I photograph, I never capture a place in its entirety, but I choose details and fragments. Enlargement is an act of elaboration, changing the dimensions, the semantics of the context and of the text are renewed.

SS: Let's talk about the manhole covers, a project that has been keeping you busy for several years. You told me that perhaps it would be just one series, but it seems inexhaustible. How did it start?

CP: I found myself in it, the manhole covers swallowed me up... There is no poorer material or use than the manhole cover, and therefore with manhole covers the transformation process is maximized. The challenge of sublimating an object of such ordinariness is extreme. My path has been very linear, from the beginning I would look around me, I started from my present and then I added that distance that allows me to overcome it. The subjects range from street signs for the first street arts that I created in 1994, to the architectures, first archaeological and then the industrial ones linked to the work world, to mines, to contemporary urban landscape up to, I would say, to post-human ones.

With the same methodology, always attracted to mechanical elements, one day I was in Cosenza, walking in a bright sun stolen from a rushing rain; I found a metal manhole under my feet on which the water reflected in such a dazzling way that a simple grating became a luminous arabesque. It all started from this one shot: instead of looking upwards from below, as I was doing in a previous cycle of work where the subjects were attics or glass skylights, like the *Sony Centre* in Berlin - I began to explore the depths.

SS: Turning the gaze from top to bottom...

CP: Exactly, and while traveling in Italy, Europe, even in China, I discovered these grills, made of cast iron and different metals, with surprising designs or doodles. Another singularity that I then detected is that, even with a different and typical shape in each area, the manhole covers from the various parts of the world have common acronyms, from Switzerland to Beijing, from Rome to Budapest, the same numbers recur, such as EN, or D400 etc.

SS: The Italian word “tombino” in English translates as manhole, literally “man’s entrance”.

CP: Contemporary art is a metaphor. Even if it is true that artists are less intelligent than their works (or maybe just slower), they do not immediately understand their meaning, reflecting on it I would say that the choice of manholes can itself be considered a metaphor. In fact, the manhole does not end there, from its opening an entire underground network branches out, a hidden life. And perhaps this obsession of mine is again an indication of the same need to reveal the invisible, a secret life, the unknown. This transformation process is actually a path towards knowledge.

SS: There is an underground geography that you foresaw. You photographed them, and then what?

CP: The attraction for these metallic surfaces continues to be very intense, so much so that I have also begun to introduce metallic colours, to translate this material more vigorously. From the mechanical iron elements on which I was already concentrating, -linked to work places such as in the Ruhr mines or in Sardinia mines-, to the manhole covers it was a short step. I am attracted to places where the echo of experience resonates. In Duisburg mine, you can still perceive the passage of the miners, who could also be very young boys, doing the hardest work in the world, and you are struck by this presence-absence of man, whose sigh or pain you can still feel. The past persists, like in Castel Sant’Angelo, -to which I have dedicated a large cycle, and is nowadays a destination for thousands of tourists every day-, you still feel the looming violence of the past.

SS: It is the vigour of the whole that you focus in the detail.

CP: Some manholes covers look like flowers (but who know what they hide!), like those in Budapest that even turn into decorative elements. It is also, interesting that the same material changes colour and appearance depending on its position and what it undergoes. The same manhole inside the Széchenyi Baths was oxidized and assumed a beautiful blue, while in another place it was all burnished. It is significant of how the context can influence the identity of a subject.

SS: What will you do with the shots taken when we were together in Hyde Park on our way to the Serpentine Gallery? In London there was also that precious manhole in memory of Princess Diana.

CP: Something surprising happened on that occasion. In the series of photographs that



I collected, painting and photography spontaneously interpenetrate, to such an extent that the photographs themselves already embody a pictorial idea. They look like paintings, in the absolute ambiguity of photographic paintings or pictorial photographs. The manholes were all photographed in the same vertical dimension as if following a plan, but it actually happened in a very casual way. Even if there is no chance in the artistic process, as Alighiero Boetti teaches us.

SS: English natural light is opaque, monotonal, the steely grey of its soft light is static. In your case, I would say that you use photography as painters used drawing before its invention. The visible, phenomenal world, is for the artists a continuous stimulation: every aspect of reality alerts them and nourishes their impulse to possess the figure that the gaze has constructed. Speaking of drawing, Degas said: “drawing is the most obsessive temptation of the intellect...” The artist draws less with the hand than with the gaze. Back to your technique. Have you always worked on canvas?

CP: Until 2006 I used analogical printing black and white photographs on paper, I would apply colour with a brush and I would spread layers of wax or resin and pigments on an overlapping plexiglass plate. Then I would enclose the work in an iron frame. Printing and applying colour directly on canvas started between 2010 and 2011. The meaning of the work has remained the same: the fragmentation of the work into a diptych or a polyptych aims to sew up the iconic parts with the monochromatic ones leading to the revelation of the image. I have been resorting to digital photography for years, however I would not mark the distinction between analogical and digital, the artist uses what is functional to the idea.

SS: Obviously, neither the materials nor the technological innovation can make a work of art.

CP: Towards the end of the 90’s, when I had completely eliminated the colour, as in the *Sottovuoto* series, I came across Giulio Paolini’s thought according to whom black/white is the colour of the mind, that is to say technique follows the expressive need, not vice versa.

SS: The b/w is the most abstract colour, it does not exist in nature, it is the colour in which we dream. We find black and white only in oneiric work and in art. In your experience, can a three-dimensional object also be defined as a painting? For example, in Duchamp’s *Nude Descending Stairs* (1912) time and space find a new form of intersection in which the subject of vision appears to be delayed indefinitely in a progressive present. A fitting example of the etymological meaning of *pictura* can be found in the *12 Cavalli vivi* by Jannis Kounellis, a work which was exhibited for the first time at the Sargentini’s Attico Gallery in 1969 and more recently at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2002. The artist categorically refuses to define his work as performance or sculpture, it designates by itself a pictorial space. On the other hand, there had already been Fontana’s experiences such as the *Il Taglio* and *Ambienti Spaziali* where the artist exceeded the limit of the surface to obtain a pictorial work.

CP: I’ve never felt the need to define myself and force myself into a category. However, if asked, I would answer that I am an artist who follows a pictorial process: the idea of painting that creates and invents itself from scratch. On the other hand, the same also happens with analogical photography, since when you see the image slowly appearing in the darkroom, it seems like magic is being performed. What is more pictorial than the reaction of grains of dust, of the silver salts on the





Reise, per Mit Goethe in Italien, Museo Casa di Goethe, Roma 2016

paper which reveal an image in their stratigraphy? I have always been fascinated by Raphael-esque glaze painting, made of invisible layers, almost of a nothingness which, however, builds up in the superposition, and it simultaneously veils and reveals.

SS: Your work engages the viewer's mind: it will not allow a quick browse, it requires a long-lasting contemplation, it invites us to think. You are the first spectator.

CP: In art we try to answer to intimate questions or to react to a conditioning from which we want to free ourselves, in order to give a reply to our inner life. All the artists try to express themselves, perhaps as a yearning for immortality and as reaction to the fear of death, that everyone dreads, but that artists manage to ease, letting it express itself.

SS: Death is actually the only thing we will never meet. When we are alive there is no death, when there is death we are not there. It is the fear of going beyond known limits. Art involves in itself going beyond the known.

CP: Fear of the unknown is atavistic. That is why I investigate what we don't know, it is my research itinerary and a cathartic method to overcome this gap and make sense of things. It's my answer.

SS: Art, as Paul Valery reminds us, is everything that doesn't exist, that doesn't exist yet. Who are the artists you brought along with you, who gave you the greatest satisfaction?

CP: Starting from afar I can summarize: Piero della Francesca, Blinky Palermo and Giulio Paolini. They are the ones who guided me: Blinky Palermo for his planning, Paolini for his philosophy and the duplicity of gaze, while Piero della Francesca because his frescoes are truly photographic! I am not mentioning Caravaggio, whose sensual paintings are full of lights and shadows but Piero della Francesca, who has instead that pure, naked eroticism of the unsaid, of the invisible, and who turns his paintings into conceptual photographs.

SS: In conclusion, what you say makes me think of Malevich's concept of visionary space, of his philosophy about the elimination of form, where the shapes found by reason are built on nothing, while intuitive shapes must spring from nothing.

The only place of authenticity in aesthetic experience is somewhere beyond reason and memory, somewhere between seeing and not seeing, a place which is nevertheless cadenced by the heart intermittences. In the oblivion that surrounds an absent centre, a forgotten energy flows, unstoppable and infinite. The gaze of art is always oblivious, unaware. It is enough to recall the Orpheus myth: when he turns to look at Eurydice but loses her in the very instant it catches her as an image. For Orpheus there is no third possibility that would allow him to seize both the image and Eurydice. The exclusion of the eye in Orpheus, like the cut of the eye in Buñuel's movie *Un Chien Andalou*, is the metaphor of a blindness, or rather a shift away from the scopic field, from the eye to the gaze, from the visible to the invisible, to a place where desire surprises itself.

1. Roland Barthes, *Barthes di Roland Barthes*, Einaudi, Turin 1980, p. 89
2. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Fenomenologia della percezione*, Bompiani, Milan 2003

Between Rome, London and Ferruzzano, 25 July 2023