

Monochromes and figures

The first time I met Vincenzo Schillaci, he mentioned *Portafinestra a Collioure* – a curious coincidence: I'd read a few pages about the painting by Matisse leafing through Alberto Boatto's book dedicated to color (*Di tutti i colori*, Laterza) the very day before. Said painting, fairly eccentric in light of the artist's body of work and the countless windows he painted, represents the occulted, denied vision, deep, bright, and black, of a window and its pastel shutters set in a wall over a floor. Matisse never intended *Portafinestra a Collioure* to be displayed: 1914 was a terrible year, and perhaps he saw it as an overly literal evocation of the world around him. Perhaps this literalness only extended to his own expressive language and painting in general, however. He had affirmed – leaving no room for doubt – his impossibility to go on considering the painting as a complete and coherent space of representation, a place to be populated by figures.

Portafinestra a Collioure is therefore an act of denial that affirms another presence at the same time: the "painting in and for itself", the "painting as object", and painting that falls back on its materialness, retires into the dimension of its own material, inviting the viewer to look at it, not through it, or at any rate, look on it and consider the hypothetical room this side of the window. To Vincenzo, that black is instead dense, prehensile, and permeable, containing within it all the figures that Matisse painted over a lifetime of looking out the window of his home/studio at the sea. No fear of calling a spade a spade, this black is a monochrome with figures.

Vincenzo Schillaci's show at Francesco Pantaleone Gallery's new branch in Milan is entitled *Figures (?)* and seems to have something to do with the considerations on Matisse's painting above. If it weren't for that question mark (suggesting a troubling relationship with the figure), I'd say that what I'm observing here in his studio has little or nothing to do with what the show purports to offer: figures. Upon questioning him again, Vincenzo told me about his earliest work, figurative paintings done in the years he lived in Palermo before moving to Berlin, and the end of that period, which left him with a still unsated yearning for figuration, an irrepressible, involuntary impulse. He explained that for some time now his attraction to figures has become part of another experience that necessarily demanded restraint by a system of rules, constriction, cross-checks. Figuration – I then realized – is an abstract experience.

So Vincenzo Schillaci's paintings are abstracts, and more precisely might be said– using an expression that sounds slightly obsolete, and not only because I myself have used it in other texts – to be "near monochromes": surfaces that are uniform to greater or lesser degree (where "greater or lesser" hosts the wide range of difference I attempt to describe below) that vibrate and second one another's different qualities. There are polished, opaque surfaces, luminous, reflecting surfaces (capable of throwing back reflections of the viewer, the shadow of something on this side of the painting), throbbing, moving surfaces permeated by marks and signs that appear to be flowing beneath the surface.

The paintings also have something running along their margins: the trace of stratification, allusions to a story inside the painting that the artist makes also through mostly rectangular areas or portions of the surface that appear as rips or tears, windows/apertures inward, an inside where something has happened, some battle or form of combat with the image, an image that dares not show its face on the painting's outside but keeps inside, safe in its material folds. A hidden image, an aborted figure that only reaches the surface in vaguest form or as exudation. Even more: Schillaci's paintings consist of different layers and tones "laid down atop one another with rhythm" of pigments, tempera, sprays, and screens of *impasto* made of lime dust and marble powder, materials that also require the artist to fashion his expression quickly. Each layer is an empty page, space on which to project an image that can take form in swift, syncopated lines and brushstrokes traceable to reality or simply "non-significant gestures of sensation" (G. Deleuze). Every field covers, conceals, and

cancels, while at the same time holding back something of the brushstrokes and marks that came before it. Every field offers the artist possibilities for images to unfold through trial and error, outburst and hesitation, failures and falls.

Each layer is both an act of negation and the possibility for a new affirmation, a segment of the path of an image that exists, in every layer, as a possibility yet to be fulfilled, or, layer over layer, as the painting's own inner story. As it develops, stratification gives the painting consistency, a degree of autonomy, a register of some *otherness* to what the artist had intended, inviting him to renegotiate and redefine his intentions, to the point that the painting itself finally tells him the process of becoming of the image that has composed itself "inside" and provided only hints on the surface, is now complete, over. Vincenzo regards that moment as a sort of inevitable surrender. Placing his hand on one of his works, he smiles and tells me that his paintings are cold to the touch; frigid, almost. They end up, in one way or another, being strangers

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