

CONVERSATION WITH CLAUDIA PEILL

Franco Fanelli

Franco Fanelli: As an artist who, as you did, began her career in a period in which photography was becoming fully accepted as a mainstream art form (from the German school to Serrano, Crewdson and DiCorcia), why, from the outset, choose not to present yourself as an artist-photographer but to use photography in installations and as a pictorial or spatial element?

Claudia Peill: Because for me the idea of painting has always been central. Photography, on the other hand, has always been a tool to exploit; at that moment in time it was photography, rather than oils or tempera, that served my purpose. Let's be clear, it's not that I wasn't interested in the work of the artists you mention and I continue to find it interesting. The difference is that I wasn't interested in a mise-en-scene; in their work there is always the reconstruction of a space, of a time and a place which, even when they are enigmatic, abstract or mysterious, are always meticulously detailed. Whereas, as far as my work is concerned, this would mean putting too great a distance between the work and the viewer. It is like setting the viewer in front of stage on which everything happens; whilst for me it is the relationship with the viewer that's important, the fact that the work comes to life very directly because the viewer brings it to life. So there is this dual gaze, this constant circularity of vision. I'm interested in the idea of painting, this pictorial process that starts from scratch, from the white of the canvas, and arrives at a form, at a material, and then cools everything down again using tools that can be pictorial but also photographic. Photography is useful to me because it bends to my needs – which are not narrative.

There has always been a very close relationship between photography and painting, whether as means to a common technical end –as in the nineteenth century – or as means for studying and analyzing one's own work, as in the case of Medardo Rosso or Brancusi. But the consolidation of this importance of "artists' photography" was the great phenomenon in the art market of the 1990s. Given that young artists often jump on the market's bandwagons, it's curious that you didn't.

For me it would have been unnatural. I've always been a bit allergic to things you're "supposed to do" and "what everyone's doing". I started with painting and ended up using photography, seeing it as an instrument that was necessary at the point in which I needed to capture something of reality. I began with abstract paintings, but those works didn't satisfy me very much, I needed to catch hold of reality more powerfully. As I've already said: not in a narrative sense, or as a chronicle, but in the sense of adhering to reality. It was a question of entering into a context, being present, picking up on signs, and I could only do it with instruments that were quick to use, like photography, it wasn't possible just with painting. Nor was I interested in taking one element of reality and translating it pictorially, because that would have completely destroyed the authenticity of a sign or a gesture, that instantaneousness that only photography gives you. A photo allows you to commit "larceny", you steal something and transform it. My first major exhibition, in 1993 at Stefania Miscetti's gallery in Rome, consisted of a large installation conceived as a continuous line; the entire gallery was covered with wax tablets on which there were signs that remained the same throughout but which changed because the background was different. This message about signs and signals (and this is the bit about adhering to reality) was one I seemed to notice on the streets, too, when I was out walking. It all started because I frequented the area near Piazza del Popolo [in Rome] where there is the only bridge on which the city's metropolitan railway crosses the river overground; you saw a whole series of words, of graffiti; I saw the graffiti on the surfaces of the Plexiglas [fencing], but behind it I

also saw a piece of Rome, and these were signs, stratifications, marks that I wanted to “take”. That Plexiglas showed me the ambiguity of vision: I saw these marks and at the same time I saw a piece of Rome, the green, the trees, but I also sensed the intensity of the kids from the suburbs who had left traces of themselves there. On every centimetre of it there was something different and it triggered a desire to work beyond the surface.

In your most recent exhibitions, too, as far as the question of space is concerned, I get the impression you are always trying to extend the physical space of your works into an architectural dimension: why?

It's all related to the gaze, to what a gaze does, so in my work I go in search of that returned gaze. In quite an emphatic way I would say that it is from looking that we progress to being: it is looking that makes us present and this gaze leads us everywhere we go. All told, it is as if the paintings were clues leading us to look at the work that lies well beyond. I have always tried to go beyond the picture plane and the walls, as I did, for example, in “Non ti scordar di me” in 1999, in a church in Tivoli. A wonderful deconsecrated church that had just been restored. To start with I felt discouraged because the building seemed to me to be so complete, so perfectly restored, it seemed useless to add anything. Then I tried to re-read its lines, the sense of that baroque architecture associated with vanishing lines that all run upwards, with the diagonals chasing one another. So I decided to place the work high up in the niches, in this way elevating the viewer's gaze. Here again it was the viewers who, through their movements, “made the work”, and not with a single painting but through a group of them (there were four) in two facing pairs. Another occasion that's worth mentioning is when I created the installation “A scatola chiusa/A scatola aperta” for the courtyard in via Marguta here in Rome, in 2001. The gallery was tiny, it was too small for me. So I decided to make use of the window and close off the gallery, which I transformed into a light box. Therefore the work was visible from outside – a beautiful courtyard garden that itself became an exhibition space.

The piece I recently presented at the Casa di Goethe in Rome was also a journey, a 7 metre long route that could, eventually, continue beyond that. And the same could be said for “Waves”, which I created in 2003 at the Italian Cultural Institute in London: 18 metres long, the work had to be read by walking round it because it was a sequence of images, like a succession of cinematic frames: so once again there is the relationship with the movement of the viewer. I always look for this sense of the spatial: the space of the work as a whole or of the individual paintings becomes a space “beyond”, in 360°.

It's another approach and another era, but in your search for a totalizing space you remind me of a 1969 work by Giovanni Anselmo, “Documentazione di interferenza umana nella gravitazione universal”: the artist walks towards the horizon at sunset and, as he moves, takes 20 photographs so that in the images the sun seems immobile...

Just think, when I was a little girl I dreamed of making drawings on a pieces of paper laid one in front of the other so that they went all the way round the world...

That reminds me of a story by Borges, the one about two cartographers who dreamed of making a map as big as the world and obviously it's an impossible task because the world can't contain it: your dream, in that sense, seems more realistic... . You were talking, earlier, about movement as an integral part of the work: what kind of relationship do you have with video?

More than video, it's the language of cinema that attracts me. Video is very much connected with action. I'm more interested in distinguishing the individual frames, so in a film that has 24 frames per second I'm interested in every single second. I haven't made videos but I have tried to capture the logic of video in my

work. I have already mentioned “Waves”: over the course of 18 metres there are 36 pieces which are like 36 frames, and you, the observer, have to read them by walking around the work; so it is you who moves, not the work.

However video as an element is present in a work like “Giorno/Notte” ...

“Giorno/Notte”, which I created in 2009, is a video installation. It’s composed of 12 static elements in resin onto which 12 videos are projected simultaneously but at different speeds. The whole thing is on a 3 minute loop. I don’t think of it as being part of the video “family”, but [I consider it] an installation. One where the movement, thanks to the filmed images, encounters the fixity of the material, the resin, which is in a sense brought to life by the images. They are, in any event, single frames that are harmonized with one another. But it was conceived together with a companion piece, “Notte/Giorno” which is completely static, by which I mean it is formed of another 12 panels where, in contrast, it is the images that become static and bring the material to life.

At this stage in the conversation I’d like to get you to take a step back and dwell a little on your early training, on the figures who have been influential in your formation as an artist or the examples that have inspired you.

I didn’t have any maestros in the sense of having worked in someone’s studio or a particular teacher. I was never another artist’s assistant even though at the time that was fairly normal for young artists; maybe it would have been easier, it might have offered me some opportunities, but it didn’t interest me, I have always been quite solitary. My real font of inspiration has been the journeys I’ve made, including journeys to see works of art in the flesh, and then reading major authors. New York opened my mind, I went for the first time as soon as I finished studying at the Academy. One work that was a revelation for me was Duchamp’s “The Large Glass” in Philadelphia, which I’d studied and read about but in reality hadn’t understood at all... . When I saw it everything I’d studied went up in smoke. I realized that art has to tell us about something inexpressible and invisible. At that point I began to think about what direction my research should take. I had realised that art is never telling you about what’s in front of you, but always something that’s behind, that you have to understand in a different way.

Which other artists have been important to you?

Magritte is part of this “inexpressibility of art”, this seeing beyond, and I understood him late too, in fact I rediscovered him after seeing The Large Glass”. Then Bill Viola, Blinky Palermo, Giulio Paolini, Katharina Severding, Günter Förg, American minimalist painting, but also the painters of the fifteenth century like Piero della Francesca and Paolo Uccello. Or film makers like Antonioni or Wim Wenders, who both have something to do with concept of the “unsaid” that I was telling you about. In their work there’s a sense of anticipation and there’s also always a discourse connected with time. Then there have been important encounters in real life, in everyday life, my companions and friends of my own generation. There are lots of artists living in Rome and you often meet them in passing, at the café, in the street, at the shops selling artists’ supplies... . You see them in their natural environment, you end up frequenting them, popping in to see them in their studios or having supper together, and you learn a lot. I had the opportunity of getting to know Carla Accardi and that was an important relationship. We would have an aperitif with her and lots of artists and poets would turn up, from Valentino Zeichen to Paola Pivi, then in the evening we’d go out to dinner and you’d meet Ontani and Kounellis, but just casually, obviously it was Carla who was the catalyst. Knowing her personally enriched me, but above all because you share everyday experiences with these artists. Accardi, when she was talking, always spoke about “us”, meaning “the tribe of artists”, this

“community that’s a bit strange, a bit ‘different’”. That kind of contact enriches and stimulates you. It’s hard, you know, to decide to be artist, because artists offer diversity, they demonstrate that it’s possible to live a different way and that bothers people. It’s an artist’s head that’s different from all those other people whose thinking is often more conformist and who always comply with everything. Someone who stands out from the crowd is always disturbing, they threaten the uniformity.

How important have your contacts with German art and culture been?

During the same period as my trips to New York I also began going regularly to Germany, but the most important period was from 1999 to 2000, when I won a residence scholarship to work at the Höherweg Studio in Düsseldorf. Düsseldorf is a city in which you feel the presence of Beuys. Professionally the German cultural scene is very sure of itself, unlike Italy, and I found this professionalism empowering. I was also able to travel, because Düsseldorf lies between Belgium and Holland, at the centre of Europe, and, what’s more, I was there in a particularly exciting period. This gave me the chance to broaden my horizons and my ideas – on an international level. I met many foreign artists, made many friends and professional contacts with whom I’ve since worked and who are still important to me today. Like the exhibitions in Holland and the friendships with many artists like Katharina Grosse, Kaisu Koivisto and Elger Esser. While I was there I also had the chance to see performances by Pina Bausch and to get to know her and her dancers. Those years in Germany were a period of great opportunities and energy.

You mentioned Blinky Palermo, Giulio Paolini and Bill Viola. I won’t pretend I find it easy to see a common denominator linking the three...

It’s like love, you never really know why... . In reality what they have in common is probably the importance that they attribute to the way in which an image is perceived, to what the gaze represents, the relationship that’s created between the art work, the viewer and the artist. What really struck me in Bill Viola and what I felt an affinity with is the method of work he uses, I’ve read his descriptions of how he works, his reflections on the act of seeing, and I find myself in accord with his approach.

But Viola is one of those artists who construct their scenes in the minutest of detail, which is exactly what you’re opposed to...

But I don’t see a mise-en-scene or a theatricality there. If anything there’s a symbolism, as in Piero della Francesca, in which every element that comes into the painting is not acting the part of something else but has a meaning. In Blinky Palermo’s work too, as you get to know it better, there’s a connection with perception; many of his works are made to be seen from a distance, as though through a pane of glass, you always have to pass through something. There’s one of my works, which I exhibited at the Museo Andersen in Rome, that I entitled “Blinky” because it reminds me a bit of a tonality he used, but above all because it’s an image that deceives even me: you can’t work out which bit of it is photography and which is painting. None of its elements lead you to suspect that actually its surface is cold cement.

Again, the aspect of Paolini’s work that I have always found interesting is connected with the way we look at things. Think of a work like “Giovane che guarda Lorenzo Lotto”: in that case is the artist more important or the viewer? In “Tutto vero/Tutto falso”, which is a work from 1996 that I exhibited at the Istituto Europeo di Design in Rome, the image, and even the work itself, is duplicated and there is a division, and it’s left to the viewer to make the connection: the viewer is a part of the work.

I think that at the root of an artist’s work there have to certain pre-existing obsessions, including obsessions related to form. For example in your work I’m struck by the frequent recourse, at the

beginning of your career, to a sort of “cloisonnism”, where the figures are fragmented and interspersed with monochromatic elements then all assembled in large-scale compositions, and then, more recently, your use of the diptych and triptych...

The fragmentation you’re talking about is formed of slashes that I’ve sometimes also called lacerations. Here I’m not referring to the “poetics of the fragment” or anything of that kind, but to a laceration, a more dramatic element. What I mean is a piece of reality that I take, I snatch, as though it were an appropriation of a piece of experience that surrounds me and that then becomes a framing. That’s where the idea of re-framing comes from, of making it into a cinematic frame, a detail that I want to capture. It’s not a snatch of chronicle that has to become a story, because I transport it into another reality and it becomes, yet again, a “view beyond” which in the end is perhaps simply an abstraction, an emotion. So at the root of what I do there’s the “stealing” of an image, of a reality that surrounds me, transporting it into a different context which can quite simply be that of emotion. These elements, these details that I collect are also little pieces of banality, of ordinary everyday life, however, I’ve had the presumption to transform them and to make them more “sacred” – not in the religious sense, obviously.

Throughout the history of art techniques have always also had a symbolic meaning (think of the gold grounds of medieval art or the twentieth century’s succession of alchemies, from Arte Povera to Sigmar Polke). Therefore I’d like it if you could try to explain the intention behind the complexity of some of the processes, like the use of resins to “veil” images and colours.

The veiling, with its layers, conceals and reveals. There’s a resulting stratification that we pass through ourselves. Rome is composed of many layers, which have accumulated, you don’t see them but they are there and we sense them because living there you feel their weight. Either it squashes you or you have to take it on board, and if you take it on board you have to take it into account, but in a positive way. Think about when you visit the Basilica of San Clemente in Rome: you go down and down, it never ends, layer after layer, and then you know that beyond that there’s a stream and then there’s something else. But I’m also fascinated by the sense of the veil that simultaneously covers and builds. In antique paintings a few grams of pigment form one or more layers, a stratification obtained with a gesture and a material that seem to be insubstantial, and yet it is the insistency of that gesture that gives the colour and the painting its substance. And here we’re back at the idea of the invisible that renders visible. But the veil is also the opposite, it is what lies before our eyes and what we have to remove. We have to unburden ourselves of so many things, even when we are looking at that which is foreign to us.

You began with “cold” technical solutions (the resins) and now you have arrived at very delicate brushwork and monochromes of such tonal complexity that they are non-monochrome. Why?

Perhaps the sense of silence has grown. It’s the “mute” aniconic part of my recent pieces that really sums up the meaning of my work. That’s where all that’s unsaid is concentrated, everything that’s best left unspoken because its meaning is the most recondite. The resin had the same function, but in this drier less glossy painting you almost need to push into it, there’s always a passage through the layers. What I put into play and suggest to the viewer is this sense of almost being swallowed by it, an even stronger sensation than the silence. These mute and silent sections are intended to be the encapsulation of the work; meanwhile the part that remains more iconic refers to a “non-representative representation”, so it’s in any case an abstraction. It’s an “abstract figurative representation”, a clue that has to be completed by the empty, enigmatic section. The two parts are divided by a slash, a caesura, to show that they are two separate moments, forever connected. One part needs the other.

Talking of time and of memory, and again of the relationship between painting and photography, I'd like to take you back for a moment to the 2006 exhibition in which Anna D'Ascanio combined your work and that of Mario Schifano, on the common ground of Leptis Magna. What did that pairing and, above all, the exploration of those ruins mean to you?

Anna D'Ascanio had been thinking for a while of doing an exhibition comparing a work by Schifano and one of my works. She had originally had the idea in 1997 when I took part in "In che senso italiano?" which was an exhibition with which she wanted to demonstrate that the artists emerging at the time (chosen by Matteo Boetti, who was working with her at that point) were part of the same Italian tradition as artists of historical importance. Not, certainly, as their clones, but as "carriers" of an "Italianness" which sometimes also emerged in the contrasts between them. In that exhibition she positioned Schifano's "televisions" alongside the first of my pieces with the reflective resins, large fragments of human bodies, and I have to say the combination worked very well. This led to the 2006 exhibition "La città delle ombre bianche". In reality the theme of Leptis Magna was almost accidental, because she had reacquired a painting by Schifano that had been stolen ten years earlier. The painting represented a scene from Leptis Magna accompanied by the works, in Arabic, "I was born here". I was amazed because I had been to Leptis Magna the year before and had photographed the very same building. So that's how the exhibition came about. Obviously the photos taken at Leptis Magna were not intended to be postcard or poster images; I wanted to give those ruins, which are so rich in life and history, a sense of the experience and the contemporary relevance that I had felt myself. When I focus on these buildings that have a past, as I've also done with Castel Sant'Angelo, I don't use the classic images typically associated with them as a form of crutch. On the contrary, the challenge lies in bringing to these buildings, to these archaeological sites, the life that we introduce when we visit them. But I could say the same of ultramodern architecture: it is always our gaze that brings a place to life.

What do the concepts of place and time mean to you?

As far as time is concerned my answer has to involve a reference to the tool that "assists" me here, so, photography, which allows me to capture a moment and transport it into a different space, a space in which linear time is annulled. I have tried to explore this theme by reading scientific texts that handle it, and it seems that in reality linear time is just a human perception, it's a state or condition that we can change and dilate according to our own perceptions. I like the fact that I can do this with my work, I can break the pattern of before, during and after, and eliminate this linearity. Photography crystallizes a moment, an instant, and that helps me because when I say that I "snatch" a banal, everyday gesture, like the movement of a hand, once it's decontextualised that hand can have thousands of other meanings. Talking of hands, I also once read this thing about Giotto. I was surprised to discover that the hand that Giotto paints is always exactly the same and it's also rather a stereotypical hand; but that hand, depending on where Giotto places it, changing the context also changes the significance. Sometimes when I'm stuck in traffic, or maybe on the bus, I'll notice scenes, something around me of which all I'll remember afterwards is a vision, like a silent film. So, I can read all of this in a way that's completely different from what it is in reality and, whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, I don't "judge" it. It's as though in my work I eliminate both space and time. The work becomes a place in which there is no longer a space and there's no longer a time.

Why has the human figure disappeared from your work?

I'm still interested in pieces of reality or of experience where there's a human presence ; it's not necessary to reaffirm that by making it the subject, but it's there, because it's man who lives in these environments,

these places of transit, these workplaces, the settings of everyday life and even of sacrifices and suffering. And in a sense these are also portraits.

I have always thought that the unresolved relationship with the past or the aestheticizing of memory are an encumbrance, a heavy burden for younger Italians. At times this translates into a sort of second-hand archaeology, albeit one that is personal and autobiographical, an archaeology of the recent past. It seems to me that you have avoided this...

I live in Rome, but it's not like you walk Rome's streets feeling overwhelmed. You need to have the power, the freedom, to walk through them and feel new. But it's a relationship that you have to confront, not avoid, if you want to resolve it. Nor can you resolve it with citations or by talking, like you said, about "personal archaeologies", making things too intimate, which – incidentally – is what I've always tried to avoid. As far as regards genuine antiquity, if you treat it as something different from what it really is, it becomes, as I said at the beginning of our conversation, a stage set, something to which you are giving another role and therefore it is always a form of theatre, it's a performance. For me that's different. I don't want to represent. If anything I want to present.

Another theme you don't address and which, again, is very popular nowadays, is that of recent history, that of the 1960s and 1970s for example.

In many artists nowadays there's the tendency to look at that period or even themes that are more recent, and to take on the role of a guide. But that's not art's job, nor should the artist be a kind of guru. It goes without saying that the artist, who raises questions and can't resolve doubts, is someone who wants to break the mould and disorientate the viewer. Art embodies a desire, the desire for renewal. It's the beginning of something, it's the energy that anticipates things. I'll give you a practical example: I like skiing, and when you're skiing you turn corners better when you anticipate them, you have to put your energy into it before you get to the curve. In the same way art is the energy of anticipation. I'm not attracted to people who want to lecture you, who want to teach you to see things "better", or to understand or to be intelligent...

How are your works "born"?

I work a lot in cycles. I do have obsessions of my own, so when I address a theme it's not exhausted in a single painting. This happens when I'm attracted in a certain way to a theme and it can occur at any time and in any situation. Then I wait, and when the attraction gets stronger, when there's an idea, I begin to feel an urgent need to work. For example, after having made a lot of work based on the classical world, at a certain point I had a desire to work, in the same spirit, on places more connected with the present. When I begin to take photographs, in that phase there's everything I'm going to do, so I take a lot of photographs. But it's not that once I've taken them I go straight to the studio and begin work. Sometimes even years go by. For example, I took loads of photos in Berlin knowing that one day I might work on the theme of architecture and the structural elements that I call "mechanical".

When I was in the German mines, in the Ruhr valley, I didn't go there for artistic reasons, I was accompanying students, but I took a lot of pictures thinking that, again, I would use them later. In those utterly empty spaces, in that desert, a place that had seen suffering and even child labour, a place that resembled a sort of gulag, my attention was focused on my own emotional response... . Because in the Ruhr valley you see the coal, you walk on it, you feel it. In that case too, I collect those emotions, that

atmosphere. From that point of view my gaze isn't that of a real photojournalist, because that's not what interests me.

You were telling me that you take photographs and then put them away in a drawer...

Yes, however the initial thing is the selection of what to put in the drawer. After that there's a second point at which I begin to make a new selection of the photos, and then the real work begins, I begin the process of cutting them up, the selection of a detail.

A while ago I read a book, by Wouter Davidts and Kim Paice, the title of which says it all: it was called "The Fall of the Studio – Artists at Work". It seems to me that for you the studio still has a fundamental role to play...

For me the studio space is very important, I'd say vital. In the past I even used to produce black and white prints in the studio; back then I was working in a really uncomfortable space, in the outer suburbs, it wasn't small but the ceiling was low and it only had artificial light, so I took advantage of the poor light and created a darkroom where I could make fairly big prints. In a wider sense, the studio is the only place I can really reflect and concentrate, it's where I most feel myself. You know, I have a habit, an obsession: when I enter the studio to start work I have to put on my blue overalls, otherwise I really can't concentrate... . It's a discipline, it's like a sort of initiation ritual for entering another dimension where the work's to be tackled.

This existential significance of the workplace reminds me in various ways of artists very different from you (and from one another), like De Kooning, who was literally obsessed with his studio, or Bacon. Today co-working or shared studios are all the rage...

No, I've never wanted to share my studio with anyone, or to live in it. I like locking the studio up and I like the journey to "go to work". It's a surprise each time. I've even got to the stage where I get the impression the paintings make or undo themselves during the night. It's lovely to open up the studio and find paintings there that seem to have finished themselves. And I have to admit that when it feels like a painting works, you're so happy, you feel like you're floating.

What I've always admired in you is your tenacious consistency, your interest in form and concept that to me evoke the days in which "avant-garde" was still a noun with real meaning: at the same time your work has also acquired a strongly melancholy and poetic character. Is there still room, in today's art world, for this approach to "making art"? Or for an artist who believes that "art anticipates history", instead of merely decorating or flattering the present?

I don't always ask myself these questions, I don't really even feel the need to ask them. I don't need to look for the answers, however I do sense a deterioration in what I see around me. That said, I would make a distinction: I talk to people, to other artists, to my students, and I realize there is a disconnect between art or what, in perhaps an old-fashioned way, we call art, and the art system. They are two very different things, because art, in my opinion, hasn't disappeared. I have already said that for me art is an attempt to move things, which is something the art system doesn't do. There's a collapse of values visible in a system that adapts to the market, the logic of finance, and therefore ends up in trouble, chasing corporate wealth and investment strategies. But I am convinced that art will never disappear as long as man continues to think. It's the debate about veils that we had earlier: the veil in itself is invisible, but layer after layer a painting emerges... . I don't in myself feel what you call melancholy; there's an awareness that there are few of us left, but we're here. I still find people with whom it's a pleasure to talk, there's still that spirit. Sure, I mostly find it in artists of older generations like, for example, my studio neighbour, Claudio Verna,

who has been another important influence on me. He's a great artist and talking to him convinces me that going to my studio has meaning, even when I'm not "wearing my blue overalls" but simply chatting and comparing ideas, because that exchange of ideas is also an element of art and of feeling "at home". Art enriches you and anyone who understands that thrives on it.

Turin, August 2016