

Flirting with fate

Lucie Fontaine, Marco Antonini and Alessandro Roma

Lucie Fontaine: Dear Alessandro, I would like to start with the project we realized two years ago, in my exhibition space in via Conte Rosso, Milan. It was your first experiment in tridimensionality.

How did that influence your work and the exhibits you presented after our collaboration?

Alessandro Roma: That was a very useful experience: it made my practice more free. I tried to work on tridimensional forms while keeping a bidimensional vision, it was an important development.

After that, I tried to maintain a certain freedom in my practice and I believe that this proposition was partly a consequence of that exhibition. If I am not wrong, Marco should have seen that show – or, if you prefer, that adventure- too...

MA: I did. I was in Milan for an exhibition. I remember how somehow I did not “recognize” your work. Or maybe that was just the first time that I carefully observed it... the furniture you used as a “foundation” for your pieces was tangible, recognizable; to me, that was the most interesting aspect. Can you articulate on the idea of “bidimensional vision” you just introduced? Is that something you will say of your flat works as well?

AR: My approach towards thinking forms in tridimensional space was to consider them as on the surface of a white page, as if I was working on paper or canvas. This brought me to stretch bidimensional images into tridimensional forms. On the other hand, my works on paper lean on tridimensionality, expanding from the confined space of the sheet in multilayered surfaces.

LF: The idea of a white surface makes me think of a writer starting a new novel. What relationship do you see between your work and literature and, more in general, how would you describe the relationship between painting and literature?

AR: In recent years, literature has acquired a fundamental role in my work, because it allowed me to abstract myself from reality and utilize narrative as a reflection on what’s contemporary. I believe that there is a very strong connection between painting and literature, starting with the process; as you highlighted before, both start with a white space, whether the sheet or the computer screen or a white surface where a narrative or visual illusion can be brought to life. In my exhibition project for Scaramouche I will depart from a literary clue that allowed me to develop on a particular imagery. Actually, I wanted to ask Marco how important literature is in the work of an art critic.

MA: Literature is essential for me, also considering my relative lack of interest in “proper” criticism. My background is in underground music, in the world of fanzines and DIY productions... criticism only catches my attention when it deals with the immediate reality (my definition of “reality”, of course, is subject to seasonal shifts). As of now, I am working on a second imaginary book (after the first *Dust Jacket*, co-authored with Andrea Galvani and Isola and Norzi in 2009) and on an exhibition inspired by Natalia Ginzburg’s *Lessico Familiare*, one of my favourite books... Speaking of literature, I remember talking about Giulio Verne with you... as a child I was in love with Giulio Verne a *Fumetti* (1978) a graphic novel edition of some of Verne’s greatest stories, illustrated by Franco Caprioli. I wonder if you ever read it. Caprioli’s quasi-Baroque, style is technically impressive, with fine *tratteggio* and tones that seem layered over each other... a substance that’s almost independent from the drawing line. His caverns and underground scenarios remind me of the texture of some of your most recent works.

LF: Comics bring Illustration -another genre that I often think as in connection to your work- to mind. What do you think about it? I also think of your works as openings on endless patterns, coming to life as circumscribed territories. They are necessarily limited by the borders of the canvas, or by the

dimensions of a sculpture; another reason why it is sometimes hard to understand your work as bi- or tri-dimensional. What's your relationship to space in your paintings? Is it more a manipulation, invention, elimination... or what?

AR: I am not a lover of comics, I always found the joint use of written word and drawing un compelling; it limits my imagination. Illustration, on the other hand is a didactic way of intending image, constricted by certain rules. I think that the term "manipulation" well adapts to the process that I follow in the construction of my pictorial images. The fragmentation of pre-existing subjects that I paint and then "re-fragment" is used to create a certain distance from the first take on the subject. Therefore, the invention of a subject happens as I get involved in the different steps of the construction process. I would say that I look for the elimination of any didactic or illustrative quality in the subject. My work is grounded in the illusionistic quality of an open space in the painting's surface, striving for balance among the formal schizophrenia. There is also an external space of tension, delineated by the surface's perimeter, whereas the regularity of the work is interrupted by spillings. Probably this is all meant to allow the work to be perceived as not merely bi-dimensional.

MA: Words like "balance", "tension", "regularity", "spillings" seem to betray an understanding of the pictorial space as physical reality... a space of variables and values to be controlled and regulated. This vision has deep art-historical roots. What's your relationship with abstraction and, more specifically, with the generation of painters directly or indirectly inspired by Hans Hoffmann's teachings? How has the way we (and you) relate to an abstract image changed nowadays?

AR: In most cases I would agree with Francis Bacon's words, when he said that he hated Rothko's painting because his painting and most of all his colors depressed him.

LF: I don't know why but hearing you talk about Bacon makes me think that each of your pieces are born layer after layer, although with different times, depending on the area of the composition, like stalagmites in a cave. How do you deal with imagining the finished work, before realizing it? Do you follow drafts, do you have a mental image of what you want to achieve? Or is it rather a series of linked suggestions, a little bit like flirting with fate?

AR: The words "flirting with fate" seem perfect to define my working process. I leave a fair amount of space to chance, starting from a sometimes foggy idea that I tend to clarify through the various steps. Layering in my work does not just happen via accumulation, but also subtraction, it is the crossing of different work phases, each of which can make me change direction. This means trying to retain a certain control over the initial idea while leaving the door open to eventual changes.

MA: When do you consider a work "Finished"? I would also be curious to know if you assume your works to be permanent, final objects ... or if you ever thought of going back and tinker with them, retouching them or letting anyone else do that.

AR: I wouldn't know exactly, but there comes a time in which you think the work can be done, and the actual reasons can be many. Sometimes it is interesting to keep going, or stopping just a moment before that, to see what happens. This can sometimes lead the work to failure, then you would have to start from scratch; still, such movements are essential to try to get as close as possible to whatever you wanted to achieve. I never thought to retouch my works, neither I would let others do that. Once they are done, I prefer to forget about them!