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THE HUMAN SIDE

I remember that a few years ago a gallery owner who knew him very well cited Giovanni Testori's prodigious speed as the clearest proof of his critical talent. I have never forgotten it. He said that Testori was so fast that he could write a beautiful text or an impeccable article about an artist he admired at the time – Rainer Fetting, Martin Disler, Helmut Middendorf, and above all Karl Horst Hoedicke – in a matter of hours. I mean to say: in Milan in the 1980s there was a great writer who was passionate about German Neo-expressionism, the New Savages; a man who greatly preferred the Mitteleuropa variant of new painting to the Italian Transavantgarde.

What does Maria Morganti have to do with this landscape? Apparently nothing. Not only because Maria's slowness is the perfect counterpart to Testori's prodigious speed (if there is one thing you ask yourself when looking at one of her paintings, it is: how long did it take her? Or what portion of time does a page of the diary, or sedimentation, correspond to? Weeks? Months? And when is a painting truly finished?), but also because she left Milan as soon as she could (she chose to study art in New York, and then chose to live and work in Venice).

The point is that Morganti was not even vaguely influenced – not even by that which could be considered, as was the case for many artists who began painting in the early 1990s, an onerous precedent – by that figuration Testori, albeit from an isolated position, loved so passionately. Maria began painting in the 1980s, but her very first apprenticeship could probably be placed within that “analytic line” that was so brusquely cut short by the painting of the 1980s.

Yet Morganti's paintings converse with Testori's texts in this exhibition. How did the artist make such apparently distant concepts

hers? I think that she read everything possible about Testori for months. Then she chose a book – an important book, containing essays about Gaudenzio Ferrari and the Sacro Monte di Varallo (the meeting place between painting and sculpture, in other words the place where the narration expressed through this contiguity occurs) and she figuratively tore out pages, isolated sentences and underlined words that then became the titles of her works. The words that Testori wrote for her, Maria would say. They are about flesh, about the body, about painting that becomes the body; in other words they are about the materiality of painting. They are also about Gaudenzio Ferrari's pink, which is the colour of the skin and of the incarnate.

Each work on show ends up having a density, a weight and a particular physical presence. A series of paintings created on irregularly aligned aluminium sheets come out from the walls. The small cavities of a strip of travertine are filled with Plasticine, a material that has been a part of her vocabulary for years. A monochrome red is spread horizontally on a panel that supports the weight of a fragment of rhodochrosite and the sedimentation of layers of Plasticene: it is the *mise-en-scene* of a dialogue between painting and substance, and between various tonalities of red. The *Infinite Painting* cannot be moved from her studio because it has accumulated layer by layer all the colours she has used throughout her years of painting (and it will accumulate those to come). Here it is portrayed in a series of photos, which simultaneously attenuate and underline its physical presence. So what works is Maria Morganti exhibiting in this show? What strange, ambiguous territory do they occupy?

It is probably a liminal space, which corresponds to the space (the intermediary one between frescoes and sculpture in Gaudenzio Ferrari's chapels) that Testori tried to recount, a space of figures caught "in between, on the point of becoming detached from the wall and assuming a three-dimensional body". It is as though

Testori's words were describing a place that Maria's paintings have always inhabited.

In a recent book Victor Stoichita reconstructed the history of the painting as a progressive awareness, particularly in the Flemish world, of the material, object nature of the painting at the expense of the Albertian idea of painting as a window.

On the other hand, in an essay about *Contingent*, the work that more than any other of Eva Hesse's is located in the "affective territory" of painting, Rosalind Krauss asks herself what would happen if, for some strange reason, Rembrandt's paintings were installed at ninety-degree angles to the walls, allowing a frontal view of only the sides of their frames. Krauss remarks: "The Rembrandts would have been rendered useless, their normal function – that of making a certain order of things visible – annulled; and instead we would be given the extra-pictorial anomaly of the painting-object, or the painting-as-object."

Is this the case of *Stratification with Rhodochrosite (red and red)*, *Taking Flight*, or of the other works exhibited here? The point is that Morganti has never posed the problem of approaching a new medium (for example sculpture), but rather pushes the material limits of painting to make it three-dimensional, to give it presence and corporeal life. So even when they seem liberated from the specific codes of the medium (for example when they are detached, or distance themselves from the wall, or when they are placed horizontally), her works remain in a sphere that is not only affectively but also synthetically pertinent to painting thanks to the irreducible presence of certain elements (the two-dimensional support, the panel, the layers of colour).

Maria Morganti's work is based on some precise rules. The artist only uses one colour a day, which she obtains by adding a new

colour to the bowl containing the previous day's colour. It is the first thing she does when she enters her studio. Then a layer of the colour is spread onto the painting of the series she is working on, onto the diary and onto the *Infinite Painting*. Each layer thus covers the one from the day before, leaving visible just a small part, for example an extremely narrow border for the sedimentations and lateral visions, and a slightly wider margin for the diary. However, the surface of the *Infinite Painting* is completely covered: the painting's history lies entirely in the edges, where the colours are mixed up, superimposed and collapse into one another.

Seen on the surface (seen for what happens on the surface), Maria Morganti's paintings are a progression of tonality of colour, as we can see in the case of the diaries, or, in the case of the sedimentations, they are "almost monochromes" (which is how Raphael Rubinstein described them in an essay about her) which only incidentally dialogue with modernism and the history of abstraction.

Sometimes vaguely unresolved, and never too assertive and definitive, her low-key way of treating the surfaces allows a profoundly human side to emerge. It is as if in each of her works there were always an elsewhere, lying below; an interior that the viewer's gaze would like to discover. This is because in each one something coalesces that is part autobiographical, experiential and hidden between the folds of colour.

I once heard Maria Morganti describe one of her paintings, talking about her mother's ocular maculopathy (an eye disease that affects the sufferer's central vision). It was a few years ago and the painting in question was one of her lateral visions, a work in which the traces, the margins of the layers, and of the subsequent layers deposited on the surface, meet, brush against each other and superimpose at the centre of the painting, forming a band of lines that traverse it vertically.

Pellestrina, a long strip of land in the Venetian lagoon where the artist has spent the last few summers, is the title of a series of small paintings crossed through (this time horizontally) by the same band of coloured lines.

And there is more: for months, years, Morganti's work has been a long-distance dialogue with her father. In fact, the artist was painting her diaries whilst rereading her father's diaries and preparing them for publication (a corpus of notes, observations and confessions that span a lifetime).

The diaries on show in this exhibition are the ones that recount the artist's time with Testori, or rather the time in which Testori's writings about Gaudenzio Ferrari accompanied her days in the studio: we read traces of this encounter in the red tones, which the progression of colours inevitably heads towards (in the Testori red papers, in the sedimentations and in the slidings).

A few days ago, while I was mulling over Maria's work and leafing through a book of interviews, I found this statement by Philip Guston: "Painting is exactly parallel to life."

(Translation by Jo-Ann Titmarsh)