

Andrea Chiesi

Where Memory Dwells

I feel as if I really am in some mysterious part of the universe that did not exist before, neither the mud of the earth, nor in the purity of heaven.

Suger's words, Abbot of St. Denis between 1122 and 1157, describe the mood of those passing through the heavy bronze doors, entering the dense atmosphere of the antique French cathedral. It is as if being slowly devoured both by the darkness and silence that fill stone walls, only interrupted by subdued background noises from the outside world. In the first moments, one feels through the body to the base of the skull, a slight shivering, vertigo-like, lightness and darkness reduce to a minimum the presence of the superfluous for contemplation requires isolation. As one grows confident with the space, eyes and breathing adapt to the unreal dimensions of this hidden world, in fact, from the murky pall from which emerge the first details, one by one, a marble-toothed demon; there, the span of the ribs, taken from biblical stories to reach the faithful in the illiterate flock.

The transcending iridescence of stained glass and the ineffable presence of something absolute represent some kind of metaphysical persuasion emanating from the architecture. To the person, since in such conditions, the spaces dialogue with the intelligible language of time and not with the geographical space. Any sight beyond the physical demands concentration and hence respect.

Same fate applies to factories which like cathedrals become a ready-made pretense of a rampant era.

Absorbing both the Art Nouveau heritage and that of the Secessionist between the two wars, establishes an architecture combining beauty, utility and functionality. The titanic forms and sheer volumes of industrial constructions transmit something spiritual, something that imposes devotion.

This mysticism draws the attention of a group of American artists, who oblivious to implications of social character, celebrate instead a sense of confidence on the emerging society of consumerism. Their subjects assume almost totemic facets: factories and tanks become the new cult edifices with turbines and machinery acting like sacred statues in their interior. The magical aura of the edifices is portrayed with the same wonder described by Suger: slender beams that distribute immense spaces where bright machines and shining mechanisms reflect the diffused light from the ample glass panes. The electricity, clean and silent, consents finally to eliminate the chaotic flare of dust and smoke from furnaces built during the first industrial awakening. These slim American traits were the result of a very rigorous technique favoring flat and lively tones, a composition of the limit of abstraction almost maniacal in its dedication to detail, which came to be called Precisionism.

Andrea Chiesi has a lot in common with the American precursors in some aspects of his research: discipline and essence always mark his artistic route, starting with places more familiar to him like the deserted spaces in the outskirts of Modena allowing him to develop his research in to the memory and landscape.

Chiesi has no academy background, but has witnessed the disenchantment, the independence of the post-punk scene of the 80's with its self-produced concerts on the dismissed spaces of fertile Emilia Romagna. Therefore, more than choosing a subject, his painting calls upon a place before it

does its interpreter. The connection between being human and the surrounding is sometimes so ingrained it is not easy to overcome its ordinariness. Chiesi does not ignore international tradition nor the Emilian tradition. The scenery painted by the artist has in it something lunar, an absolute void reversing almost into existentialism. The painter does not immerse himself blindly into art history, but adopts a method (precisionist) associated with a specific way of looking at the world similar to De Chirico and Sironi in painting and Ghirri and Basilico in photography.

When the earth itself is still fecund with events that have marked its political and social history, inevitably one is confronted between past and present, between actuality and memory. The artist's purpose is not to violate the integrity of the space but need to learn what it keeps in custody and what has remained of these buildings so disarrayed by the surrounding landscape. What moves Chiesi is the resistance against the memory, the indefinite space it occupies in the collective mind, the anecdote, the instability and the yearning to understand what place they maintain in the history of the community.

His incursions lead him to portray ruins, not for simple aspiration towards the sublime or for banal esthetic satisfaction. In his paintings all this evolves in a more ample sense of total physical identification with the ambience.

The economical boom and social struggles of the 1950's – 1960's, as well as the artist's generation and the awareness of the present state of crisis, are a testimony of how society has transformed itself so far. Historical reconstruction requires objectivity and photography is an instrument adapted to that purpose. Chiesi's work begins with ideas collected from incursions, allowed or not into a preselected spot which is not to say he is only trying to decipher the economical political identity of the last twenty years or filing proofs or stacking documents. Chiesi's canvases are neither a report nor a Becher systematic catalogue given from a frontal point of view. They are rather a frantic and violent eye opener that is closer to the solutions of German Expressionist cinematography where staircases become abysmal whirlwinds, the cranes antediluvian animalist, and the towers carnivorous monsters as in a Murnau or Lang movie. Perspectives unwind and emotions cripple the shadow. The size of the images is the only occasion where the artist makes his presence perceived, since no stroke or drawing unveils its character.

The canvases are painted with a very restricted color range – as if hit by a cold rain – they reveal a variety of sophisticated tones. This does not mean its surfaces are flat or not vibrant enough, quite the opposite, the linen on which the paint is spread allows to make the most of clear hues where the luminosity is enhanced more intensely by the contrast of the dark areas. The homogenous coloring to which tends to go this chromatic synthesis, respects the duality between light and dark so interiors become darkly mellow or tenaciously stricken by the light. Skies reset to zero, and temporary references are referred to with either threatening or deep tones. The muddy pools are but a variation, the theme allowing a reflection of transparency of the forms in the mud overturning the usual prospective orientation.

The impulse to introduce oneself in a place is an interest intended not only to reproduce the large spaces together – whether indoors or outdoors – but to confront a more profound discourse dedicated to the specifics of the changing rooms, offices, bathrooms... of the angles where the human absence becomes itself more perceptible in testimony of a precedent passage. For example the linoleum of the pavement still reflects – in contraluce – the marks left on the floor during a soccer match, while the keys play in disorder like the chairs in which one sits at the game, or the lavatories, from very white tiles, always translate the halos from the ample passages of the chemical cleaning products.

The more intimate character of these works, generally of a reduced format, make the application of the color more emotional, demonstrating different involvement respect to the neutrality of works like FATTORE 33: the brushstrokes have amore convulsive course, less mechanical then the concise representation of the silver trellises on black background.

A strong interst towards the factories appears more vast from these small works and their concerns with the concept of storage. The archives and libraries are analyzed like a sort of warehouses where the memory has been accumulated through processes of perpetual stratification. EKD 36 somehow acts like a link between the artist's more abstract genre and the figurative. The disposition of the volumes in the library have the same rigor as the keys of a piano, therefore those stacked in the foreground become more physical, more material, more real.

All of Chiesi's work leads towards rebulding a "hypothetical biography" of dated images of places in which reside his and our past. The spaces simply live from the events that have characterized them from souvenirs that in those cities of paper , turn out continually reversed, feeding a small babel of numbers and words that weave facts, places and people.

Gabriele Francesco Sassone, 2009

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