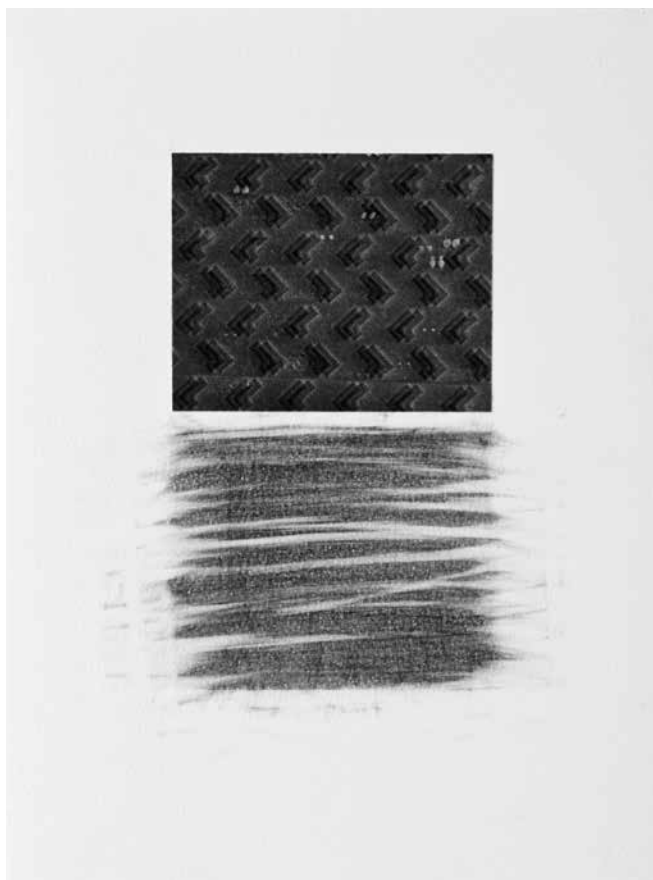


CLAUDIA PEILL: SIGNALS FROM A MANHOLE COVER

Senza titolo, 2015. Collage, fotografia e grafite su carta, cm 40 x 30

Senza titolo, 2015. Collage, fotografia e grafite su carta, cm 40 x 30



Artists lay eyes on a reality to which ordinary folk don't pay the slightest attention. Their gaze, like that of poets, represents the vindication of everything the world ignores; or better, its true "creation". To *see* as they do is also to *surprise*, in areas where reality is opaque: it is a spark of meaning, a value attributed, like a new name given to things that are then born afresh. To reveal the hidden aspects of reality is to "bring them to light", or to reawaken their secret physiognomy.

Claudia Peill tells the story of a day spent in Cosenza, back in 2015, when, at the end of a rainy day, the sun lit up one of those inspection hatches that most of us refer to as manhole covers, and which, if we do ever happen to notice them, we immediately disregard because we are used to thinking of them as being of no interest.

That we are in the habit of doing so shows how little attention we pay to things we dismiss as laughably insignificant, without stopping to think that beneath those hatches there run arteries, just like those in our bodies, through which the life of an organism flows.

So, a manhole cover, and it started glittering, right there in front of her, sending her a signal, urging her to "appreciate" its overlooked purpose, and inviting her, perhaps, to describe it to us in a different language: the language of signs.

Claudia Peill has always been guided by a desire to traverse reality with her gaze. Or at least, she has ever since she first sensed that the pictorial surface was extending an isolating filter between her and the world, while what interested her was the experience of "being present" in it, never depicting herself, but able to interact indirectly, to dialogue with it and to intervene, via self-reflecting forms and approaches.

The observable aspects of shadows and transparencies, the urge to capture movement in all its different forms, the liminal spaces occupied by the subject in its larval state, and the tenuousness and indeterminacy of those boundaries, which have no weight or thickness (and are actually, at times, inverted), the diaphanous, labile side of what we see: all of this formed part of Claudia Peill's artistic universe—as though that universe featured film rather than photography—before this new experience began.

But then that first snapshot in Cosenza—which over time, thanks to journeys to many other cities in the world, has expanded its argument indefinitely—introduced, instead, a gaze trained on a static emblem, one that can be employed horizontally, multiplying the original in a theoretically infinite variety of ways, reflecting the customs, the styles and even the languages in which different peoples have expressed themselves.

Where, beforehand, the camera echoed the movements of the artist's body, continually shifting to capture the ephemeral dynamics of reality's manifestations (a reality often duplicated in its own reflection), now, instead, the framing of the shot implies that her body is immobile, centred on a



subject with a centrality of its own and well-defined limits, a subject that cannot slide off elsewhere or slip free, but which exhibits its surface composed of indecipherable marks, of which all we can usefully analyse is the configuration—a survey of a very small portion of space.

But have we really progressed from motion to stasis, from transience to fixity? What was the artist doing in the period that preceded this, if not introducing herself into the flow of existence using a prosthesis, a second eye, that allowed her to sneak onto the stage of events and witness her own life reflected in fleeting aspects of an unfolding occurrence? And then, in her own characteristic way, veil upon veil, with layers of wax and of resin, as if wrapping her work in a “shroud”, she swathed the original event in a distancing layer of time, encasing it in an inner, mental space, ready to live again for the duration of an enigmatic and revivifying cadence.

When those veilings weren't sufficient, a sheet of Plexiglas, onto which further paint was applied, sealed in (like a tombstone) the collection of samples extracted from reality and then recombined, fastening them definitively in place inside a metal frame.

From her new position of centrality, Claudia Peill is perhaps telling us that we need to find the courage to go further, but inwardly.

And in the transition from mobility to the fixedness of a written language of signs, the complicated to-and-fro of lines filling the surface of the manhole covers is, of course, immobile and definitive, but—as happens when sounds are transformed into a written code—movement is present all the same in the form of rhythm.

Language, like thought itself, is rooted in motion—a fact recognised by many major scholars in the fields of psychology, philosophy and neurology, including Daniel Stern, Carlo Sini and Oliver Sacks. Linguistic signs are distributed spatially, on multiple levels, in a very articulated and complex fashion, with pauses and movement like those in a musical structure.

Peill's encounter with a language that is not only unfamiliar but effectively also unknowable, like that of the relief-cast patterns in iron or other metals on the manhole covers, has had a very significant effect. It has derailed and then set back in motion and revitalised (if only in a dimly conscious form) a process of exploration encouraged by the complex associations our perceptive faculties are capable of making, notwithstanding centuries-old preconceptions differentiating between or favouring some senses over others. The visual, the tactile and the acoustic are anything but distinct: on the contrary, sight, touch and hearing overlap or swap roles thanks to atavistic instincts already observable in babies as young as six months old, who are capable of recognising the shape of an object by touch alone, without any visual clues but entirely intuitively; or can connect a facial expression to a voice heard separately.

In reference to her encounter with the manhole covers, Claudia Peill says, “the manholes sucked me in;” and also, “the water [on them] reflected the light so dazzlingly that a simple grid became a bright minaret.” Those allusions—to a plunging downwards and to a minaret (a holy place in whose adjacent arcades, just as in prayer, we encounter the rhythm so essential to the fusion of the believer and the universe, of earth and heavens), invoking the often floral beauty of a certain kind of arabesque design every bit

as transfixing as some mandalas are—powerfully attest to an urge to re-site herself at the centre of her own universe, along the vertical axis—the spine or *axis mundi*—that runs through it, ready to absorb the thrust of the different energies scattered throughout the cosmos.

And so, as the artist herself remarks, the desire to reveal things that are secret and invisible, “the process of transformation” that art is destined to effect, ends up coinciding with a “journey of self-discovery”—in other words, a journey towards self-awareness—that has analogies with forms of meditation practiced in Asia and the Middle East.

Everything here plays out in minimal thicknesses, approached with such intensity that they dilate to the point of dissolving the material barrier that divides us from the world: surface and depths fuse, condensed into an area where movement coincides with stasis, and our consciousness expands.

Without wanting to get caught up in discussion of a psychological kind, it is clear that, because it resolves—thanks to the act of creation—the conflict between Self and World, the work of art has always mediated between two poles that ordinary consciousness perceives as being distinct and opposite, and which therefore, when that conflict remains unresolved, result—as we continually see in everyday life—in violence and catastrophe.

Just like “games” and “competitions”, art belongs to a realm that “grew up in sacred play”, where both time and space reside in a dimension “standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life” (Johan Huizinga).

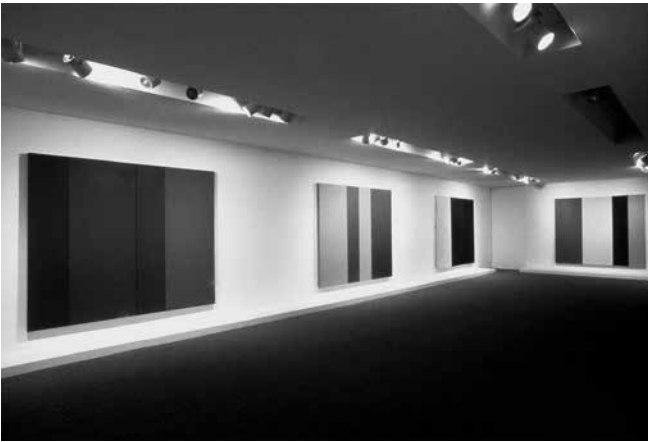
Responding to a “feeling” that has little to do with rational choice, via a remarkably refined, and above all intellectual operation conducted with a technical sophistication that accurately reflects her mental insights, Claudia Peill has arrived at the climax of a period of entrenchment in the course of which centrality has become a new and vital characteristic of her gaze—a gaze capable of penetrating the mesh of the unitary consciousness that has, in any case, always represented the culmination of the contemplative states we experience when we immerse ourselves in an aesthetic vision.

Every attentive and practiced viewer “feels what they see”. Only later does a process of elaboration begin, translating vision into words.

The state we find ourselves in when we experience a powerful aesthetic emotion is like that described by Schiller in his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man*: “We find ourselves at the same time in the condition of utter rest and extreme movement, and the result is that wonderful emotion for which reason has no conception and language no name.”

This aim of this analysis of mine is to identify the motives shaping the artist’s research and the significance of actions that originate in the depths of her subconscious, where the factors at play are all rooted in a common bedrock not yet influenced by questions of expressive style and form (in other words, everything that will eventually make all the difference at a qualitative level), determining the formal plane on which the artist’s *poiesis* will develop, and its specific character.

The miracle we witness the minute we find ourselves looking at a work by Claudia Peill is the directness with which the force of modern tradition accompanies the contemporary freshness of her inventions, immediately suggesting that we should be using the terms “direction” and “orchestration” to describe her working method.



The relationship between presence and absence, between solids and voids, the equivalence of the formats' vertical and horizontal measurements, the clarity of the articulation of the parts, the balance achieved between areas of impenetrable opacity and volatile evanescence: all this is fruit not just of a felicitous and singular flair but also of an almost mathematical calculation involving precise spatial, chromatic and temporal ratios, with an "upbeat" and a "downbeat" suggestive of music, or of a strong and instinctive feel for cadence and rhythm. And it is precisely this latter quality that holds harmoniously together even long sequences of images, sustaining the animation—to use a decidedly cinematic expression—that is the primary characteristic of art. Moreover, with a *modus operandi* all her own, the artist sets up an intense dialogue between painting and photography, demonstrating, with great freedom, her entitlement to "paint" with other media.

The monochrome intervals of paint that she places between one figure and the next do the work, on one hand, of the shaft of a column, or a pedestal, whose function is to isolate, lifting the figure onto another plane. But they also act as a hiatus that allows us to reconsider the figure and better grasp it, or they stand in for the emotion with which we greet it or comment on it: a continual alternation of solids and voids that, like the pauses in a speech, like a breath held and then released, accompany the artist's movements, and our own.

Today, this new centrality and the perpendicularity of Peill's gaze, which bores into the distance and expands the visual threshold in a very small section of space, along with, more recently, her tendency to print directly onto canvas, seem to be a form of reiteration using different tools—an inherently and strictly painterly exercise, without which, as the tale of Zeuxis and Parrhasius teaches us, whatever the surface, no painting would ever exist.

The years in which Claudia Peill first stepped onto the artistic scene were particularly difficult ones, marked by disorientation and linguistic fragmentation, the market economy's new precedence over culture, and worldwide political uncertainty. Nonetheless, and from the very outset, the artists she chose to look to were the major figures of the 1960s and 1970s or, further back, the pillars of the avant-garde and the great years of "inaction painting", as opposed to the "action painting" of Pollock, De Kooning and Kline.

To the figures she quotes as her models, including Duchamp, Paolini and Blinky Palermo, we could safely add Rothko, Brice Marden, Schifano and Mauri, but also Festa, Tacchi and Mambor for their elegant evocations of the polyptych form, and for the splendour and the aura their terse figures were cloaked in without ever being in peril of becoming academic exercises or rigid dolls.

In the voids and pauses that punctuate Claudia Peill's compositions, the background chatter of a multitude of distant voices can be heard, the sweep and spirit of a culture, the variety of a lived experience that has absorbed, seen and listened to many things, and that joins the vestiges of the great classical tradition whose wealth we have inherited, and industrial civilisation with all the dramas it has spawned: a multitude of ideas and allusions presented with precision and rigour, generating the rich polyphony of a grand work of art.

Brice Marden, Shea Gallery, Minneapolis 1974

Brice Marden, Pace Gallery, New York 1978

Pag. 40

Snapshot in Sabaudia, 2022