

With Heart and Mind: Reality and Fantasy in Marco Sassone's Painting

Massimo Bertozzi

Faced with this exuberant and almost aggressive painting, this sorrowful splendor which infuses every brushstroke, it makes little sense, I think, to ask oneself to what extent Marco Sassone continues to lay claim to the proud, nostalgic legacy of the grand European tradition, and to what extent he has by now completely yielded to the wonderful freedom of expression which derives from his own personal "discovery of America".

We know, from reports, that in his formative years there was a father-painter, to whom he perhaps owes his love of landscapes and his innate sense of nature; that there was also a brief, though significant, encounter with Ottone Rosai, to whom we can trace his mournful feeling for humanity. And we also know that there was a more productive and fruitful relationship with Silvio Loffredo, to whom Marco Sassone pays tribute in terms of his vivid color, a taste for impasto, and occasionally by painting with fluid, relaxed, synthetic brushstrokes which strive for a calm, composed mode of expression; it is this style which characterizes, for example, the profound appeal - of silence and solitude - of a superb painting of 1990, which has remained Untitled, almost as though to magnify the sense of loss and desolation.

Nonetheless if we look at earlier examples of Marco's painting which we have come to know, for example, *Aftermath* (1968), in which - by then transplanted to California - he reflects on the sorrowful experience of the Florentine flood of 1966, we find that those origins of his have already been firmly filtered and have settled into a style of painting which is uniquely his, not only in terms of form, but also and above all in terms of a poetic feeling which the young Sassone renders explicit, like a declaration of intent.

The choice of a diffuse, filtered light, falling somewhere between reality and fantasy, is already a specific characteristic of the type of realism that Marco Sassone has in mind, and which from that time on he has been determined to pursue at every opportunity, through the maturing and emergence of his artistic personality, as well as through a variation of formalistic solutions, experimentation with new themes and different subjects, and the progressive definition of a poetic intent which does not mean to lose sight of the estranged fate of modern man.

That small figure up above, which tends to crystallize in the air, and therefore to settle dialectically and dynamically in space, may perhaps suggest a distant echo of Sironi's suburban men, and the lamp which looms over him, evidence of an earlier, less invasive form of public street-lighting, might also have been painted by Rosai, on the corner of Via Toscanella or opposite the Customs house on Via Villamagna; yet the entire universe of Marco Sassone can already be found in the brisk, intense landscape, and in the obvious rift between the man and his environment. This despite the fact that the color does not yet scream out or splinter, in contrast to the later flecks, but is made up of marvelous layers, subdued and vibrant but with only minimal variations, like in the undisturbed harmony of a mosaic, where the essential unity - but also the masterful modulation - of tones absorbs and recomposes the detailed fragmentation of the tiles.

When you think of it, in each case the continuity with the most recent phases of Sassone's painting is to be sought in that relationship of distress between contemporary man and the world

that surrounds him. A world which is no longer animated by the optimistic hope of progress, but which is now more and more conditioned by the degradation of pessimism and alienation. Attrition, discord and conflict thus nourish a type of painting which settles on an urban context, the place where the clash between man and nature has hardened.

A clash of themes and expressive forms, as in *City Pigs* (1991), where the circle of pigs is rendered with such crudeness as to extinguish any thought of grace or warmth, of trust in the urban context's readiness to receive, and which on the contrary supports the impression of a ravenous readiness to swallow up, sully and destroy which the city conceals behind a cloak of prestigious buildings, glittering shop windows, and luminous neon signs. In another painting of 1991, *Why are the children hungry?*, Marco Sassone puts the question a different way, presenting us with a butcher's warren, with quartered beef hanging from the hooks. Though the depiction is dominated by pink and red tones, he has chosen those which are more acidic and livid, so that we no longer have the expressionistic force, all flesh and blood and nerves, of Soutine's *Quartered Ox*; instead the colors promote a sweetened, sterile, plasticized image of a food without taste or substance, which can attract, entice and lure impoverished, starving children, while having no nutritional value. On the contrary, in its perversity, it is not meant to appease hunger, but to be a reminder of it, reawakening its most cruel, indifferent pangs.

Never as in the century which has just ended has man's body been so assaulted and tortured, mangled by bombs, stripped of its flesh and gassed in death camps, and genetically manipulated in scientific laboratories. Painting, and sculpture as well, could not remain inert, and arrived at a convulsed, disturbing form of representation, formally distant from any legacy of classical composure. Yet Marco Sassone rediscovers an even more atavistic aggressor: hunger. Too often repressed, almost out of fashion because it is not very technological or modern, hunger continues to strike millions of people every day, breaking them down physically to the point of spiritual annihilation: an annihilation fittingly alluded to by the formal mushiness — that muddle of people almost swallowed up by the painter's impasto — found in a 1992 painting entitled precisely *Hunger*.

There are people for whom the future seems to offer no hope, but only a brief succession of days, each one the same, without deliverance, for as long as they live. Existences that have no other prospect than to huddle down each evening along the street, their only hope being the dawn of another accursed day. It is no accident that *Perspective* (with a play on the words perspective-prospect) is the title of another painting, also dating from 1992, in which a human being - man or woman, old or young, who can say? - wrapped in a blanket of uncertain color, with disheveled hair and ragged shoes, lies stretched out across the lines which lead back toward the painting's vanishing point; the figure is therefore absolutely parallel to the horizon line, which is the only possible prospect here, but which he cannot even see because it lies inevitably behind him.

People for whom there is no longer anything but the streets. Yet it is a street which leads nowhere, which does not indicate the way but becomes the only world in which it is still possible to live.

For Marco Sassone the "discovery" of the Homeless proves to be, between the end of the 1980's and the beginning of the last decade of the twentieth century, an extraordinary opportunity to gauge the expressive power of his painting. Grappling with a subject that is familiar to him, since the homeless fill the streets of the city where he lives and works, but which at the same time represents a universal phenomenon, he equates them with the disinherited everywhere in the world, in a timeless reality. His are the homeless of San Francisco, victims of a society where everything is consumed — people as well as goods — where everything can be used and

then thrown away without giving it a thought. But they are no different from the vagrants of the old world, the refugees from black Africa, the Latin-American trash pickers, the drifters spilling over from every country in East Europe, victims of the collapse of Communism after having long been victims of the ruling despots.

Things are the same the world over and starving people are all the same, throughout the world. The man with the livid face and spent gaze, who comes toward us in the 1994 painting *Home on the Streets*, is one of many; we don't know who he is and we know nothing about his past, but we are able to feel the full weight of the loss and pain that crush him, and to perceive as well the cloak of sadness with which he pushes his tragic bundle, along with his shopping cart, toward an uncertain destination: it is all that is left to him of his home, his family, his life.

Marco Sassone's new country therefore becomes an America of vagrants, those who suffer and do not know how to rebel, who can only cling to what time is left to them, like a last breath of air. How many live a dream on the sidewalks of San Francisco, forced to lie among bricks and cement; a dream oppressed by childhood misery, the upheaval of growing up, and above all, regret for a time in which being rootless made sense, the rebellious gratification of freedom, a poignant yearning after poetry, if for no other reason than that it was still possible to find oneself with a role in a film by Chaplin or a short story by Saroyan.

Painting a face then becomes a way of looking at the world, of laying bare contradictions of thoughts, of discovering the complex uncertainty of feelings. In *Man with Beard* (2000), or in *Marian Blue and Sidney* (2001), the expressive power of the painting is concentrated into pasty images, strong with color, oily and dense, to render the thickness of skin on which time has weighed heavily; but one must look more carefully at the nuances to recognize the signs of unshakable humanity in the mute throbbing of flesh and nerves, in the desperate cries of their gazes, where resignation and defeat are spent, but where the final fires of rage and distant flashes of a former pride still burn.

It is that which drowns in the depths of the gaze of the *Man With Blue Eyes*, whom Marco Sassone has painted and sketched at length, taking up the same subject even after a number of years: in 1996, when he relies on a host of brushstrokes, letting the color ooze and flake; in 1998, when he curtails the agitation of the rapture, to the point of condensing it in brief, restless strokes; and in 2000, where he exploits the softness of pastels, but only to then be able to let the marks cut into the skin, like a pitiless scalpel of suffering.

There is an inexhaustible charge of pride in this gaze. Pride in his misery and pride in his defeat, but it is like distant suffering which is no longer painful but contains only the memory of pain, and this is undeniably a consolation.

What is surprising in each case in Marco Sassone's portraits is the perfect fusion between the painter's vision and the technical rendering of the image. The personality of the subjects is intensified by his relentless psychological realism, since the vital core, the mental tensions, the obsessions and energies which animate the figures are the only things that matter to the painter, who even while tackling a subjective case like that of a portrait, constrained, that is, by the individuality of the subject, displays a vast ability to penetrate the spiritual condition of human beings.

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