

The Voice of the Painting

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I look at the barely defined painting by Philippe Pastor and I admire the energy he shows when he throws himself, body and soul, into the convolutions of his expressivity: it is a painting that does not rest within itself, it has a significant shape, it bears the signs of a creative activity that diffuses as much energy as it accumulates, along with the messages that life itself is capable of transmitting.

Pastor is original in that he devotes himself wholly to the passionate nature of things and people, which encourages him to express himself directly without any other mediation. He is not at all “conceptual”: there is no project, no aesthetic code, no intellectual propaedeuticity controlling the emotion that is represented.

It is more the bodily event of the manual nature that performs the show which is the image defined by a lucid eye absorbing the essential values of shape and colour.

The action-gesture becomes emotionally natural once the image is formed. One could almost imagine it as the stylistic echo of American abstract expressionism. But this is only partly true. The theoretic and abstract procedure of action-painting (derived from dada-surrealism) does not suggest models... Pastor is among those who evolve in the visual territory of the most painful human testimony, through desolation and alienation, with a touch of comedy but still terrifying.

The closest aesthetic approach to Philippe Pastor’s seems - to my mind – to be Jean Dubuffet’s singular experience, with his captivating paintings that are bizarrely vital and gnomic. Whether one considers his wall graffiti, his pathological, infantile or other types of painting, Dubuffet’s surprising quest for shapes always starts with the condition of mankind rather than with abstract pictorial values.

I am thinking of certain tough characters who are openly infantile, scribbled and messy, with dense colours spattered with sand: what is the “humane” touch that cries out and is expressed through these dramatic images, both by Dubuffet and by Pastor? And where is the humane participation in the drawing achieved by a spontaneous gesture imprinted on the chromatic matter in a visual semblance of “false incompetence”? The geography of the body, spatial ambiguity, the expressive power of the various “assemblies”: as in the “women’s bodies” series by Dubuffet; each visual type and each series drawn by Pastor is linked to the image preceding it and at the same time it confirms its irreducible individuality.

There is always something new and at the same time very old in the visions shaped by Philippe Pastor. He leans towards the “origin” and hence the “primitive” or the “archaic” if one prefers. But in his expression, one finds no habits or mannerisms, or even artifice.

His intention is not to seek out visual shapes worked out theoretically, or exotic suggestions that form a whole with his most intimate psychic dimension. Quite the opposite, he is seeking to express the “primitive” side of himself and of all mankind, and to make it visible in its most complex and self-sufficient expression.

And so, far from the surrealist taste, Pastor makes painting a direct means of creative participation, without literary mediation. He screams, sings, despairs and turns to a blank sheet of paper upon which he imprints the calibrated sign of a visual emotion, a synthesis of words and looks, the immediate shape like the echo of an audible sound.

The drama he describes is psycho-visual and he intends to oppose it to all forms of sweetening and artifice: a “raw” response that emphasises its stylistic originality and rejects all forms of mannerism.

Thus, this artist has created his cosmology inhabited by fragments of “human drama”, comments inscribed like graffiti, where the misery of passions comes to the fore with a burlesque and cartoon-like effect. Totally different and almost the antagonist of everything which, in the art world, is liable to attenuate the emotional impact of a message, Philippe Pastor confirms his neo-expressionist tendency almost by making a parody of the effect of psychotic art (one again sees the resemblance with Dubuffet) within a virtually obsessive narration.

Daily life undergoes a deformation which stands out like a parallel universe of fantasy “puns”. Pastor devotes himself to art on the borderline between caricature, protestation, denunciation and a frenzy that exalts and despairs.

Several years ago, when I had the opportunity to observe his works in his painting studio, I rapidly noted my first impression which reminded me of the poet Giuseppe Ungaretti.

Pastor’s works were fragments of a vision, just like Ungaretti’s poems were telegraphic synthetic expressions (« ...Si sta come d’autunno/sugli alberi le foglie... » It looks like Autumn / on the trees the leaves...). And in paraphrasing the Italian poet, I quoted the “joy of the shipwrecked” in relation to the spattered papers produced directly by Philippe, a modern “desdichado” (unfortunate) who describes his own disenchantment in a calibrated mixture of lyricism and aggression.

Many gesture-actions, burns, paper trimmings, eyeballs drawn out in lumps of plastic and chromatic matter, untangle Philippe’s biomorphous paintings that recount the emblems of a daily existence in a dramatic series raised to the level of parables: warriors, “bitches”, bulls, small monsters, loving couples, disillusioned souls... It is the same Pastor who underlines the nucleus of his inspiration: “street life, people, misfortune, despair, beauty, communication problems, anything we can’t say out loud but we think so strongly and silently...”

One’s own experiences combined with a painting suggest the idea of a frame-action which applies to oneself and the expression of a higher cycle or representations: this different repetition consists of Pastor’s stylistic secret which combines – in brush strokes – painting and life in an exaltation of behaviour (“performance”) which aims to obtain a formal result and does not waste itself on pure and simple ephemeral gesture.

The hand, the elbow and the roller soaked in colours, sand and ink, take turns in building these works... and we see cartoon-like signs revealing the silhouettes of pure and stereotyped female characters, so anchored in their characteristic sensitivity that it is enough to see the circular sign of an eccentric hairstyle, the dazzle of a piece of jewellery, the swing of a step barely suggested by the fringe on a skirt.

And when it is not a woman entrenched in her role in view of her commercial activity, a sexual figure and a fetish of the contemporary imagination, then masculine characters appear, all represented by the neurotic symptoms of money and power.

« VOUS REGARDEZ ET VOUS NE POUVEZ MÊME PLUS VOUS RECONNAITRE TELLEMENT VOUS ÊTES BEAUX » (“You are looking and you don’t even recognize yourself you’re so handsome”), this is how a quote surrounds a symbolic bull’s head which, in Pastor’s psychosomatic fantasy, summarises the grotesque traits of masculinity, considered as pseudo-prestigious emblems (physical violence, sexual vigour, riches, military and political authority, etc.)

« TOUT CE QUI EST MAL C’EST BON... ALORS? » (“Everything that is bad is good...so?”) says another one of Philippe’s bull-headed characters: and we can understand the extent to which the quote is not an additional element but complements the finite character of the image. The quote is not a comment but an intrinsic part of the character presented.

The same applies to the ironic parable of modern man’s “great illusions” which change the characters represented into a provocation on a black and yellow background: « DEPUIS DEUX CENTS ANS VOUS PRENEZ DES BILLETS POUR LES REVOLUTIONS.VOUS SEREZ MÊME TENTÉS D’Y APPORTER VOTRE PETIT PANIER » (“For two hundred years you’ve been buying tickets for revolutions and you might even be tempted to take along a picnic”).

Pastor's figurative narration is like a long story that emphasises – in an almost obsessional manner – the painful moral nonsense of a collective existence marked by the automatisms of behaviour. He describes his fantasies in a visual wrestling match that continually emits signals in the darkness of time, as if they were “bright emergency rockets” as well as a modulated expression of hopeless compassion.

We know that Pastor chose Léo Ferré (“what became of my friends”) as his spiritual and moral guide. And his visual models are similar to the spirit of the author-composer-performer poet with an occasional intense expression. The cries, the smiles, the ecstasy and the dazed look are all the variables of the soul in its constant quest for the existential notion of real life, way beyond the stereotypes of a conventional, false and brutal society.

With his liquefied pigments, his straightforward matter, the contrasted action of water and fire, Pastor achieves the miracle of bringing to life a constantly changing imaginary world, lending rhythm to the unhappy vision of the contemporary world.

It is a strange and sad vision of self-destruction against which the artist introduces the sole antidote, the mirror of his bitter painted carnival, in which vice and habit are reflected along with artificial morals, lies and curses invented by men, which nevertheless oppress them and deform them more and more by erasing their identity.

In this mess of general self-destruction (where there is nevertheless room for genuine explosions of vitality and love), Philippe Pastor also introduces pain by means of the decline of the natural element. And in this respect, his pictorial intervention on tall, burned out tree trunks may be surprising, it makes for a sort of petrified forest of sculptures he calls “Burned Trees” and which symbolise the vitality of nature, violated by human intervention (especially the violation of Provencal woods around the Bay of Saint-Tropez), which is nevertheless compensated by the artistic metamorphosis into a colour-space solution.

Mankind's tendency to self-destruction, seen as the inherent truth of the ever-increasing speed of the production-consumption cycle, appears to be the artist's favourite target and that of his almost maniacal, insistent visual operation.

His cry of warning, of protest and of over-human pain is also a sincere live song; indeed, he does not lose faith in the types of life and relations that are still possible between men, if only they would find the courage to say out loud « ... what we think so strongly and silently...”.

This is exactly what Philippe PASTOR intends to do through his ardent and exciting work as an artist.