

Beauty is difficult

Gennaro Castellano, 1995 Tema Celeste #52

“All that is beautiful is difficult, and he who would approach it must struggle naked and alone with its figures”. The words of a Dorian lyric echo what Ezra Pound, the great smith, wrote in the Fifties: “beauty is difficult”.

Beauty, therefore, is that which metaphorically defies death and all its disguises...it surpasses the norm! One thing is certain: beauty is a gift and, at the same time, a sizeable critical zone. It speaks a language few make a real effort to understand and which in turn comprises only direct, explicit messages, whatever their provenance. Basically beauty asks us only to divest ourselves of our arrogant, tyrannical ego. Or, at least, to silence it for a moment: naked and alone.

Many lofty examples of art clearly demonstrate that beauty is an objective datum. Actually there have always been a variety of attitudes regarding beauty, although some have dominated one era or another, characterizing it. And in fact the artistic product of extraordinary quality that is so easy to recognize when we look to the past is extremely difficult to identify in the contemporary world. Who's to blame? A complex of socio-psychological implications, that are hard to avoid. Today it is easy to understand Mozart, but isn't easy to understand the treatment and the destiny allotted him by his contemporaries. Naturally the levels of interpretation of a work are many, and some are certainly more penetrating than other. And it is superfluous to say that the difference is made by culture, sensibility, a natural talent and lots of practice. Legitimate taste elites have always existed. Almost inevitably they have transformed them self into cliques – losing sight of their initial impulses – which in my opinion should be provoked, challenged, but only to create new ones which, quite probably, in turn...

All that remains for artists I to bang up against the system now and then, to try to stay inside it, to find attentive, possible partners for dialogue, to share, in a space of time, aims and interests, only to return each to his own voyage. It is not necessary, and perhaps not possible, for art to be democratic; it is sufficient for it to avoid being an art of the regime. Similarly, I don't believe that art is instructive or misinstructive, propaganda for anything other than itself. Art defends its privilege of freedom by any means necessary. I am led to believe that the “how”- and I don't just mean cold technique- is, today as yesterday, more important than the “what”.

The behavioural sign of Duchamp, his reduction to minimum terms of artistic intervention, made sense and had weight thanks to the choices of life made by the artist. He had gone through all the phases of doing, reaching the point of reduction of the procedure in favour of the idea.

Is it possible to begin working directly on the basis of these results? The question is how. In like manner, the dramatic gesture of Fontana- first holes, then sliced cuts in the canvas – was motivated by a long, scrupulous path of research that led the artist to this conclusion. In art everything is possible: what counts, evidently, is the result, but the result is subject to formal and intellectual rules.

My interpretation of details of the Neapolitan 1600s is a reminder of beauty lost and found, or at least frantically sought after: the irrational satisfaction this entails. The Neapolitan still lifes of the 17th century are, in many cases, an exemplary synthesis of the passionate, sanguinary manner of the artists of the Spanish area and the cold, rarefied, almost geometric approach of the Flemish-Germanic culture, and therefore – in a great leap – between two opposite ways of approaching life. My work, too, is an aesthetic synthesis of “warm” and “cool”, “cooked” and “raw” elements. I try to use to past without gratification: I don't make still life like those of the 17th century, nor do I rely on tradition. I simply borrow the wrapper to wrap my ideas and give them form. The wrapper itself becomes something else, it is transformed, it changes dimension, the projector further deforms it, the colour change. Filtered through the technical medium of photography, befuddled and electrified by the passage in a colour laser copier it returns to us de contextualized and disorienting. But what really brings it back to life is the act of returning to its initial stage of painting. Moreover, it is typical of artists to utilize assistants who replace them in certain phases of the procedure, and this is

an ulterior level of contamination. I might add that there are no substantial difference among my subjects, whether they are repeated often or seldom: the procedure and the idea are always the same. All possible images are "still lifes", whatever they represent; life itself, seen as an aesthetic phenomenon, is a complex and marvellous "still life" made with techniques and intentions unknown to us. I see painting as no more and no less than a practise, a daily exercise, a research method that allows my mind to be as present as possible, capable of working on ideas, of indicating differences.

In any case, I wouldn't underestimate the fact that artworks- and never before as explicitly as today – are, to a decreasing extent, the result of a single mind – although we cannot exclude the possibility of this happening even today. They are forms that go beyond the individual, concentrating the energy of multiple subjects to sustain a larger design. Again in these cases, what counts are the results rather than the premises.