

PRESENCE THROUGH ABSENCE

The painting research of Antonio Pauciulo

*To re-propose the portrait means to deny that
"end of the image" considered possible by some;
and it means to find again reality and myth,
rather than in the product created by man, still in man himself.
Nor do I think there is little point in seeking, as one of the main elements,
the revelation of being through the study of appearances.*

Ugo Attardi, 1969

The text by Attardi given in the epigraph announces the return of the portrait in painting as the return of figuration in contrast with the emergence, on the international scene, of informal research and as a privileged way to reach the Being through "appearances", thus realizing the mission of art in general. What one of the greatest Italian figurative artists of the twentieth century affirms is suggestive and important (also because it came from an artist who had disavowed one of his even interesting abstract experiences lived as a protagonist in the Forma 1 movement) because it expresses the tendency to privilege the rooting of art in the history and events of man rather than in the variegated and sometimes "lighthearted" use of objects produced by man or even in their simple "nomination".

Antonio Pauciulo, an artist of great temperament, whose painting is characterized by an insistent research on the "portrait", while he can ideally agree with some of Attardi's observations, then he moves profoundly away from them in the moment in which he claims that figuration is achieved in abstraction. It is possible also and especially in its absence. And this happens, according to him, precisely in the portrait, and especially, in that kind of portrait that is the self-portrait.

As is well known, the self-portrait is a genre that has constantly resurfaced in the history of Western art, especially since the sixteenth century. It brings together aspects of great interest, although not entirely unrelated to a certain ambiguity, resulting from the type of relationship that is established between the artist and the object of the work. In practice, the subject of the work here doubles up, becoming its object as well. There is a proverb that says that the true self-portrait is reached when the author resembles the work and not vice versa, as would seem natural. Oscar Wilde recounted in an insuperable way the truth and drama of this relationship, in which one no longer understands where reality lies, and therefore where truth lies.

In the self-portrait, the artist places himself at the centre of man's questions about man, by setting himself the task to define himself, or at least of becoming aware of himself, sometimes transposing this awareness of himself into the nature of his actions and even into the instruments, objects and environment of his action. This is the path that Antonio Pauciulo takes in the series of works called *Polyptych Mietshaus*, presented at the Otto Nagel Gallery in Berlin in 2005. The artist shows himself in them, he shows us his body in the "rental house" in which he lives and with which he identifies.

The artist in his self-portrait creates an image of himself that enters into dialogue with him. As Jean-Luc Nancy says, the self-portrait “does not resemble an original” (the artist himself), “rather it is itself the original of the self resemblance of a subject in general, but each time also of a singular subject: it is my portrait or my portraits and, only sometimes, can I teach myself about my being myself”⁽¹⁾. The identity of the portrait (self-portrait) is therefore all in the portrait itself or, as we will see in the specific case of Antonio Pauciulo, in the set of portraits of himself. In a constellation or series (which he will call by different names and eventually only by the term array) of portraits of himself, whose similarity is to be sought in themselves. In this superimposition of objective and subjective, the artifice gives new life to the subject. The artifice creates the subject.

After the series of canvases that make up the *Polyptych Mietshaus*, which in their multiplicity give us an image of the artist in that period, the artist will give life to other cycles of abstract compositions enclosed within shapes with human outlines. Taken together, they represent a series of re-examinations that the artist makes on himself and that, under the action of an inner impulse, find expression in compositions where the imagination can no longer be distinguished from reality. On the contrary, it is reality itself that shatters into images that imagination only collects ⁽²⁾.

At this point it is perhaps useful to open a parenthesis to specify that the process outlined above can be achieved in two different ways. The first has as objective and final outcome the representation of the subject according to the principle of mimesis, the substitution of the person with his image. In it the subject withdraws (in the double meaning of the verb) and the image remains. He withdraws from himself reproducing himself. In the second, the artist does not intend to offer the image of his image, but to represent the intimate truth of his person, “portraying” his feelings, his impulses, his soul, his own being himself, as Nancy says ⁽³⁾.

In both cases, what Baudelaire affirms when he speaks of the portrait is valid, and he considers it as “a dramatized biography”, which requires from the artist an “immense intelligence”. Each self-portrait is obviously a portrait, a portrait of himself, and in each portrait, according to Baudelaire, “the artist’s fidelity certainly needs to be great, but his divination must be equal. When I see a good portrait, I guess all the efforts of the artist, who first had to see that which was left to be seen, but then also guess what was hidden” ⁽⁴⁾.

I believe that this is the perspective and the spirit in which it is necessary to place oneself in order to identify the red thread that holds together the painting history of Antonio Pauciulo. In all these years he has done nothing but constantly looking within himself, to grasp the features of his inner face and to account for them faithfully, in a process that has translated into a process of growing and necessary abstraction. After the *Mietshaus* cycle, in which the artist represents himself through the mundane objects of his daily life, two other pictorial cycles can be identified that, in a crescendo of drama, offer the image of his inner life. The first, in 2004, is entitled *Inner Nude*. It is composed of fourteen oils on canvas (fourteen like the fourteen “stations” of the Way of the Cross) that describe in fourteen variants the human condition, playing exclusively on the color, differently articulated within shapes of man, that in the form clearly recall that of the crucifix. The cross, however, is often present as a compositional structure in the paintings of this artist. With nine other works in which this structure is broken into lumps of material, *Internal Nude* — an essential work to understand everything that comes next — was presented in 2004 at the Maison Heinrich Heine in Paris.

The second cycle is actually composed of three distinct cycles, but designated indistinctly with the title *array* and characterized by successive series of portraits, silhouettes of heads on compact backgrounds of different colors, within which free brush strokes or spatulate of color seem to obey different emotional and musical textures, almost to compose a long path of research. Array means series, network, but also matrix, exhibition. These various nuances, in the work of Antonio Pauciulo seem to be all plausibly present. The characteristic of the three series is the progressive abstraction and formal simplification, which leads to compositions of great, impressive, chromatic expressiveness. To appreciate this, one only has to look at the difference between the 2014 series and the 2017-2018 series.

These series present themselves as a different repetition of the identical each time. Like the faces of someone without a face. His face is the sum of all faces. Self-portrait of apparent everyone-portrait (allo-portraits). Self-portraits like pieces of an autobiography.

If in the Mietshaus the artist, obscured by the coincidence of himself and things, implicitly assumes their tone and character, in the following phases (*Internal nude* and *array*), characterized by knowledge, he becomes somehow alien to himself and the world and tells of his emigration towards the margins of existence, towards a territory in which he tries to find himself through all that his heart has endured.

The self-portrait, then, becomes an art of interiority and spirituality. And it is in his face, faceless, that the artist finds himself again. In the most intense search of mimesis, he destroys it. This, however, is by definition art in general and the basic ambiguity that it establishes between the real and the unreal, where the real ends up being what we say the unreal ⁽⁵⁾.

The inner self-portrait of the artist, as we have mentioned, is the image of an image. However, this is not the case. It's the image of something that happens the same moment it's produced. Which does not resemble the image of the one whose image it is. And yet it is not a misleading image. It is an image that makes the invisible dimension of the artist visible. It shows and hides. An image identical to itself. A fiction that is not a fiction.

The artist's image of himself detaches itself from its origin and emigrates towards the spectator, who is invited to go back (but only by way of saying) on the path taken by the artist, in a process that, as W. Benjamin sensed, cannot but be, in turn, creative.

The paintings of the array series never refer to the real person of the author, whom the author himself intends to re-present, but rather to the form of a relationship between the author and himself, which stands as truth. The referential identity of Pauciulo's self-portraits, therefore, is identified with the pictorial identity. The identity of the portrait is in the portrait itself. "The person in himself is in the picture" ⁽⁶⁾. In his self-portrait, the artist exposes himself as he is, inventing himself.

Perhaps these self-portraits must be considered in the light of what Nancy writes, as "the way in which the gaze returns to itself, not in the way of a reflection, but in that of a penetration in itself that makes visible something beyond its aspect: this very invisibility from which it looks, its macula, its blind spot - which makes of its art a desperate mission, a work that gropes on the dark abyss of the self or of the 'hypse' " ⁽⁷⁾.

In the inner self-portrait, therefore, the inner representation of oneself becomes the self. Representation is the invention of an inwardness that cannot be represented in itself, a very particular form of mimesis of an inimitable inner reality. The form then necessarily becomes allegory. In Antonio Pauciulo, the decisive element of this allegory is the colour and the laying out of the same. The revelation of oneself does not consist so much in removing the veil that covers one's inner life, but in the exposition of the veil itself.

In this process, we are faced with a great level of abstraction, in the sense of absence of obvious meanings, of which the artist himself seems to be unaware because he is moved by an impulse that is not declined.

In Antonio Pauciulo's painting, colour appears as a reality in itself, as something definitive rather than qualifying. The colour reaches a state of definitiveness in itself ⁽⁸⁾.

The process through which the artist abandons the intention to make recognizable a carnal face in order to let emerge the deep and impenetrable "Self" is, as we have said, a process of abstraction. De Kooning speaks of fleeting vision (glimpses). Abstraction here must be seen as the process that allows the artist to sink into himself and want to declare himself by denuding himself in a totality that mimesis would not allow. He lets himself be carried away by the rush without so many scruples or hindrances. It offers itself in all its complexity, building a presence through absence.

Jacques Derrida, in this regard, speaking of the interior self-portrait, makes an interesting use of the category of blindness ⁽⁹⁾. The artist - he says - paints without seeing. What he wants to communicate is a state of mind that guides his hand, blindly. The lecture becomes interpretation and, that is, in turn, a creation that leads us to feel something similar to the emotion that moved the hand of the artist "re-tracing" himself. It is as if it were the hand that moves on the canvas to see. But what does it see? A feeling. Seeing then coincides with sensing. The image is outlined by the effect of an "occult power".

The hand, for Derrida, more than describing, indicates, it ventures to indicate an invisible thing. It points to a path that leads, in groping, to the thing. The thing, however, in this case, is the artist himself, who moves like a blind man throughout this story.

If seeing blind is a grace and a miracle because, as we have said repeatedly, it means seeing what in itself remains veiled. It is a presence in absence. It is a learning in abstraction. Learning by trial and error contains a large margin of error; that is to say, by erring, which underlines the importance of the person who stands in front of the self-portrait. In fact, those who look from the outside, look carnally and do not see anything. Instead, those who can look at the invisible interior, will see. He is the visionary blind man. Saint Paul, struck on the road to Damascus, begins to see when he becomes blind. And his vision will be a tremendous one, that will expand from the past to the future revealing to him the sense of history. This was expressed in an extraordinary way by Caravaggio in *The Conversion of St. Paul* in the church of S. Maria del Popolo in Rome, so beloved by Pauciulo.

The painter, in these circumstances, has the merit of guiding the viewer to see what, without his indications, he would never have seen. In some way, the painter has set in motion a device that restores the viewer's sight. And they will see what was invisible to them before.

The series of *Internal Nude* and especially of *array* compose a complex of portraits - self-portraits, a sum of many that are always one. Of the diverse that are always the same, of the equal that arise from a multiplicity of emotions that are always different. Together they form a work that is the result of a poetic story of self that unfolds over time. These are fragments in which the "Self" lives. They are attempts to read the "footprints" that the exterior life leaves inside the artist, continuing to slip them out of his hands.

Each of his single paintings is made of signs of pure present. The deeper they penetrate, the more they become intelligible. But they are only themselves. Strong in their own strength. The colour that the artist applies, keeps the instant alive.

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NOTE

1. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The portrait and his gaze*, R. Cortina Ed., Milan 2002, pp. 48-49.
2. Giorgio Agamben, *Self-portrait in the studio*, Nottetempo, Rome 2017, p.10.
3. On this distinction, see: Jean-Luc Nancy, *The other portrait*, Castelvechi, Rome 2014, pp. 28ss.; Jacques Derrida, *Memories of the Blind. Self-portrait and other ruins*, Abscondita, Milan 2003 and 2015, passim; Charles Baudelaire, "The Portrait" in *Poems and Prose*, Mondadori, Milan 1984, pp. 859-865.
4. Charles Baudelaire, *The portrait*, cit., P.860.
5. On these aspects, see: Philippe Lacou-Labarthe, *The portrait of the artist in general*, The Melangolo, Genoa 2006.
6. Jean-Luc Nancy, *The portrait and his gaze*, cit., P.22.
7. Ibid., P.38.
8. Cf. Introduction by Michele Ranchetti to: Francesco Nappo, *Genre*, Quodlibet, Macerata 1996.
9. Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of Blind*, cit.