

Aurore Valade Turin, Portraits 2009-2010

After her 2008 experience, Aurore Valade is exhibiting again at Gas in Turin, in a solo show especially conceived and created for the gallery. The works on exhibit were created by the artist when she was residing in Turin with the support of the French Consulate.

The project is the result of a unique, extremely accurate research and involves creating photo images to be composed according to the three genres of classical painting (portrait, interior and landscape) plus an array of other artistic and cultural references, organized according to an accurate study. The subjects are all Turin inhabitants. They are portrayed in profile, against a white background, inside their apartments. A window, or glass wall, is clearly visible on the background of each image, and through it you can glimpse a view of the city.

The interiors are accurately designed by the artist, who personally chose the spaces and rearranged the furniture and objects so that the result could be adequately rendered in painting. Every photograph also contains references to current events in magazines or switched-on televisions that have legible titles, after which the work is named. As we have mentioned, every image simultaneously contains three historical-artistic genres. The first is the portrait, again in profile. Here the model for the artist are Renaissance historical paintings, first and foremost the well-known Duke of Urbino by Piero della Francesca, but also photographs from entomology and cultural anthropology treatises that blend recent trends in contemporary art (for instance certain works by Thomas Ruff). The second genre is the interior, inspired by the atmospheres of Flemish paintings. The last is the view, again containing explicit references to Renaissance art. Each image is the product of painstaking photo-montage and photo-editing, aimed at giving photography the visual feel of a classic painterly work. However, despite these radical technical interventions and remakes, the artist clearly wills her photos to retain a realistic look, adhering faithfully to the objective truth of the moment they were taken. The whole exhibiting project was conceived as a series where different types of works alternate, creating a harmonious series of objects, interiors and views. The photo that closes the cycle, entitled *Il signore dei sentimenti* (The Lord of Feelings, a homage to the recently dead French film director Eric Rohmer) shows some visible differences in its composition, although it does not depart from the basic guidelines of the project. On a theoretical level, the entire research of Aurore Valade is the product of a complex reflection, combining, as we have seen, a wealth of extremely varied suggestions. For instance, we can immediately identify references to such major French thinkers as Michel Foucault and Jean Baudrillard: the former is evoked by the artist's reflection on the idea of representation and its questioning in the contemporary age, the second by the theoretical aspects pertaining to photography and its approach to reality, which is self-evident and problematic at the same time, if seen from an ontological standpoint. However, in the case of this particular project, there is one citation that allows us to interpret the work with the help of interesting hints. In a short 1898 text entitled *Appunti sulla melodia delle cose* (Notes on the melody of things), the German poet and critic Rainer Maria Rilke reflected upon the theme of the portrait in the work of art, in particular on the difference between the way saints and characters are portrayed in medieval paintings and the introduction of landscape representation with the Renaissance.

The saints that people medieval paintings are portrayed against a golden background, to underline

their status as blessed, but at the same time isolates them physically from the background and from the other saints. During the Renaissance, instead (aside from historical considerations on the introduction of perspective), the integration of landscape and view into the background is viewed by Rilke as the recognition of the possibility to have a deeper personal relationship, and has to be attributed to the new climate of humanism.

From Rilke's point of view, this relationship coincides with the possibility of mutual dialogue among the characters who animate the painting, as well as the possibility for the work itself to communicate with its users. This opening up of communication, which is not merely stylistical, happens through the representation of the characters' world by means of a landscape, often painted as an inhabited, living space. The view, therefore, becomes a shared background that reflects the deepest essence of the subjects represented in the painting.

For Rilke, this happens not only when the landscape acquires a symbolical function, but also, above all, when the world depicted in the background can be read as an inhabited, dynamic space that is shared and shareable. The background view is, in Rilke's words, similar to a common tune - as if every character belonged to a choir, and everyone's voice contributed to create the harmony of the whole. Therefore, according to the poet, it is not the faithful reproduction of a figure that generates the possibility of the relationship. What is most important is the representation and knowledge of the 'world' the subject lives in, or better - in the words of Rilke - of the 'world behind' the figure itself. The world showing behind the back of the human figures discreetly expresses their experience, thoughts and memories. Thus a space is designed that can be explored by whomever wants to comprehend, connect or entertain a profound dialogue. In the works on exhibit, this space identifies, for instance, with an inhabited interior filled with objects, things and memories, and finally opens onto a view of the city - the common, globalized world seen through the media (newspapers, television) that are included in the photo itself.

Very closely to what Rilke suggested, the theme of the portrait - i.e. a character isolated by the background plus the view and the interior as the key to understand the subject's being - ultimately becomes the object of a research that informs the whole project for this exhibition.

This work by Aurore Valade combines her concern for historical and theoretical aspects with accurate, detached professional abilities that attempt to preserve the extremely delicate balance between research and technic - not without a good deal of irony.

Maria Cristina Strati