

Variable horizon, staring gaze

Horizon from the Greek ORIZO - genit. ORIZONTOS (below KYKLOS circle) which ends, and this from ORIZO term, denominative of OROS limit, boundary, which compares with OYRA tail, namely the extreme end (v. East); while others less well or combines with ORAO I see, I look

One day, ten years ago, Emidio Clementi, musician and writer, calls Andrea Chiesi asking him to accompany him on a walk in the outskirts of Bologna. The call is not justified solely by the longstanding relationship between the two, but by the fact that Clementi already describes Chiesi as "an expert of the suburbs."

"He is not interested in witnessing the degradation, his paintings are not yet another confirmation of the transience of human affairs or a cry of complaint, but rather the ambitious attempt to revive the functionality dreams that one day those buildings have embodied. Therefore, his whites are bright, his shapes are majestic and the gears that fill the canvases seem to work still at full capacity. The spirit with which Andrea is related to the landscape is that of an archaeologist. An archaeologist of the recent past and therefore, inevitably, an archaeologist of the outskirts."¹

Ten years later Chiesi comes back in the outskirts of Bologna, in particular at the Pilastro quarter, for a new exploration. *Variable horizon* is the attempt to draw an anthological path crossing the long and prolific production of the Modena artist, starting from the relationship with the peripheries to imagine a dialogue with the contemporary landscape.

In the urban and metropolitan landscape, periphery and horizon are inextricably linked concepts. The gaze obsessively oriented from the *urbe* to the *suburbia* means that this latter is configured as the only possible horizon. At the same time, if from the etymological point of view the two words share the idea of limit and circularity, symbolically both can be used as synonyms for development and renewal. In this latter hypothesis lies the ambiguity which, more than anything else, presently distinguishes the suburbs, marginal areas but always at the centre of public

discourse, undoubtedly border territories but always in the spotlight because able to embody contradictions, inconsistencies and antinomies which are less obvious elsewhere.

On the one hand, therefore, the idea of horizon in all its meanings, on the other hand, the contradiction of uniting the noun to the adjective *variable*, undermining the definition that would have it as a single firm point at the end of the vision.

The horizon variability has a geographically simple explanation. In fact, Andrea Chiesi started turning his eyes to his surroundings, his town Modena, its marginal areas, and continued exploring his country in Bologna, Milan, Genoa, arriving in Berlin, New York, Beijing, coming to see that at the basis of his art works there was always the same subject. The subjects of his paintings, especially the panoramic views, are impermanent horizons, prospects where the *skyline*² is made up of several overlapping layers, be they durable like the architectural (residential, commercial or infrastructural) ones, movable like cars, signs, banners, or ephemeral like graffiti.

The suburbs for Andrea Chiesi are physical and mental places, distant and next, privileged spaces of real contemplation, always the centre of his objective lens. His gaze, in fact, is primarily a photo: a process of analysis of the urban condition that enables immediate recording, continuous scanning, to be reprocessed later. Photography is preceded, only in chronological terms, by drawing, as a direct investigation in the field, as a sign in action that, in some recent productions, is performed live.

The urban landscape, complex organism hosting the daily life, is the starting point and the ending point, an unstable start and a safe harbour, has been and remains one of the favourite themes in Andrea Chiesi painting. Already at the dawn of his production, the element of suburban scenery peeked inside comics' pages pregnant with abandoned factories, hard contrasts between black and white, suburban atmospheres still not identified as a unique image focussing the whole attention.

A series of drawings on paper of the late '90s introduces and conveys the gaze on architecture, sometimes approaching to grasp certain details, sometimes moving away to embrace, albeit partially, small urban portions. In this specific case the sign is heavy, fat (so it seems, thinking about the used tool, graphite), lights and shadows are part of a single step, the speed of execution opens to the vision in series, to an

almost narrative succession where, however, the protagonist is the space, the emptiness, the building devoid of human presence.

From *The House* series (2004), where the artist portrays close portions of reality through a window, to the *Kryptoi* series (2007) dedicated to the former Tobacco Manufactures of Milan and Modena, where the distanced eye allows to embrace wider territories, from the *Perpetuum* series (2011), with the undisputed protagonist of the abandoned areas, to the *Ucronie* series (2013) devoted to the suspension of time, until the recent *Karma* (2015), the chance to see the contact points is constantly increasing. As if it were a single large representation of a continuous horizon, just like the real one running all around the earth's circumference.

The structure of the compositions of Andrea Chiesi that favours the stratification of surfaces on a single support (the canvas) is reflected in the obsession for openings and closures of visual perspective. In his paintings, even in interiors, the crossing of thresholds, one after the other, marks the observation rhythm. A semi-open door, an open window, a curtain filtering the daylight, just like bridges, gasometers, condos, railway lines, platforms in landscape paintings, pile up occupying the extent of the visible spectrum and describing its linear development.

The horizon is just one of the limitations that Andrea Chiesi's painting has been facing for a long time. From the instantaneity of a photo, that for the artist is a visual note on a notebook where he continuously writes, to the long and reflective time of painting that lingers on the subject by subjecting it to a sedimentation a crystallization, as he likes to call it.

During the making of the picture reality moves away, undergoes a process of abstraction, gets rid of its physical, architectural, chromatic features, even the social and political ones, stroke by stroke. Painting for Chiesi is meditation and painting the horizon is joining the East, with the most extreme and far away matter, *"the faster and more digital gets the world, the slower and more physical becomes painting; the more bulimic becomes the consumption of surface images, the more valuable and contemplative is painting."*³

¹ E. Clementi, *Bologna. In Barca* in S. Scateni (editor), *Periferie. Viaggio al termine delle città*, Editori Laterza, Roma - Bari 2006, pp. 34-35.

² The term *skyline* is used because its definition in English comprises the urban horizons composed by buildings, skyscrapers and other structures (*“the outline of something, as the buildings of a city, against the sky”*).

³ A. Chiesi, interview with Franco Fanelli published for the Karman exhibition at Guidi & Schoen Gallery, 2016