

EXHIBITION AT SAN STAE

"It occurs to me that time / has no season / because seasons betray the dawn / just as people / betray the shadow of an elusive truth..."

These are the lines that spring to mind, penned by whom I know not (and so I make them mine), whenever I think of the creative artistry of Pierre Casè. The words assert themselves like an obsession, and resist, at least apparently, all logical explanation. This happens whenever the hand anticipates the mind, or when the mind finds unexpected terminological juxtapositions. The hand of Pierre Casè anticipates that time without season because the "walls" he transposes into his work do not belong to any epoch, but bear instead the shadows of the people who have been there, seen them, leaving perhaps a sign, a trace, before becoming lost in their hidden truth. This is their supremely subjective logic.

By this reasoning, even Casè's "heads" (whose expressive reductionism mimics the outline of twin cerebral hemispheres, like one might see in an x-ray) belong to the same conceptual category. But the source is far more intimate and personal, for it is rooted in personal trauma. And these heads likewise need the support of verses to open themselves to the world: our artist has chosen the poetry of Angelo, his recently deceased brother. A bond that, having become shadow, marks then hurdles the wall of existence.

"Broom on the dry earth is a bonfire./ That hot ash invades me".[1] So begins a poem by Angelo Casè which by no accident accompanies and opens, at least from a temporal standpoint, the artistic path of Pierre. Dry earth and ash are recurring constants in the work of the Ticinese artist who, from his smithy *cum* studio in Maggia, recombines and recasts time, then cools it like a fixed point, eternal, distinguishable in the gestures, fissures and clumps of tar that describe an hypothesis suspended in the air (i.e. the efflorescent crust) like an infinite question mark. "That hot ash invades me" is something Pierre could say every day, and perhaps does, like a litany, a prayer, a condemnation (though fundamentally a gentle one) that compels him to perpetually renew the ritual of creation. This is his rhythm of working, which means entering the realm of matter with his hands and his thought: a thought that was there already, time-tested like an architectural construction, but which is then blocked to subsequently reconfirm the miracle, renewed and renewable, of the work that is now there, interrogating us, interrogating itself. Is this life's destiny? Yes, this is it. And Pierre has understood it firsthand since that fateful day.

A church. A special church in a special city was needed to cement once and for all the carefully planned and now finished work. Baroque San Stae and sumptuous Venice are the perfect combination for Casè's rhythmic and solemn rosary. Not because Casè needs the help of a lofty setting to show his work - to the contrary, his sober compositions are born of a climate of singular austerity. But Venice is an agreeable limbo in which to clear up doubtful points, and San Stae gives rise, in its sacred interior dimension, to a unique voice (an invocation) addressed to hope: "You existed for me one evening, light / as a fortress of flowers, robust / as a horse's breath in the air that flowed / slowly and you told me of the Sun on the riverbank".[2] But it is a desperate hope, for exhibited in the splendid central nave is a procession of ex votos, a cadence of relics never to be resolved, condemned to become a sacrament, scarred by the stigmata of suffering: "You existed for me one evening, light...". Yet that lightness infinitely repeats that evening of resurrection which, for us mortals forever hanging by the thread of existence, is our renewable night, our renewable amazement tomorrow. The funnel-shaped passage toward the altar of Casè's "heads" is the price of expiation, the modulated metamorphosis of a mind that grapples, step

by step, with a reality that has been reconquered and redirected to art and, ultimately, to an obstinate will to live.

This passage has two faces, a *recto* and a *verso*, as one finds in works that harbour the other side of the truth in their hidden parts, allowing for a broader and more exhaustive reading of what is, in this case, an excavation of intimacy. The other face of the 26 panels, like niches or chapels, each contains a poem by Angelo, emblematic alter ego, to a certain extent unconsciously, of Pierre. The poems do not articulate the theory of the "heads" on the other face of the panels, the artist's choice was not inspired by a desire to explain. This is the consummation of the encounter of two affinities, two elective proximities that penetrate beyond the bond of blood. We find ourselves instead in the presence of complementary experiences that combine perfectly together, like fragments of the same vase, like the comforting arms of a mother, opened to take in her children.

This second face provides a second dimension of imagery, constituted by the excellent and sensitive contribution of Marco D'Anna, who both reiterated and expanded the concept expressed by Casè in a sequence of photographic enlargements, or rather fantastic elaborations involving the heads of Casè in part, along with x-rays of skulls that expand then empty out into a broad and dramatic vision of an ossuary, a boneyard. And at that point the theme branches out into other subtexts that encompass the vast question of existence, of the fleeting nature of life and the persistence of memory, the only thing that truly connects people to the world, passed on along the fine and suggestive thread of words, writing, the sign scratched onto a wall that says "I was here".

It is not by chance that the exhibition is entitled *Mnemosyne* (actually a tandem title, along with *Archaic Heads*). And we pronounce that title now because the moment of memory has arrived, the moment of assembling and aligning our gaze, distributing them across the 1,040 stations, each pervaded by the same subject yet each extraordinarily different in their nuances, for Casè has described here a brain in motion, which naturally responds differently to different stimuli. This is why 1,040 is a convenient and opportune number; there could or should be millions of them, as many as there are or might be in the course of the entire existence of each one of us (and therefore of Casè himself), radiographic representations of cerebral transmutations in response to rational thought, language use, amazement, and so on. "We die a little every day - an unknown / animal cry, the lost letter, the pleasure / of seeing a friend again, or the displeasure. A pencil / that doesn't write, the white pages of the beloved / book, the neglected date. And the sun, a shiver / in the sleepy eyes of a cat".[3] "We die a little every day", and we live again, like a cut flower displayed in a crystal vase if given the comfort of fresh water, of the ideas that nourish life and renew the patterns of impulses firing beneath the cranial cap. Pierre's renewal resides in the obscure daily task of forging metal, of mixing woot and tar and wand, of orchestrating the fire that burns, consumes, oxidises ferrous matter, determines its nuances of colour and offers unexpected solutions. Thus the many different selves that constitute the book of existence are disposed, like leafing through a diary for images, emotions, visual stimuli.

Dismembering, stitching and restitching life through the metaphor of one's own suffering is like dying and being reborn over and over again, it's like the miracle of that plucked flower, living the provisory existence of the vase yet raising its head whenever it thinks of the roots it left in the earth. Likewise, Angelo's poetry is the nourishment necessary for Pierre's solemnity, like the images immolated by D'Anna in the name of greater knowledge. The path to the altar, which narrows as it goes, is the necessary viaticum of loss and resurrection. Indeed,

the risk of losing one's sensitivity, intelligence and memory is overcome and defeated by that invisible interstitial bond that connects every photograph and brings back the light. At this point the anguish that could potentially await us at the end of the path drawn by destiny is transformed into a debt paid to suffering in an offertory of awareness. And Casè's superstitious or propitiatory gesture (let us consider that primeval arch, propitiated by tar, proceeding hand in hand with the sublime to stand guard over the very heart of all thought and emotion) is cloaked in the sacredness of a place that owes a singular debt to his memory: the magnificent early 18th-century facade was designed by the Ticinese architect Domenico Rossi. As such, everything revolves as if a labyrinth (not unlike, significantly, the cerebral folds) that finds in the end a felicitous point of encounter and exit.

"Do not ask for grapes in March. Tread lightly between morning / and night, it takes but a trifle to save the day from ruin: a simple / gesture, the slight pause between one word and the next." [4] Angelo's admonition is superfluous, for Pierre is not about to be satisfied with off-season fruit. He is instead on a constant quest for the absolute in the transience of everyday things, in the fragile matter that finds substance and power in the very poverty of its expressiveness: is not the wall of a house in Maggia a blank canvas for the wind and rain and cold, which corrode and crack and crust it toward the abyss of the centuries? Yet this wall is there, with the evocative power of a dolmen, with signs of human passage that resemble wounds never healed by existence. But it takes only a trifle to save the day (and perhaps a life) from defeat: a gesture is enough. Hence derives the importance of the constant, impellent actions of the artist, driven to emphasise the unique specificity of a conscious presence. The Greeks referred to art as *techné*, from which the word "technique" clearly derives, while poetry comes from the Greek *poiein*, which means "to make" or "construct". Is there anything more solid than technique, than construction? And thus it becomes a consolation to believe that, thanks to art and poetry, one can concretely influence everyday reality, and that the experience of an individual (perhaps a dramatic experience, as is the case here) is capable of reflecting the experience of the world.

It would seem that Casè's "heads", all of them closely interconnected, do not allow pause. Yet the pauses are there, determining the value of the work, activating the music of suspended exquisiteness. In any case, the interior amplitude of the church is a pause in itself, and the installation, so solemnly balanced and paced, floats in the pause of the temporal dimension left outside in the streets and canals, beyond the walls that contain and conserve the event with transparent participation.

These same "heads", drawn and composed one after the other like the tesserae of a mosaic which, read as a whole, alternates comforting tonalities with zones of shadow, emulating a succession of impassioned declarations and deafening silences in an effort to contain the boundaries of a wound on the threshold of extreme loss. And from there, memory is reborn, as if by magic: "Reconcile your memory with your smile - betray not / the secret that by silence is nourished, by light / destroyed, like the snail sprinkled with salt / as it slides on a silver Wake / toward the soothing cool". [5] Once again Angelo reminds Pierre, as if, even though seemingly having other intentions and other visions, he wished to forever survey and safeguard his brother's work with his words. The canto cited above closes thus: "the proof / will be that you are alive, even if the soul, offended / and betrayed, does not contemplate other life - only / that smile upsets you, elusive and disturbed". [6]

Speaking for our own time, I do not know of other dialogues between art and poetry that have penetrated so deeply, in such magically uncalculated measure, and so appropriately to this sacred context, the infinitely renewable mystery of existence.

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ANNOTATIONS

[1] A. Casè, *Il Silos*, Edizioni Carminati, Locarno, 1960

[2] Ibidem

[3] A. Casè, *La data negletta*, in *Le precarie certezze*, Edizioni Cenobio, Varese-Lugano, 1976, p. 47

[4] A. Casè, *Lo stesso enigma*, in *Le precarie certezze*, Edizioni Cenobio, Varese-Lugano, 1976, p. 79

[5] A. Casè, *Non tradire il segreto*, in *Taedium Vitae 1986-1997*, Giampiero Casagrande editore, Lugano-Milano, 2005, p. 209

[6] Ibidem