

Curiosity and courage

“Old men should be explorers” T.S. Eliot

“We live just for these twenty years. Do we have to die for the fifty more?” David Bowie

The works of Aurore Valade are made to be read. You need to be curious, let your gaze run across the whole image then go into the details, studying every single part. Just like when you read a book.

I think this premise is very useful when approaching the work of this promising artist, whose paintings, far from being mere photographic shots, reveal themselves as true paintings, or *tableaux*, to translate the term into Valade’s mother tongue. The word *tableau* also appropriately describes the complexity in the composition and in the making of these works, both in terms of technique and project.

As we approach Valade’s works, let us take our time and give them all the attention they deserve. Let us read the writings, study the poses, geometries, references: for nothing in these images is accidental - everything talks and waits to be interpreted.

Architectures, spaces, objects, characters and faces move within the general compositional harmony: like a gaze or the traits of a face, the scars and signs of aging, they tell us about the different stages of life and individual history, all condensed in a face that turns to us, as Lévinas would have it, with the urgency of an existential issue, as pressing as it is unavoidable.

For this exhibition project, Aurore Valade chose an unusual, daring subject as her guideline: old age. This could be the best example of photographic images as ‘theory’, in its literal meaning as sequence, but also as reasoning that leads to results and helps formulate new questions, which in turn raise new issues. As everyone knows, senility is a highly relevant topic today. On the one hand, we talk about an increasing longevity of the population, especially in Western countries. On the other hand, we feel a growing need, even an urgency, for a generation turnover not only at the top level of institutions, but everywhere. According to a report presented in January 2013 by Comunità di Sant’Egidio and published by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the HelpAge International association, in the 21st century the senior population will grow exponentially compared to adults and children, and such a transformation cannot but radically change the present social structure.

These reflections raise a number of issues (acceptance of physical and mental aging, social security, etc.) as well as opportunities (seniors can turn out to be a resource for the country, from an economic and social point of view): in other words, today old age is a topic that can hardly be ignored and must be confronted, without falling into clichéd traps.

The title of the project suggests that sometimes age can even become a sort of new golden age: a ‘grey gold’ we might say, using a current French expression that describes the social, sometimes also economic, potential that elderly people have today in our communities.

But there is more to it: if we view senility as the age of wisdom, decline and twilight, then the subject can be read from another angle, and turned into a metaphor for much broader issues that involve the society, the history, even the fate, of our Western world.

So when we talk about the Old Continent, referring especially to Europe, we are using a metaphor that is very close to reality.

But what does this old age look like? What end, what decline are we talking about? Of course, what is at stake here is much more than the personal, private aging of every individual: we sense that there is something both vaguer and deeper, having to do with the spirit, as it were, of our present world, with its prospects and possible chances. This intuition is strong in the project of Aurore Valade, who elaborates on the subject accurately and perceptively, at times dramatically, but always with a touch of irony.

Thus we come to realize that the shades of grey (or better of grey gold) are many more than fifty, and have to do with issues, to which we are all sensitive, whether we like it or not.

The reference to the popular erotic novel¹ is obviously ironic, although not out of place, since love and eroticism are a strong presence in this exhibiting project, and it’s no accident.

Just think of the two works Valade created during her residency at La Napoule Castle, Clews Center for the Arts (*Henry & Marie Forever I e II*): a couple of elderly lovers is portrayed in two situations, in which they are carried away by passion. In the first case, the two are embracing in the middle of a white room, next to a work that also depicts a love act. It is a work by Henry Clews, the artist who once owned the castle, and whose ghost is believed to haunt the old rooms, still madly in love with his Marie.

In this image we can read the names of Henry and Mary sculpted on the wooden door – an old door, bolted, closed, like time or an intimate moment, along with other sexual and amorous symbols. In the second image we find the couple in a place that is more difficult to define: bedroom? Church? Classroom? Or is it a sacred place, as the high vaults seem to suggest? Here the couple is sitting in a clearly sexual pose, among objects that evoke phallic symbols. And two rabbits.

According to an ancient symbolism, if a work of art depicts one single rabbit, the artist wants to suggest marital purity and chastity. But if the rabbits are two, the allegory is much more profane: it is an explicit reference to erotic love, to libido. Here, too, what we have is sex, passion - no misunderstanding about it.

In other words, what we are given is not the image of old age one would expect: what prevails is love of life, a celebration of the freedom to express oneself, and a desire for experience that defies time and biology, in a constant search for new ways of being oneself.

Which makes us realize that, as Jungian psychiatrist James Hillman wrote, discovery and promise do not belong solely to youth: age is not excluded from revelation².

But what revelation are we talking about? The revelation Hillman refers to is the emergence of a fully fledged individual character and its force. This hypothesis is all the more interesting if we follow both reading levels: the age we have to do with is not (only) personal; it is also (most of all?) the aging of a world, of an epoch. Our epoch.

Whatever reading level we choose, after the revelation, after the discovery, we need to take the next step. In both our private and public life, we reach a point when we need to stop picturing ourselves at the beginning of a journey, and start feeling adult – taking our lives into our hands and go get what we deserve. This is a problem that deeply affects a whole generation of young Europeans, who live between precarity and the clichés imposed by society and the media. But what is to be done?

Masques de vieillesse (masks of old age) shows children who have fun playing the role of old people, wearing carnival (or death?) masks on their faces. Half-way between (psycho)drama and the metaphor of a necessary vitality, these children are actually playing with time and mystery. Everything falls, something

breaks, something else stops in midair: some children stumble, fall to the ground and learn that in life there are moments when you fall down. And then you get up again.

In regard to the compositional and stylistic aspect, two key factors emerge from the reading of the works: the first is the artist’s choice to use a much more delicate palette, with pastel hues, soft and plain. The choice of white (or rather a white/grey) as the dominant color has a symbolical meaning: white is the non-color that obliterates all colors and contains them all. A sort of alpha and omega of all possible tones.

What also emerges is the attention Valade pays to architecture. In her work on motherhood, for example, architecture sets the compositional rhythm of the work in an almost Renaissance-like way that vaguely evokes certain works by Piero della Francesca. Here, architectures under construction contrast with the not-so-young woman expecting a child, and with the sarcasm of the inflated balloon in the background, evoking animal breasts.

An explicit, insightful citation of classical iconography appears in a work entitleds *Carità Romana* (Roman charity), in which an ancient symbolism perfectly blends with an ironic interpretation of our present time: in this metaphor, the old continent is breast-fed by a compassionate, generous young woman of color, symbolizing the emerging countries.

In another work an old man is holding a child in his arms, a scene that recalls Ghirlandaio’s *Old man and his grandson*, while in the background a mix of ancient and modern architecture marks the deliberately anachronistic rhythm of this work.

Elements like the opposition of time and space, or architectures that become symbolical, abstract places, are even more evident in *Epoca*. In this work a group of elderly people in a futuristic environment sits around a classic bust of Plato. On the background, some children are playing with a visibly white-haired babysitter, while a woman in the foreground is holding a copy of the magazine *Epoca* from long ago, leaving it to the spectator to interpret the image: what is it about? Eternal recurrence? Anachronism? Irony? Similarly, *Eaux du monde* (The waters of the world, created as part of a residency the artist spent in Bordeaux) shows a group of elegant seniors attending a social event, with their glasses raised. A closer look, however, reveals that it is not a wine tasting as one would expect, but a ‘water tasting’:

a sign of the times and of the epoch-making changes that expect us: since water is now a rare, precious merchandise, it has become fashionable to choose its brand, type, and quality.

In other works, in particular the two works portraying couples of elderly twins, the theme of old age takes the shape of a reflection on the passing of time, on personal history and the way life changes people without them ever noticing it. The twin couples, both monozygotic (in one work, the eggs placed on the floor are a reference to this notion), are born with identical faces, but life changes them and their different stories can be read in the expression of their gazes, on their faces, bodies, clothes. Here Valade's look gets more introspective, delicate, and intimate.

In another work an elderly woman, resting on a stick, is looking after her sick daughter. The younger woman holds a flower in her hands and looks straight into your eyes, maybe trying to evoke a lost beauty, like the Milan Kundera character³ clutching a flower in the middle of a hostile crowd in a big city. Hanging above on the wall, some tacky dishes and a sinister black clock seem to form a cross. Perhaps to remind us that, unfortunately, things sometimes do not work out as we would like, this photo has no "happy end" – except for the allusion to beauty and poetry, which live on as a testimony to a (hopefully) possible future, rather than to the past we left behind.

Again I think of James Hillman when, quoting Roland Barthes, he makes a distinction between the time (*chronos*) of biology and the *chronos* of passion, emphasizing how, in the late works of Rembrandt, the ravages depicted are not so much the result of passing time, but of the pathos of life⁴.

While Lévinas maintained that age shapes the face, writing on it a necessary, peremptory "question" about responsibility and solidarity towards other people, in Valade's works the same function is performed by the body. It tells a story, it belongs with those expressions, it manifests itself, asks questions, calls into play. This is the way in which old age, again according to Hillman, turns the body into a metaphor⁵.

However, if we continue to follow the psychiatrist's reasoning, we find that aging is not an accident. It is a necessity of the human condition, and is required by the soul⁶. In other words, the very fact that aging exists proves that the goal of human beings in life must go beyond the merely operational, reproductive and functional ability of the body.

Nature created this long life span, whose meaning can be elusive in a strongly consumer-oriented society like ours. Yet if this stage exists, there must be a reason for it, and it must be anything but trivial.

Keeping in mind that the senility Valade talks about is also, or above all, that of our world and our social models, we could try to think about this age of the soul as the place of essentiality, of being constructive and authentic, and most of all, as the god Saturn wanted of the Greeks, as the place of evolution and change. In other words, it is a time for becoming what we are, as Nietzsche put it, without telling tales, making excuses, or harboring illusions.

As many works in this exhibition seem to suggest, it is not old people whom we have to reject or "discard", but old ideas, which make us older, wearing out our body and spirit: here lies true renewal and the fulfillment of our dreams. Thus, in this implacable *Zeitgeist*, the profound, pressing question that inevitably concerns us all, and seems to be reflected in Valade's faces, has to do with our ability to honestly ask: "where do I stand now in relation to what I really am?"⁷. And the answer you give to this question cannot but push you to change, evolve, become aware of your time, private or shared, and search for new and possibly unexpected ways of being. You do this by following the *chronos* of passion, not the merely biological *chronos*.

But in order to reach this goal, again according to Hillman, and as the images in the exhibition suggest, we must be able to get involved in the facts of life candidly, with curiosity and courage⁸: in the words of Hillman, it takes the strength to leave our old ideas to embrace strange ideas, and create a shift in the meaning and importance we attribute to the events we fear.⁹ Ultimately, in art as in life, what it takes is the courage to be curious.

Maria Cristina Strati

¹ The reference is to the novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, by E.L. James, which became very famous in Italy in the summer of 2012.

² James Hillman, *The force of character* (1999).

³ Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (1988)

⁴ James Hillman, op. cit. p.

⁵ Op. cit.

⁶ Op. cit.

⁷ Op. cit.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Op. cit., *my italics*