

## **Andrea Mariconti. *Since the beginning. The research of painting.***

**Ilaria Bignotti**

### **Introduction**

Asking an art critic to write a text concerning the research an artist has developed for a long time is a challenge. Actually, it is mandatory to catch the essential elements and, at the same time, to focus on the different views about the works in order to start an analysis of the exhibition.

That is what Andrea Mariconti has been expecting since when he asked me to write this text.

I have known him since 2007, when I saw his big paintings in Milan. I immediately took an interest in his research and what impressed me were both the stratification of shapes and materials which characterized his paintings – always in the balance between iconography and iconoclasm – and that peaceful, mighty sensation his whole works communicated. His work is like a tableau of an intimate narration, which is, at the same time, quiet, indefinite and always oscillating between the incipit and the end of the picture.

I organized my text in short paragraphs whose titles are words that try to define crucial paradigms and problems of Mariconti's artistic approach, even if I do not claim to illustrate all the complexity behind his works.

### **Am Anfang**

At the end of the previous century, Anselm Kiefer created two works called *Am Anfang* (*At the beginning*) and *Von Hier Aus* (*From here*: in German, the preposition "aus" means that something goes out from "here").

These two big paintings look like shrouds covered of different materials: acrylics, emulsions, shellac, ash and sunflower seeds. All these materials, blended and broken, seem bound to the shrouds which hold and show them: if we look carefully, we can glimpse the scenery of the end, the vision of a failure. Here and there, like buoys to grasp, Platonic irregular solids hang and seem to prevent us getting lost. They share the same wrinkled and inconstant materials but, suddenly, they stand out until we come to recognize them. But thereafter, our eyes wander and the eyelashes glue to that dry, thin – sour – paste that surround us.

Let's talk about these buoys – stones. Not only plunge they into canvas, becoming a point of vision and construction of the visual space, but their reference to the solid – that is more meaningful than we might think – represent a warning of an endless transition to stratification, seduction and aberration for both Kiefer and Mariconti.

In *Homage to Anselm Kiefer*<sup>1</sup> Massimo Cacciari wrote: "*at the beginning, it's Wheatfield with Crows. Then, imagine that it's completely covered by a rain of burned coal, ash, straw and paper. The death of the sun that, there, was just announced, now it's evident. At this point, the path of sun has already hidden any sky. The Earth has swallowed it; to earth, to its horizontality belongs any path. Therefore, the wider these landscapes are, the more they trap and enchain. It's impossible to move; it's impossible to find a path which goes beyond*".<sup>2</sup>

At Andrea Mariconti's exhibition, we can see two paintings named *Meta-Fisica* (*Meta-Physics*), two diaphanous landscapes that show a hazy countryside, painted in faded shades, like brown and grey, and call to mind a damp autumn. In the bigger one, thick ice covers the surface: harmonious lines are drawn towards the centre, while hay bales stand out on the high horizon, like Platonic cylinders, mark the "imprimatura" of the fallow land in background.

<sup>1</sup> Massimo Cacciari, *Omaggio ad Anselm Kiefer*, in *Anselm Kiefer*, a cura di Massimo Cacciari e Germano Celant, catalogo della mostra, Venezia, Museo Correr, 15 giugno-9 novembre 1997, Milano, Edizioni Charta 1997, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

In the smaller painting, oils, earth and natural pigments solidify and gather, wrinkle and break. We can see a wave of land that raises and shakes a harvest in the shape of solids rolling down a hill. The artist seems to know the landscape he imagined, as though he had seen somewhere, in another time and now he uncreates it through his painting.

Mariconti declared: "I never created the thick matter of my paintings on purpose, but necessarily, it happens when I work with this kind of materials; it's a stratification of memories, materials, glazes, and finally they make this matter become a body of image that comes out of canvas."<sup>3</sup>

The green, sinuous wave of *Keramos\_calkos*, a work where earth, copper leaf and copper oxide gather, dissolves in a brown field and fades in a rising white cloud. It seems that the painting cannot hold the solemn agitation of the matter as if, at the same time, it showed but also denied "[...] *this bituminous painting, cold and wise, emotionally in suspense and alienated. Stony grey, sour white, rare, sharp lights: it's as if the sensitive primer and the situation worth were sifted until they were exhausted and they turned out to be a torn representation, desiccated in a mere emotional tension, the essential architecture of silence*".<sup>4</sup>

To paint the making of the matter as well as its unmaking: Andrea Mariconti titled this exhibition *Naeuma-Antimatter*.

A becoming painting that is a violent creative process: "*the palette is the poiesis: the making that dissolves, splits up, that can show only by releasing and analysing, that can bring sight. The palette is the "vase", where different elements reach their "right" combustion; [...] to paint, to burn. Representing means transforming, dissolving*".<sup>5</sup>

### **Epoché**

*"Haze sole certitude. The same that reigns beyond the pastures. It gains them already. It will gain the zone of stones. Then the dwelling through all its chinks. The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said? Quick how ever ill said before it submerges all. Light. In one treacherous word. Dazzling haze. Light in its might at last. Where no more to be seen. To be said"*.<sup>6</sup>

*Ill seen, ill said* is Samuel Beckett's accurate description of a total and progressive emptying, where the narrator fills and then empties a closed landscape populated by simple and still characters, human beings, animals, things. The writer stages this condition of visual suspension over and over again, as if, somehow, he wanted to show in a visual, tangible, present way what it is not: the void. That seems to be his final goal. One of Samuel Beckett's less known literary works, *Ill seen, ill said* is mentioned in Emanuele Garbin's book about Gerhard Richter<sup>7</sup>, another artist considered a reference point for his research by Andrea Mariconti.

*Anmla*, oils, oxides and natural pigments on canvas, is the vision, not the view of a glacier: the tones are cold, the gaze must be as steep as the cliffs emerging from water. Blue, violet and rose shades fade away and erode the surface that holds the stretched paste painting: a frozen shroud, a tragedy that was about to happen.

This glacier was inspired by a real one, the Perito Moreno Glacier, located in Calafate, between Chile and Argentina, but in Mariconti's transfiguration it looks like a curtain that he has just brought down on Mar del Sur.

<sup>3</sup> Eloisa Montagna, "Interview with Andrea Mariconti", *Andrea Mariconti, Quia Pulvis, Exhibition Catalogue*, Galleria Pittura Italiana, Milan, 17<sup>th</sup> May-30<sup>th</sup> June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Flaminio Gualdoni, *Andrea Mariconti. Silenzi*, in *Andrea Mariconti. Storia Naturale*, Milano, Skira 2012, p. 11. (*Andrea Mariconti. Silences*, in *Andrea Mariconti. Natural History*).

<sup>5</sup> Massimo Cacciari, *Omaggio ad Anselm Kiefer* cit., p. 11.

<sup>6</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Ill seen, ill said*, Faber.

<sup>7</sup> Emanuele Garbin, *Il bordo del mondo. La forma dello sguardo nella pittura di Gerhard Richter*, Venezia, Marsilio 2011.

Let's wait for a mystery, without any prejudice.

*"I will not omit to introduce among these precepts a new kind of speculative invention, which though apparently trifling, and almost laughable, is nevertheless of great utility in assisting the genius to find variety for composition. By looking attentively at old and smeared walls, or stones and veined marble of various colours, you may fancy that you see in them several compositions, landscapes, battles, figures in quick motion, strange countenances, and dresses, with an infinity of other objects. By these confused lines the inventive genius is excited to new exertions."*<sup>8</sup>

The mystery resides in the astonishment of the perceptible, shaping matter and of the painting fade-out that drains and withdraws from the edge of the surface.

### **Imprint**

*Those who live in the countryside [...] love to touch the earth, the grass and smell them after a storm. A sensory intimacy with Nature which makes Andrea Mariconti desire to use these materials. His works, so full of matter and organic memory, invite to touch them, nearly to create an imprint of skin on the material surface, giving shape and substance [...] to that creative process called resemblance through contact by Georges Didi-Huberman*<sup>9</sup>.

Thus, Emanuele Beluffi described Andrea Mariconti's painting, ten years ago.

The exhibition collects a series of new works, monotypes made by applying templates of steel previously used to make shapes with clay and that the artist found in foundry. We can see sparkling shapes lying on the ground that become a new figure during the melting process. Their name is *Antimatter* and they face the enormous problem of the imprint through a critical analysis. Huberman wrote: *"The shape given by the imprint represents an obstacle to the idea of art because it comes too straight from a pre-existing matter and not from that idea so cherished by Classical Art Theory [...] to exist it does not need to be born in artist's mind. Strictly, it derives neither from the idea, nor from the drawing, nor from the invention, Vasari's magical words. [...] the imprint excludes any distance from its reference, because it needs adherence to be successful; the contact requires even a decrease, the dissolution of any mediation. Hence, only inside the deep, unreachable contact between the matter-substratum and its becoming copy, the imprinting shape can blindly find its origin [...] what is the time of an object made through an imprint? It's a strange paradox, strange because it seems out of history. On one hand this kind of object reminds to something in a precise time, Ça-a-été, like Roland Barthes said when he talked about photography [...] on the other hand the shape by imprint introduced a deadly anachronistic time, not only because the imprint is as old as the hills, like many say, but also because it is out of the history of art."*<sup>10</sup>

### **Melencolia I**

In Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I*, a signed engraving burin dating back to 1514 and displayed at the Staatliche Kunsthalle in Karlsruhe, a big squared rock stand out, on the left. According to Aby Warburg's impeccable interpretation in his essay *Pagan-Antique Prophecy in Words and Images in the Age of Luther*, published in 1920 (that owes to Karl Giehlow's pioneeristic studies), it seems that Dürer had wanted to paint this "mysterious" polyhedric rock and the comet (above, on the left) as a recollection of the meteorite fallen November 7<sup>th</sup> 1492, in Ensisheim, near Basel. Actually, the artist had gone there, that year, to illustrate Sebastian Brant's *Ship of Fools*. One of those flying pages, which illustrate this poem, shows the meteorite with an "apocalyptic" purpose (but the fragment fallen from the sky will have a place of honour in other works of Dürer).

<sup>8</sup>Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della pittura*, cod. urb. Lat. 1270, 35v: "Modo d'aumentare e destare l'ingegno a varie inventioni", citato in Damitsch, *Théorie du nuage. Pour un histoire de la peinture*, Paris, editions du Seuil, 1972, trad. it. *Teoria della nuvola. Per una storia della pittura*, Geova, Costa Nolan 1984, p. 44 e nota relativa. (*Treatise on painting*)

<sup>9</sup> Emanuele Beluffi, *Andrea Mariconti. Storia naturale*, Milano, Skira 2012, p. 17

<sup>10</sup> Georges Didi-Hubermann, *La somiglianza per contatto. Archeologia, anacronismo e modernità dell'impronta*, Torino, Bollati Boringhieri 2009, p 115.

The historical event, that the German artist really attended, blends with a complex iconography aimed to give a solution for the dangerous symptoms of melancholy to the artists of any time, according to Renaissance astrological medicine. Jupiter – closed in a magic square above woman's wings – could be the antidote-talisman against Saturn whose influence dominates the whole composition. According to Warburg "*Saturn, the old, universal demon, the divine cannibal who devoured his own children [...] in the time had become a "iuvans pater" (a loving father according to Marsilio Ficino's theory) a gift giver to those who were doomed to be born under his influence*".

Indeed, with the help of planet Jupiter, a metamorphosis happens and, thus, the slowness becomes meditation that goes deep, digs inside and creates the meditative genius at work.

If Marsilio Ficino had advised philosophers and intellectuals against melancholy (spiritual concentration, to wake up early, to go for a long walk under the sun, to make talismans like the magic square), Albrecht Dürer would have done the same for artists, forgotten by Ficino. Dürer put in Melencolia's hand a compass instead of the ordinary shovel used by Saturn's children to bury the dead. In this way, he declares that she belongs to art, to the imaginative, cognitive and meta-empirical force; the eyes of the woman, who represents any artist in any time, are thoughtful, her still hand holds her thinking head. The other instruments of making lie on the ground: purse, keys, symbols of maker's geometric-mathematical power. They are ready to be used in the new age, ready to deny any "*vanitas vanitatum*".

The action follows the thought. The past is heavy upon the shoulders, the present is still becoming, in the making and in the mind.

The artist measures, thinks, plans, makes.

Matter and *Antimatter*.

Mariconti shows a parade of squared rocks: he calls them Anmla. We can grasp the idea of the "soul", closed in the matter, among the oils and oxydes on canvas.

The squared rock stands out against the bituminous background. It holds the signs of a rocky alphabet – the artist had studied the rocky drawings in Valcamonica for long – stylised wedges, tools and soils. They engrave the big stone as if it were a screen.

Irregular polyhedron, melanchonic solid, Rosetta stone, informal field for a sign whisper which reminds to the alphabets of Carla Accardi and Antonio Sanfilippo.

Blessed by Saturn with a furrowed brow with the help of Jupiter, a jack-of-all-trades.

Even Kiefer has his own Melencolia.

He has many.

He started to work on this subject at the end of 1980s, inspired also by his participation in *Saturne en Europe*, a collective exhibition, in 1988, that took place in different locations of Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg. He participated with a series of works whose title was *Saturn-Zeit (The Time of Saturn)* and all of them were made of lead save one. That year, Kiefer bought and restored an abandoned factory of bricks dating back to 19<sup>th</sup> century, in Baden-Württemberg, in Germany. At the beginning, the complex of Höpfigen had just to be an extension to the atelier in Buchen but it early became the aspect of a sole, big installation that gathered works and architecture. In this place, the next year, he realized a cycle of twenty-six sculptures called *Himmelspaläste (Heavenly Palaces)*, dedicated to the themes issued by his Jewish mysticism. Some years later, in 1992, the artist left Germany and moved to Barjac, in Occitanie, in the south of France, in an abandoned industrial area of about 40 hectares called La Ribaute. Starting from the creative way of working he experimented at La Ribaute, he made images actual and realized a series of majestic and fragile "palaces", combining block of reinforced concrete.

Quoting Giuseppe Uncini, another reference point for him, Mariconti said: "*the cement is the fifth element [...] the man built all the works of his mind with, he built the reality that surrounds him.*"

*Working with cement, for me, means making a contact with the first, true material and matter of man's works. Therefore, the cement, for me, has its own history.*<sup>11</sup>

The second of Kiefer's *Seven Heavenly Palaces*, today a permanent installation at Hangar Bicocca, is called *Melencolia*.

I can see, behind Andrea Mariconti's *Anmla*, magical formulas solidified in a timeless solid: engraving the rock already means painting and it is the turning point of the long road of art, that makes, remakes and unmakes the matter of time.

### **Paths**

*"The main gift that painting gives to painter is to learn to observe [...] the things in relationship to yourself and to what is around you. Painting is a way to connect with things"*<sup>12</sup>

Mariconti said so in 2007.

The exhibition in Locarno tells us about the long path of a research haunted by different problems. A research that faces them through materials aimed at creating a possible imagine and composition while, at the same time, they seem to suggest the undeniable power of fading, melting, washing in the immense matter which is magma. *Antimatter*.

The contrast between iconography and iconoclasm, the shiver that the artist feels in his fingers while he paints, lead him to question the shape and its results, its deviations. Maybe, this is, at the same time, the safer and most dangerous path Mariconti can follow.

Walter Benjamin taught us that being contemporary means not being completely contemporary.

Mariconti's time of painting is exactly that: a time of vision that is like an expanded moment, splinters of past and future, of pre-history and post history are nailed on. A scene where the dialectic image acts, like a discontinuous constellation of iconography and iconoclasm, where archaic and modern merge; a big paste where knots and clots of painting made of survival blend and the exhalation of time foreshadows the age to come.

### **Antimatter**

"Sweet, enigmatic, precious memories of ordinary materials, covered by an abstract praise and an objective coldness that astonish, like a signal of great loss and of themes mixed underground and on the ground and then removed with fresh bulbs and digging roots, lime and sugar, mica and worms. In this way every part painted suggests objects, tales or solidifying poems that appear to be a revelation, like to scatter and provoke the darkness; like to key the twilight with a crystal cry. Air, water, fire, earth and all the ideas that confess similar images are abolished".

<sup>11</sup> Eloisa Montagna, "Interview with Andrea Mariconti", *Andrea Mariconti, Quia Pulvis, Exhibition Catalogue*, Galleria Pittura Italiana, Milan, 17<sup>th</sup> May-30<sup>th</sup> June 2007.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Eloisa Montagna, "Interview with Andrea Mariconti", *Andrea Mariconti, Quia Pulvis, Exhibition Catalogue*, Galleria Pittura Italiana, Milan, 17<sup>th</sup> May-30<sup>th</sup> June 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Emilio Villa, *III-1953*, in *Idem, Pittura dell'ultimo giorno. Scritti per Alberto Burri*, postfazione di Stefano Crespi, Le Lettere, Firenze 1996, pp. 19-20.