

KANON I-II

Andrea Mariconti is a man on a quest, an artist ever on the lookout, a person who is moved and moves through the world, through the history of the human race, through the geology of the earth, in the anthropized environment and within his own soul. He is a man who embarks on a journey both physical and internal, sharing findings and discoveries both small and great through his artwork. He is a “being-in-motion” (indeed, his status as “pilgrim in the world” is one that marks him ontologically) who invites us all to follow on the quest for self-knowledge, for knowledge of the other: the quest for meaning. He sets forth on this quest from his particular vantage point as a thoughtful, patient and meticulous artist, a master of multiple painting techniques, an attentive observer and tireless experimenter, a man capable of truly daring artistic principles and painting actions, yet always with such good measure as to make the brilliant seem natural. Why this title, “Kanon”? Canon is somewhat of an obsolete word, not to say a word that has been overtly rejected by modernity. It refers to the quest for order, the right order: that order proper to the nature of things—those things surrounding us and their relationships with one another—relationships which in their turn involve us. Relation, proportion, order: that’s what is meant by canon. These aren’t characteristics that can be forced on reality from abstractions of the human mind according to our likes, whims or ideologies, but they must be sought after under the guidance of human reason within reality itself in order to attain a better understanding of ourselves and of the world. When Le Corbusier developed his Modulor system, he tried to find a pattern of numbers based off of the average measurements of the human body. He found it. From there he drew the principles of proportion which he used for his buildings, and a representation of the so-called Modulor was erected at the entrance to the Unité de Habitation... a building which the inhabitants of Marseilles took to referring to as the maison de fada, i.e., the Crackpot’s House. Where did he go wrong? Not in his intentions assuredly, but rather due to a typically functionalist and reductionist anthropology that characterized his thought. Le Corbusier was convinced that by basing himself on the average measurements of man’s body he would be able to meet all his needs. Though he made reference to the Greek canons and Leonardo Da Vinci’s Vitruvian man, his proposal was radically different and mistaken. This is easily deduced from the figure of the modulor itself: a muscular stick-man with one deformed and disproportionate arm, raised in the air above him. Leonardo had sketched out a handsome man of noble features, with a proud and confident look on his face. Not only that, his man is drawn within a circumference and a square. The circle and square represent respectively heaven (Empyrean heaven) and the world (the Cosmos). Here are two perfect forms whose surfaces, though comparable, are never perfectly equal (the famous problem of the square of the circle, which still remains unresolved). For Leonardo, man is the middle term of proportion between the two figures and the two dimensions here represented. This means that man, set in that place which corresponds to him by nature, is capable of measuring the immeasurable, of relating with that which is completely “other”. The square of the circle is man himself. In the case of Andrea Mariconti, the quest for the “canon” is not reduced to the discovery of special numbers and mathematical proportions, nor does it end there. Certainly some of his works (such as Ambarvalia) display geometrical folds and cuts that follow precise proportions. Others portray surface layers (thick drippings of pure white titanium, creating a geometrical effect in the foreground that gives a dynamic dimension and special depth to the individual represented in the work) characterized by a series of well-ordered and numerologically significant signs, or even decorated with ancient musical scores. But does the artist stop here? Does it all just boil down to a mere graphics game? Here music can come to our aid. From antiquity music has been considered the mathematical art par excellence, and yet it cannot be reduced to the mathematical equations behind it, not even after discovering that these equations correspond to the physical proportions found in the cochlea of our ear. It is the soul that creates art, that searches for meaning, and that moves minds and hearts in unison, instilling itself in the work of art. This is why the true work of art arrives straight to the heart: because it proceeds from the soul, contains the soul and communicates to the soul. The “canon” sought by Andrea is not, therefore, a mathematical proportion, but the quest for the right

relation between us and that which surrounds us. If this is the subject matter of his work, then the question regarding individual representation in his figurative painting is no longer of great import, since the individual subjects are not ends in themselves, but rather pretexts for this endeavor and witnesses of the relations discovered. This fact is particularly evident in the ten works of *Kanon I Habitat Mouseion*, in which he finds it necessary to ask himself what sense a museum has in our modern day, what type of rapport can be built today between a work of art on exhibition and its visitor, and does a museum still have something new to say... The answer that follows from this project is yes, provided the roles of museum, work of art, and artist are changed. Andrea Mariconti approaches the problem by making a museum the subject matter of his work: a museum that becomes a subject matter to be viewed, an internal landscape populated by works of art and people. Its effect is the same experienced in his landscapes where you can breathe the humid air passing over the rugged Irish cliffs, the morning mist that struggles to clear amid the silent trunks of a dark wood, the stifling fog that lingers over the long-harvested fields, or the cold wind blowing against the cracked face of a huge Andean glacier. Here spatial atmosphere is more intimate, and yet it remains central to the whole work. It works as a centripetal force that holds the ancient artefact and its visitor both here depicted in a dynamic equilibrium. The visitor sometimes appears as no more than a blurry prototype and at other times is known to be present only by the shadow he or she casts on the work exhibited in the museum. There is a constant interplay between the relationships within the individual work of the artist, the original work therein depicted and the beholder depicted before it. The paintings are characterized by structural and compositional balance as well as balance in the human sense, for the observer and work depicted here find themselves reciprocally complemented. They provide each other with perfection and meaning. Take for example the beautiful exchange that takes place between Guido Reni's *St. Joseph* and its observer, or the meaningful relationship established between Bernardino Luini's *Madonna del Latte* and the woman wearing a burqa who gazes upon it. There is also spatial balance: the spacious rooms of the museum find their meaning in the presence of both protagonists, as for example in the room that houses the *Via Crucis Bianca* of Lucio Fontana. Thus the museum ceases to be a "dead box", a mute, sealed and self-referential container, or a deaf showcase unaware of its contents since they have been uprooted and torn from the context they were made for and where they once had life. Here the museum is once again a temple to the Muses. An internal landscape becomes an interior landscape. Its protagonists are very much alive, namely the works of art themselves and the men and women that observe them: passing alongside them, studying them closely or ignoring them completely. What type of dialogue might be taking place between the *Magdalene* in Hayez' *Crucifixion* and the girl bearing a tribal tattoo? What type of rapport might there be between the dramatic wooden *Crucifix* from the 14th century and the invisible visitor?

So, if subjects can be a means to investigating the relationships that pervade the cosmos (both macro and micro), than anything can be a means and anything can be a subject, such as the painting material for example. From the 1900s up till now art has used a little bit of everything. At a quick glance it might seem that Andrea's research regarding the materials he uses is simply a "trick" to hide the fact that, in the end, his paintings follow the traditional style (we'll speak further on of his attitude towards Tradition). It would simply be a touch of contemporaneity to justify his existence as an artist today or a stratagem to distinguish himself in some way from others. But if we recall what was said as regards the canon, then we see that there is a close and indispensable connection between subject matter and the materials applied, resulting from a calm and yet unrelenting coherence. The artwork of Andrea is an experience of nature, for the artist's reason enables the natural elements which he chooses, respectfully uses and combines, to speak with greater clarity and frankness. Thus the material used is no longer simply the instrument of expression, but in its own turn it becomes part of the content of that expression, yet without confusing the identity of signifier, medium and signified, as it happens even in the most lyric informale artworks. Thus the scenes of Lombard fields (*Ecumen-Keramos*) or of the distant geysers (*Keramos calkos*) are made with real soil and ashes that have been patiently prepared and selected according to their consistence, color properties and origin (when possible they're taken from the same place depicted

in the work). In some of his most recent works the color is due to an oxidation of the copper leaf; a process that takes place in the making of the work. The oil often used for the depicting of human persons is old engine oil, which in its turn comes from petroleum (and hence from the heart of the earth) and from the work of man. What was once scrap material becomes material that has survived and gives witness: to the indissoluble bond between earth and man, to man's relationship with machinery, and to the existence of contemporary man. Not only that, but these materials become a χρίσμα, (a chrism) namely characteristic signs used as a seal or stamp. They indicate the dimension of the sacred. In other words, they point to yet another "canonical" relation, albeit a non-denominational one. They remind us that if we are to understand ourselves and the world, if we are to embark on the fascinating quest for meaning, and if we wish to discover those arcane relations that intervene and govern all that exists, we cannot but open ourselves to the dimension of the sacred. It is precisely this pictorial material which paradoxically reveals to us that mysterious spiritual world that permeates all things. This doesn't all come about idyllically. It isn't just some intellectual game, but rather a suffered and dramatic search. It begins with an interpretation of spatial depth through conceptual and material layering that manages to convey a powerful impact on the observer. There are three layers in Andrea's artwork: 1) the pictorial layer, consisting in the material used which we have just described, 2) the manipulation of the pictorial support, which is often folded, torn, or missing a section, and 3) the already mentioned technique of surface white layer. This one, while creating a sense of motion by the running and thickening of the white drippings, defines a spatial plane distinct from the subject painted, interposing itself between the latter and the observer, and thus increasing the sense of depth that characterizes the landscapes and "portraits" (I use this term for the sake of simplicity) depicted. The space created is a conceptual one because it is the fruit of the artist's particular vision, which focuses on what he wants, making it clear and crisp while blurring its surrounding which are either unfinished or completely lacking. This space is made dramatic by its exaggeration of depth in the landscape or setting, or by its absence in the human figures, portrayed as desolately alone in their silent gestures and melancholic postures while immersed in a dazzling white that cancels out everything else, or swallowed up in the gloomiest of black backgrounds. Nonetheless, it is clear that the most dramatizing element in his works is the laceration of the images. When the support is paper, it is literally torn, whereas when the support is canvas, for example in those settings made with real soil, the sensation of laceration is given by his awesome cracks. Some, referring to these works, speak of a "deconstruction" of the image (a term very much in vogue these days). I am absolutely convinced that such a concept cannot be correctly attributed to these works. The images represented by Andrea never lose the coherence of their "compositional syntax." The figures portrayed are not deconstructed, i.e., broken down to their fundamental elements and then set up again in a different, de-structured way, and even less in a broken, deformed or mutilated way. At most one could speak of a "fragmentation," but of the support and not of the image. The procedure behind the work intends more than just laceration. This already in some way indicates a break with the traditional image that twentieth century art has treacherously (and in some cases foolishly) created. Today we find ourselves picking up the bits and pieces of a tradition shattered by the ideological madness of the pre-post-trans-avant-garde of the twentieth century. The best of our contemporary artists carry this trauma in their minds, hands and heart. It may seem paradoxical to find fragmented contemporary artwork standing alongside centuries-old art (some of which we have only thanks to careful restoration work). And yet this paradox best reflects the current status of art. In the world of art as elsewhere, a lot of blood has been spilt, and that is the picture Mariconi lucidly reassembles for us, with patience and sorrow. Those gashes torn across the paper are not open wounds, but rather scars that recall the fury of the twentieth century. That paper, that welcomes its unusual painting material and is torn and lacerated, behaves as though submitted to an accelerated aging process which far from coming across as fake, renders the work profoundly authentic, surpassing the strain of time in advance. The artist's relationship with time is complex. On the one hand his works portray the passing of geological time in the materials used as well as in the subject matter itself: ancient glaciers, rugged cliffs eroded by wind and sea, the steep peaks of the Andes, lands torn by craters and geysers, plains

and ancient forests. Then there's the passing of historical time, especially as regards the history of art and the stance taken towards artistic tradition understood as transmission, i.e., the handing down of knowledge from one generation to the next to be understood anew, assimilated and enriched. Andrea is able to salvage everything - even the best of the twentieth century - in a powerful synthesis which instead of being merely imitative or mimetic creates an entirely new and unique art. His artworks are cultured, rich in meaning, charged with cultural references that avoid the annoyance brought on by quotation. It is immediately evident to the eye that Mariconti as an artist is thoroughly a Lombard. His attachment to the homeland, where he chose to stay and take root, is willingly shown by his poignant agricultural landscapes characteristic of the Po valley. He is a Lombard in his use of light, with those da Vinci style nuances inherited by Luini and traits of Caravaggio's revolutionary use of light. He's a Lombard in his openness to the Europe of Flemish influence, to the world of Rembrandt and Ribera. Nonetheless, he is a contemporary Lombard, such that it is not difficult to find similarities with the paintings of Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Anselm Kiefer, Burri, and even Jackson Pollock. Synthesis, not mimesis. Not a mere imitation or nostalgic return to the past, but a novelty that embraces the best of ages past and yet, I insist, proposes something new. Thus, in *Kanon I Habitat Mouseion* we are by no means before another case of quotation or replication. Nor do we find a simple interpretation or clever tribute. True, the artist confronts the great masters of Art History, but as an equal and not an emulator. Moreover he bends their works to his own intent to form part of a pictorial language. The interest is not so much excellence in an academic exercise, but rather the relationship with the observer (a relationship in which the two become one). This is particularly evident in the representation of Nuvulone's Madonna and Child, in which the very gaze and expression of the Madonna are changed and transformed by the bold foreshortening. This is also the case in the exceptional portrayal of Ribera's St. Jerome, which leaves us astounded by his mastery of the brush stroke which leaves us a taste of the old and by his classic use of lighting, while still using that unmistakably Maricontian painting material with its suggestiveness and all that it brings across. Once again, there is the passing of time in the life of man: youth, maturity and old age, as in the classical topic of the three ages, dealt with in feminine light by Gustav Klimt. The things of the world remain, while man is soon gone. This seems to be what the figures of Mariconti say by their expression: sometimes serious, melancholic, or at other times barely traceable or simply undefined while they are lost in their daily activities, traveling, or absorbed in a moment of relaxation or reflection. They all seem perplexed by the fleetingness of the present, in search of meaning or awaiting an answer. At this point the passing of time meets and collides head-on with the deepest question for meaning: the inner need for permanence in face of the blatant experience of all that passes and is gone. Earlier we referred to the value of the sacred recalled by the painting materials employed by the artist. Once again, it would be mere appropriation if they didn't get to the point: Andrea Mariconti's quest is aimed at finding that which remains. This is the characteristic of his work: they are works that remain and will remain in as much as they are made with art (the Latin *ars*, i.e., to know how to make with one's hands), molded on content of solid humanistic nature and pervaded by a haunting beauty. Thus we can consider them "classical," since they are called to be perennial, extemporal in their permanent contemporaneity. As far as the message goes, he doesn't give prefabricated answers, nor does he provide a simple, comfortable or accommodating solution. For now the search is more important than the solution itself. He sets out on this quest observing the world with a charmed gaze. This is not a naïve gaze, but rather one still capable of wonder: that wonder which has always been the first instigator of knowledge and founds the zetetic dimension of man. It is a mystical gaze, through which we catch a glimpse of the aura of eternity that pervades and shines forth from within everything that exists in this world. As we have seen thus far, everything in his work is intended to convey this wonder, inviting each of us to set out with him upon this journey, rediscovering our common condition as *homines viatores*.