

## ***TRAUMA, Forays into contemporary painting***

### ***Notes for a reflection***

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*Painting relates to both art and life*

*Neither can be made.*

*I try to act in that gap between the two.*

Robert Rauschenberg, 1964

*The palette is the poiesis:*

*the doing that dissolves/separates,  
that only undoing/analyzing can  
manifest,*

*bring to presence. Representing is  
transforming/dissolving.*

Massimo Cacciari. *Tribute to  
Anselm Kiefer, 1997*

### **About "Bild" as Bildung: the meaning of the project and its roots in history**

A twofold quotation introduces this essay, emphasizing the complexity of the theme and the exhibition course, the wealth of reflections deriving from the works on show, the result of the experiments of nine international mid-career and new generation artists, many of whom shown for the first time by the gallery from the viewpoint of their pictorial research: Giuseppe Adamo, Stijn Ank, Steven Cox, Francesco De Prezzo, Maurizio Donzelli, Serena Fineschi, Silvia Infranco, Anne Laure Sacriste, Roy Thurston.

The statement by Robert Rauschenberg – one of the inventors of the new American painting - from New Dada to Pop Art -, and Massimo Cacciari's analysis of painting as an alchemical process by Anselm Kiefer, founder of the new German avant-garde between the 1970s and 80s', contain the origin, and in a way the interpretative key to *TRAUMA. Forays into contemporary painting*.

Sharing the attempt to renew from within, without rejecting them, the foundations of the pictorial genre in its traditional acceptance - relationship between drawing and color, project and process, comparison between surface and depth of field of vision, relation between vision and layering of materials, dialogue between the two dimensions of the work and the three dimensions of space – the nine artists gathered today in an exhibition offer a visual and conceptual direction in contemporary painting, joining in the recent debate and challenging its critical parameters and historical categories: the ones presented for the first time by Marignana Arte, that is, Stijn Ank, Steven Cox, Francesco De Prezzo and Anne-Laure Sacriste; the others have already been studied on other exhibition occasions; they all display a freedom of expression either through traditional materials, or adopting new media. They share the determination to reinterpret the pictorial gesture, taking apart the interpretative parameters to refashion their modalities and methods, offering results endowed with linguistic freshness and iconic significance.

Hence the decision to ask the nine artists three crucial questions about painting:

- ***Painting as method or experiment?***
- ***Painting as a definitely accomplished research or a temporarily undefined enquiry?***
- ***Painting as a narrative or a visual trauma?***

The reflections these questions set off are scattered through the text, proving the liveliness of this language, even today: starting with the lapidary reply of young Giuseppe Adamo, who declares: ***“Painting is an experiment that requires method”*** and the passionate one by Serena Fineschi, who in an equally succinct way says: ***“Painting as the definitely accomplished research of a temporarily undefined enquiry”***; Anne Laura Sacristé appears to answer her: ***“You need to be blind to see.”***

These assumptions inevitably led to our quotations by Robert Rauschenberg and on Anselm Kiefer.

The former, the prophet of American Pop Art, showed throughout his research how more facts occur in painting than life holds in store. The experience of painting, as much in whoever does it as in who observes its outcome, has a force of attraction while representing an ever-shifting mystery: starting with *White Paintings*, made between 1951 and 1953, where Rauschenberg used a canvas straight out of the shop for painters, yet to be primed for receiving colors – a painting to paint. An authentic zero degree of painting that can thus contain all that artists can – again – invent: also, precisely, as the absence of any content and even any will to create.

The spiritual son of this enquiry, on the one hand, is young Francesco De Prezzo, when he thus describes his pictorial process: ***“[...] painting means going through two different stages, the first ‘construction of the image’ in which with a painting from life I faithfully reproduce visions/glimpses of the space in which I actually work; at a second stage instead, more instinctive, I am covering the precious pictorial work with a uniform layer of enamel. This monochrome painting will thus ‘plug’ and ‘cleanse’ the original image, ideally making the surface of the canvas an autonomous field [...]”***

Serena Fineschi also, when she claims that painting is ***“matter and memory, intelligence and geography of the body”***, highlights this pictorial process in which the heart of the enquiry is life experienced through painting: ***“Body, matter and memory are the hub of the action and the site of physical confrontation”***; an experience that merges and layers also in Silvia Infranco’s creative process: her Project Room, curated by Marina Dacci, shows the sensitivity of an artist for whom painting is ***“a visual plot that evokes and rediscovers the narrative underlying it.”***

In the above-mentioned artists there is a straining towards something submerged: painting as the knowing blanket protecting the image triggered by experience, it nurtures and nurses its memory: hence also the poetics of Stijn Ank, who subjects himself to a process of forgetfulness and inexperience to be able to give birth to a sensorial and empirically shifting painting:

***“[...] In my own work, to discover new ‘origins’, I practice forgetting what I know. I try to let ‘meaning’ fade away. I try to enter a world of ‘what I don’t know’ and what ‘I haven’t experienced’. My tools here are my senses. And with these senses, for example sight, I learn that the eye sense is not only there ‘for seeing’ and then objectify. It is there ‘to sense with the eye’. And this sensing with the eye is in touch with all our other senses. It is in touch with our brain, with our experiences. It is in touch with ‘the other’, with ‘the context’. So ‘seeing’, for example the color red, is not the same as ‘sensing’ the color red. Red is not only red (that you know), but maybe is also happy, painful, warm, dead, life (and many other things you don’t know or haven’t yet experienced) [...]”***

Memory, as a viaticum and gift that painting brings with it, is what connects these artists and also leads us back to our second ‘tutelary deity’, Anselm Kiefer: instigator of a pictorial revolution performed with several

of his companions in research, from Gerhard Richter to Georg Baselitz, and driven by an ethical intent as well as a commitment to recover history and redeem German thought, from its Humanist origins to the great 20<sup>th</sup> century, They were the *Neue Wilden*, the New Savages: they painted with their fingers, reversing the visual perspective from above and below (Baselitz), they worked with *blurring* and *fading*, to reflect on the parameters of obsolescence and visual anamnesis, even proposing a new pictorial alphabet (Richter), relentlessly experimenting with the pictorial medium in all directions. In retrieving the value of figuration they transmuted it into a textural magma, in an alchemical transformation of materials and compositional methods, where the artist is once again a prophet able to show his people the spiritual path (Kiefer). For the intensity of his enquiry Maurizio Donzelli's work is close to them, his works being, one after another: ***“a piece on a straight line in which the preceding and future images can be inserted [...the result of] a true love for the world's infinite capacity to propose forms and the infinite human capacity to grasp and perceive them, the whole seasoned with my temporary and biographical presence at a given point in time”***.

So *TRAUMA* appears in those two exceptional moments in history on which our reflection should still dwell today; it develops through the research of nine artists who are bravely bringing about a profound rebirth of painting: a language like a Karstic river has flowed since the 1970s to the present under the layers of conceptual art and in the gullies of performance, among virtual roots and digital abysses, nurtured in new generations of artists who rediscover the power of painting, of working on a two-dimensional frame to weave and interlace spaces of imagination, reflection, declaration, rebellion, claim.

Aware of the failures of the Western world's categories of analysis and storytelling, owed either to the collision with the digital and the virtual or the resulting disaggregation of the social, economic and cultural criteria of the new Millennium, the nine artists involved in *TRAUMA* **must** paint because they believe that painting is still a capacity of autonomous creation of *Bild* (image, picture) required less to tell reality but represent it, in a didactic, ethical as well as visual and esthetic direction. A *Bildung* (training, education) addressed to the viewer, thereby in turn involved in a process of imagination and poetic interpretation – poietic, making – of things and the world: the experience of seeing that becomes a source of knowledge.

*“Painting is a visual trauma for both maker and viewer,”* Steven Cox wrote.

A process that has to be traumatic in the broadest sense of the word: because when eye meets image the effect is surprise, conflict, a corps à corps between one's own sensibility and someone else's: “[...] *vague fragments of narrative* – Giuseppe Adamo wrote – *throb under the membrane of the visible, awaiting to be perceived first of all by me myself.*”

A trauma that is expressed in a loss of one's own limits, yet at the same time a retrieval of one's own capacity to go beyond, in an imaginary, transcendental, potentially boundless direction: an extreme act leading Fineschi to claim: *“painting as dedication. Fleshly extension wherein the formal interlacing can be relaxed and trust in new personal and social reflections and experiences.”*

Hence also the subtle allusion to the German verb *träumen*-to dream that has the same root as trauma: dream of another language, different, able to weave a new path of vision and formation, it is not easy, it is complicated, it is traumatic.

**- About the temporary, the transitory, and the courage to paint. The value of the project and the recent critical debate**

While the 1990s, up to the new Millennium, extended the field of historical-critical reflection as well as the market's interest as regards painting, claiming on the one hand the importance of recent historic research, mostly of the *Post-War period* and the radical sphere, monochrome and spatialist, from Lucio Fontana to the *Monochrome Malerei*; on the other hand, verifying the influence of these languages in a neo-abstract and experimental direction aimed above all at exploring the relation-clash between surface and support and the dynamics of installations with all the versions derived from them, with the new millennium a series of concomitant factors, connected with the international political and economic, social and cultural context –

from the Twin Towers catastrophe in 2001, to the economic crisis of 2008-2009, the war between religious and cultural perspectives of West and East – led to renew the pictorial enquiry: as if it might somehow once again provide solutions, interpreting the dreadful decline of values and also interpretive models that up to then had resisted postmodern blows and shocks. Then a painting without models arose, even increasingly free of a preordained method, that was able to produce new and powerful linguistic solutions, still in the midst of definition and transformation: an eclectic painting, temporary, apparently selfless, changing, unstable. It was thus defined recently, as of the essay *Provisional Painting* by Raphael Rubenstein published in *Art in America* in May 2009 and translated in Italian in *Flash Art* by Luca Bertolo, for the show *La figurazione inevitabile. Una storia della pittura* (Inevitable Figuration. A History of Painting) curated by Marco Bazzini and Davide Feri, and held several years later at the Centro Pecci in Prato, in March of 2013, a harbinger of a renewed interest in painting itself, also backed by the article *Eppur esiste. Storia Rapida della pittura italiana* (And Yet it Exists. A Quick History of Italian Painting) by Maria Chiara Valacchi published in *Flash Art 308* in February in the same 2013.

Such contributions - exhibitions and reviews -, on the one hand underscored the importance of not defining a precise pictorial direction, but of welcoming the indeterminateness and ongoing transformation of this language, not at all rejected by present-day artists but instead still essential; on the other hand, they have claimed through a series of examples drawn from the modernist period that ontologically painting has always contained these aspects of instability, provisionality, incompleteness, eclecticism that make it not at all in its death throes today but constantly responding to the shifting, anxious, and unstable scene of the present.

Here I shall quote Rubenstein's comment in the conceptual passage that interests us for our brief reflection: "[...] Why would an artist demur at the prospect of a finished work, court self-sabotaging strategies, sign his or her name to a painting that looks, from some perspectives, like an utter failure? It might have something to do with a foundational skepticism that runs through the history of modern art: we see it in Cézanne's infinite, agonized adjustments of Mont St. Victoire, in Dada's noisy denunciations (typified by Picabia's blasphemous *Portrait of Cézanne*), in Giacometti's endless obliterations and restartings of his painted portraits, in Sigmar Polke's gloriously dumb compositions of the 1960s. Something similar can be found in other art forms, in Paul Valéry's insistence that a poem is "never finished, only abandoned," in Artaud's call for "no more masterpieces," and in punk's knowing embrace of the amateurish and fucked-up. The history of modernism is full of strategies of refusal and acts of negation. [...] I take such work to be, in part, a struggle with a medium that can seem too invested in permanence and virtuosity, in carefully planned-out compositions and layered meanings, in artistic authority and creative strength, in all the qualities that make the fine arts "fine." As employed by younger artists, provisionality may also be an attempt to spurn the blandishments of the art market—what seemed, until only yesterday, an insatiable appetite for smart, stylish, immaculately executed canvases, paintings that left no doubt as to the artist's technical competence, refined sensibility and solid work ethic".

The artists involved in the present exhibition project replied significantly when I asked if painting is a definitively finished research or a provisionally undefined enquiry.

Representing a rigorous analytical work on painting, the American artist Roy Thurston made this statement: "Part of my interest in painting is that I think of it as an important ancient cultural pursuit that is still very much alive today. In this way it is an established method that has a multitude of facets. This also implies, and I believe this is true, that painting has some kind of core that is accessible to people everywhere. With this observation as a starting point, I have for many years tried to make the next painting something that I can't quite visualize in the present painting. This could be interpreted as an experiment or as an investigation, but of course it must appear complete when it's finished, so it's not really experimental. It might as well be thought of as not an experiment, but as a failure to fully imagine, so it has to be continuously attempted. Every once in a while there is a big change in the work as a number of ideas converge. And so one painting leads to the next".

Another significant reflection is the one by the Scottish artist Steven Cox when he claims, he also linking the first two questions in his reply:

*“Creating meaning is extremely close to feeling. It's this feeling that creates meaning. I am not talking about making a painting, or making a sculpture, etc. — in other words: I don't mean making an object, but ways to capture the tangible experience of an ‘origin’ (which could be space, light, color...) that all the ‘meanings’ loaded onto it have made us forget we are aware of its essence.*

*[...] Each ‘outcome’ in a work I experience as a link in an ever expanding process of birth and growth. I feel that ‘what’ is born (and thus: ‘what’ grows) is always ‘provisional’ and ‘indefinite’. It's that feeling that keeps my work alive”.*

- **Against every definition, choice, and destiny of painting: TRAUMA**

These thoughts led to the choice of the nine artists proposed today: they went through a lengthy process of construction and redefinition of the pictorial field, confronting ontologically the issues of margin and center, presence and forming of the image, full and empty in the visual background, driven by the belief in the formative value of the work of art as the place of awareness.

Creators of a fecund tension between a figurative memory and an abstract connotation that at the same time is potentially polymorphic: Maurizio Donzelli also begins the visit chronologically, with new works that in the resining of the surfaces and total deflagration of the abstract-lyrical image forcefully elucidate the history of painting towards autonomy and an elevated poetics, free of every conditioning: *“understanding everything rationally, conclusively is an illusion and above all a pedant literalization giving the illusion of being able to rule the world in virtue also of the ‘pact’ we established through the suspension criteria referred to scientific progress: what we do not know today we shall surely know tomorrow. Yet we should remember that each narrative remains a temporary conclusion, it depends on how much we are prepared to be content with such a provisional situation.”*

Conversely Roy Thurston, who together with Donzelli represents the first generation explored in the show, analyzes the relation between surface and support, reinterpreting the direction of the conceptual enquiry of painting, in works steeped in a totemic and highly iconic intensity: *“I think the impulse to paint, or for fine art in general, can be split into two separate categories, narrative or constructivist. [...The constructivist category] in my practice is artwork that is essentially visual, abstract, tactile, theoretical, and relies on the experience of the artwork”.*

A response to these two directions comes from the artists belonging to the new generations that follow in the exhibition: from Giuseppe Adamo, who in choosing pure painting visually layers waves of color, tone on tone, evoking sea drifts and earth crevices, telluric landscapes in becoming: *“You grope about in the dark grasping objects of uncertain identity, handling them to guess their form”*; Silvia Infranco answers him, as in the layering of materials, organic or not she retrieves the alchemical process of painting, in memory-laden and secret works, finding *“interesting the inspirations that arise during the stages of provisionality.”*

Serena Fineschi belongs to a more conceptual vein, pursuing a careful enquiry that in repeating the pictorial gesture samples and critically reinterprets the color plates of the great history of art.

The works of Stijn Ank are strung between pictorial and architectural dimensions, making him in this sense the interpreter of a version of the experimental fresco.

*"[...] White plaster (the basic starting material in my work) is something I still don't know. It can be powdery, liquid and solid, ... It acts but it also reacts. It becomes and un-becomes 'some-thing' when it's being poured in a mold that is assembled with meaningless pieces of material. The plaster, when still in a liquid state, I mix with pigments of all kinds and colors. In this mold some-thing happens that, when the mold is opened, I often don't understand and that I like to share, because I feel that it makes sense [...] As people around me try to analyze what exactly happened and how they can define the work, many words with meaning appear. Recently the word 'fresco' appeared in order to describe the flat works where the plaster and pigments appear in a work that is mostly surface. Those frescoes hang on a wall they say, so they're also close to painting.*

*For me those frescoes don't hang on the wall, but they're in front of the wall. They're in a certain di-stance of the space and in a certain di-stance of the beholder. So perhaps they are still closer to sculpture than painting? Or can we perhaps speak about an intern-sculpture? Maybe also this word says more about what a 'fresco' really is?"*

Instead Steven Cox, in color layering, works between evaporation and surfacing of the image: *"Painting is an on-going experiment, for ideas come first and the technical processes of realizing such ideas are second. Paintings that are essentially abstract can only be actualized by investigating and examining the physical possibilities of paint. Only by using the most conceptually accurate techniques and processes can we obtain first-hand knowledge of experimenting with paint and pushing the boundaries of paint's inherent materiality [...]"*.

In the act of concealing the subjects of his paintings from their figurative origins or dissolving them in an anxious monochrome approach, Francesco De Prezzo strives towards a radical synthesis in painting. Anne Laure Sacriste, whose painting is strung between narration and emotion, the scenario of an accurate, highly delicate enquiry, asks the viewer for an attentive enquiry, responding in an equally traumatic way – meaning new and suggestive – to the works on exhibit: *"painting as a way of perceiving, transforming and transcending whatever materiality with the idea of beauty."*

The challenge uniting them is introspective even before being visual: perceptive experience of alterity, immersed worlds, kaleidoscope of images and suspended figures, born of this inventive passion that also emerges from shadow, from isolation, from the margin that gnaws at the center and reaches it. A necessary painting, arising from a constant and extenuated ploughing, a patient cultivating, going back in time, repeating and focusing the object in the quest for preeminent figures that always appear elusive.

We are still in need of this *"roaming urged by curiosity and aware that it is not what we find that truly matters, but what matters is the path we follow while seeking,"* as Maurizio Donzelli claimed.

