

## **FROZEN MUSIC**

by Maurizio Sciaccaluga

*Where there is an abundance of light, shadow is blacker*

W.A. Goethe

*Progress, 'til there's nothing left to gain, it's*

*Progress, it's a message that we send.*

*And progress is a debt we all must pay*

Bad Religion

*I really believe there are things nobody would see if I didn't photograph them*

Diane Arbus

*When people ask me what I do for living, I usually answer: I paint wrecks*

Andrea Chiesi

After reading how Andrea Chiesi describes his work, my instinctive, immediate reaction is, for once, to stand back and let him introduce himself. Because Andrea is one of few artists today to be perfectly aware of what he is doing and capable of talking about it without diminishing its power, without seeing it go out or making it mundane or boring. In fact Chiesi is perfectly aware of and in control of what he does, of all the work that lies behind each of his photographic reconnaissances, aware that each painting is the product of a lot of hard work and thought. And yet even though this painter from Emilia is often capable of producing us with a lucid, precise description of his *modus operandi*, even though all his work appears to be perfectly calculated and masterfully done with obsessive care and precision, something still stays hidden behind the words the young painter says or writes, something still justifies the intervention of another voice with the intention of going further. So as to reveal the part of the ego that a person can never reveal himself.

To start with, his photographic reconnaissances, or rather, those strokes of the hand before each painting is started. After all, these represent the conception of the artist's relationship with the place, the instant in which it comes to life and is fertilised. In this preliminary combing the artist selects and circumscribes areas of particular historical or personal importance, testimonies of our industrial past, ecological disaster sites or, in the best of cases, buildings that were once productive but have been totally abandoned, deprived of any function, useful or otherwise. In short he chooses and circumscribes apparently useless skeletons that only take up space, rejects that the modern world – that formerly industrial society that has now become post-industrial and hypertechnological – has quickly buried and forgotten as embarrassing, inconvenient by-products. Chiesi focuses on leftovers rejected by the world, and the marginality of these places represents the marginality of the artist's cultural background: the semi-legal social centres, the counterculture, the underground, punk, new wave, gothic, ante litteram Italian graffiti fanzines and independent magazines. In the end, the contemporary artist's true freedom lies in the ability to choose any subject and the painter only later, as if by chance, sees the beauty of what he is randomly mapping. The perfection of lines, of interweaves, of unused architectural structures emerges in thousands of snapshots that document the decay and abandonment, the fascination of betrayed places – the exact opposite of those stupefied and insipid non-places that are so dear to contemporary artistic culture – and is underlined by their tragic, brutal destiny. In short in his photographs unintentional beauty – one might call it the enchantment of necessity – triumphs

over cynicism, and the images themselves, the snapshots reveal an inevitable consideration nobody was expecting: the photographer's talent. We are somewhat surprised to discover that Chiesi sees painting as simply a finishing touch, the viaticum of poetry, but that the words he uses, his vocabulary, is the vulgar, crude, day-to-day language of photography. Here we appreciate the colours, the light and shadow, the way the shot is framed (which presages a certain structural set-up that also find in his paintings), the hidden beauty where we least expect it; here we understand how much life has gone by beside these structures, and how much death is underlined by neglect and starvation.

The choice of the site to be documented is always made on the basis of political ideas, of a social philosophy consolidated over the years. Like Diane Arbus' of architecture, Chiesi seeks out lifeless cement monsters, land and places where the battles of the working class were fought, places of social marginalisation, favourite targets of the environmentalists for their extreme negative impact on the land. In the end, these are nothing more than a transposition of Arbus human monsters, of those lifeless individuals and those interiors marked by psychological decay that the photographer offers us in her curious series of disappearances. Chiesi's choices are anything but neutral; they are weighted down by a political burden that the artist does not want to lay down, and they are, in his own words, stories and testimony of historical memory with social implications. Seen this way his work goes well beyond simple reconnaissance -which is his detractors' accusation (and every artist inevitably has his detractors) – and becomes a sort of WWF campaign in reverse, led by a dreamer who freezes memory, who refuses to forget and take his eyes off the spot. The artist forces onlookers to focus on the image of something that has been deprived of its function forever, and therefore appears unjustly useless, ugly and massive. The ruins of Bovisa, Campi and Bagnoli in place of the wolves of the Apennines. Chiesi speaks of the brownfields, places which are often contaminated but are of great economic interest for their increasingly central position in our growing cities, and denounces the sacrifice of memory to economic interest, opportunism and speculation. One such area is Cornigliano -the subject of one of the most recent incursions: location of the Italsider steel mill by the sea since the 'thirties, a symbol of the issue of urban redevelopment of abandoned industrial areas since its privatisation when it became Ilva in the 'nineties, because of its location close to a new urban pole and because of the political implications of the environmental issues associated with dismantling of the steel mill.

The artist has seen cities grow and develop, devouring everything around them. He has seen them advance like a metastasis, multiplying and expanding, devouring the countryside, neighbourhoods, villages and boundaries, creating new and more distant boundaries and vomiting up the ruins of what they had arrogantly swallowed. He has seen suburbs become city centres and new borderline districts be born, he has seen new industrial areas replace the old, new refugee camps fill outlying areas with new residential districts right on their heels. He has seen the post-industrial era expel productive activities from city centres without eliminating their strong negative impact on the land. And now he is telling us what he has seen.

All his locations have a few things in common, such as the political and social importance they hold or have held at some time, but above all they have a beauty of their own, an evocativeness, a particular charm that seems to have been hidden for too long, waiting for somebody to reveal it. Chiesi's paintings are not about the ugliness of steel and cement, but they manage to look inside buildings, structures and relics which freed of all their negative connotations, end up being expressions of pure harmony. And a strong sense of sadness. There is a subtle contrast between the solidity, the weight of the materials -iron and cement- and the lightness of the light that falls on them, making them less dramatic. It is all painted in grey-blue shades of Wings of Desire, the

colour of the soul, of all souls who have passed through without leaving any apparent traces. They say beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and painter's skill lies precisely in subliming rage and indignity, transforming cholera into a sort of mute poetry. Poetry scanned by a continuous series of phantoms, of simulacra that stand out against a sky that is too clear to be real, too rarefied to contain oxygen. Maybe this is why man has disappeared from the scene: as the artist himself says, this is a post-apocalyptic scenario, from the post-atomic age. In the end every building might be merely a hologram, a scenario from some neo-Gothic videogame fantasy. We scrutinise all the shadows, all the dark corners, the windows and doors and the infinite corridors, looking for an escape route in case the enemy should appear. The image always looks like frozen music, as Goethe called architecture. The colours create a sense of depth, the light caresses the cement and dilutes its power, the figures come from a mental continent that is more than real. And so what is the Beyond? Perhaps it is the longed-for Satya Yuga, or Golden Age, or the moment when humanity is wiped off the face of the earth and something new can finally start.

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