

THE ILLUMINATED SIDE AND THE DARK SIDE OF PAINTING

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My attraction to Scheibl stems from his ability to plunge his gaze into the vital magma, trying to extract from it the possibility of a meaning, without losing its fluidity, its mystery, its dense physicalness.

The instrument he employs in this adventure is the gaze, aloof and involved at the same time, a visual skill that comprehends and sympathises and goes deep down, a gaze that knows how to squeeze the juice of reality out of what comes his way, like hands squeezing color from the painter’s tube.

In the past somebody had defined Scheibl’s art as “post-abstraction,” a concept he had interpreted and shared in the 80’s with other young Austrian painters. With time, he has refined his linguistic and expressive means, and such definition has come off, to the advantage of his uniqueness, letting only the power of his images speak, as texture of signs and color we may see (or better, make out, or sight) on both sides, below and above, back and forth, before and after, just as if we were there with the artist, this side and beyond the see-through mirror that is the surface of his paintings.

In the Dozza exhibition these very qualities of Scheibl’s art shine with a clear, glaring light. This is a special occasion, for him and for us: at first he had seemed a little doubtful, but after his first visit to the Rocca Sforzesca, he had seemed enthusiastic at the idea of involving such unusual spaces in a sort of comprehensive work, a work that is the exhibition itself, a whole event inside a whole castle; for him, a kind of “first time”: the first time that Hubert exhibits and stages his private world, the one that inhabits his Viennese atelier, filling it with unexpected presences, familiar, foreign and even alien ones, but never useless or casual. Here, at the Rocca, the artist feels he has found a new home, and moves here, with his dearest works, and with new ones, conceived and painted especially for this Italian summer, for the hills brushed by the shining Tuscan light that climbs over the horizon and fills up this corner of Romagna with the scent of classicism.

The rooms take shape, the privileged shapes of that dead end maze the artist has turned the Rocca into: from nature to dream, from pleasure to imagination, from unconsciousness to the universe, from love to death:—or, maybe, the other way around, or

who knows in what other way or direction—itineraries worth exploring, because, as Markus Brüderlin had sensed almost twenty years ago: “Any comparison to Hubert Scheibl’s work is determined by the undetermined.” An example for all: the white painting in the “Dogs room,” a big canvas where the silhouettes of the rampant dogs, as in a coat of arms, turn into sign among signs, dance and breath with everything else in what has been described, with insight, as the “white darkness” of Scheibl’s canvasses.

His art enchants and persists, maybe because it has developed the knowledge (the maturity of the mind, awakened by the desire to take risks, again) of a human habitat where nature and artifice can coexist; or maybe because his art gives out hints, from the empty that shapes the full, of a fascinating interior landscape, the place where all the adventures of the mind take place, a land that has kept its promises and that, again, looks unexplored, or inhabited by unexpected paths and encounters. But, we all know, painting and nature are linked together, made of almost the same substance of soil, light and color, both entrusted to the verticality of space that build, and to the horizontality of time that transforms, like Cartesian categories that are captured in a whirlwind intertwining logical data and coordinates, but do not confuse—and indeed enhance—sensations and feelings.

In a few words, and in any way, Hubert is a man who lives through his fascinations, who loses himself in the siren call, and finds precisely in his surrendering to life the only possible truth, the only reason to be an artist. Like Hamelin’s piper, he seduces and drags with him everyone he encounters, and everyone is pleased to follow him, enchanted by his image, comfortable and warm like a mantle on a snowy day and full of precious lights to lit up the night.

There is a strong Dionysian element to his art, maintained in a sort of difficult balance on the line of the ecstatic.

There is painting, a lot of it, intense and dramatic, drunken, constantly seized by a frenzy that comes from deep within but that is fatally attracted to light. There is something absolute and extremely fragile that draws on the dimension of the sublime, the place of perennial existential contradiction, “a pictorial style”

Dan Cameron observes “full of the gestural and of the grandiose, in connection with the restless values of existentialism ... a sort of pragmatic sublime.” This last definition, however, allows not to take things too seriously and to keep irony at hand as a safety valve, but must be considered especially in the sense of “making,” hand-making, turning the ghosts of the mind into tactile and visual matter, into artwork, because—as the artist himself underlines—“there is no other artistic medium in which the creative process is so tightly connected with the movements of the human body. My paintings are the physical evidence of my hand, the expression of my mind.”

His choice is absolute, as Hubert has from some time now recognized his own language, painting, to which he always remains faithful. He is also a curious man, an open-minded intellectual, strongly attracted to other expressive forms: cinema, from where he borrows the quickness of gestures and the unexpectedness of some appearances, even disturbing ones (one of his idols is old, great Alfred Hitchcock, and not by chance): from photography, he takes the cleanliness of framing and the focus upon details; from music, the refinement of pauses, the need for silence, the sense of the beat as in the rhythmical strokes of painting; from poetry, the way he proceeds by analogy and metaphor, enabling the viewer to re-construct a possible meaning through intuition and sensitiveness.

The pleasure of painting prevails over any other enticement, and color gets the leading role in Scheibl’s paintings: color is what we perceive first, what gets under our skin, the sparkle that establishes the contact, the short circuit between the viewer and the object viewed. But, pay attention: in these “fields of color,” today inhabited also by the presence of his extremely cultivated and far-reaching daily imaginary world, there is, in my opinion, no silence you may breath (in the past some critic had described this way the concept of the “unspeakable”) but rather a choir devoid of echoes and enchantments, deriving from different contexts and passions, yet finding their balance and harmony in a soundless humming.

We know that the artist is always looking for something that goes beyond the painted surface of the canvas (again Dan Cameron observes that Scheibl is much more involved in theoret-

ical and philosophical speculations than in the technical execution of paintings) and therefore, even in his endless conversation with color, he behaves in a way it is not exaggerate to define “pre-Socratic”: he works on the combination of the four basic elements to obtain all kinds of variations on a theme, like in an endless game. Color now thickens, becoming warm soil, dug up and ploughed by the artist, while matter vibrates, expands, withdraws; then it catches fire, flares up and suddenly burns out in coals, making the heart thump, demanding for the reassurance and comfort of embrace after the passion; and again, color becomes a water-plant, a soft water-lily, a green screen of branches and foliage dipping in the peaceful mirror of a pond or a flowing stream; then it turns into light, withdrawing into a temporary opaqueness, that is not darkness but the threat of shadow, or in a sheerness where air and light, at last free and dominating, seem to dance, losing all the weight of their matter.

Even in his more ecstatic dimension, a certain rigour is necessary to live everything to the full and in the best way. And rigour also means “sense of limit,” the critical ability to recognize one’s own environment, to understand if we have the necessary strength to cross a new threshold or if this entails the loss of balance and measure, to avoid committing the sin of “hubris,” violence as exaggeration, as excess. In this world of excess, where everything is looking for over-exposure, it is surprising to find an artist so involved in his quest, but also so self-aware.

Scheibl does not accept boundaries of language or genre, does not obey to “compelling” stylistic categories. The only limitations he accepts are those he sets, the ability to control his gesture, to shape it in view of new battles, not letting emphasis and exaggeration, the real enemies of rigour, sweep him away.

His gesture is deliberate and aware, not automatic, but selected from time to time and set free, until it reaches the threshold of the unspeakable, almost to the point of no return, on the extreme limit of Self-loss, a loss that is not desired, but perhaps courted and equally feared. And Scheibl’s challenge will become like that of someone walking on a tightrope suspended between the strong feeling of “cupio dissolvi” and an equally stubborn love for life.