

BONJOUR MONSIEUR FACCO - Alberto Zanchetta

In Montpellier, in the collection of the Musée Fabre, we can admire one of Gustave Courbet's most famous works, *La Rencontre*, better known with the name *Bonjour Monsieur Courbet*. The painting is the reflection of an era, of a time when painters carried the tools of their trade on their backs – canvases, brushes, paint, palettes, portable easel – and explored the county roads far and wide on the lookout for a subject to paint. A wandering, in this case, with Courbet himself in the leading role, surprised in his roaming by his friend and patron, Alfred Bruyas (with retinue of servant and dog) who wants to commission from him the painting we see today.

If we were to listen to the words of Paul Morand we would associate *plaisir* with the impulse to wander and the yearning to become one with nature, to lose oneself in it; according to the French writer, the romantic notion of travel in today's world consists in losing oneself rather than discovering or finding something. It is only a preparation through means of the *peregrinatio* that can make us receptive to such strong emotions, epiphanies that stimulate the release of dopamine into the bloodstream, the substance that allows us to feel pleasure (that *plaisir* mentioned earlier). The idea of the *flâneur* on the lookout for images is the origin of this exhibition that Andrea Facco has conceived as a viaticum through the myriad layers that make up of the art of painting, and their "potential convergences". In defiance of the Bohemians in Paris who painted after having scoured the countryside, Facco's excursion has an urban setting, and it also an excursion into the genres, the styles and the idioms of painting. This attempt of his to re-mould the grammar of the image is manifested in a series of drawings inspired only indirectly by *La Rencontre* di Courbet, since the model for them is a caricature of the painting called *L'adoration de M. Courbet*, first published in the magazine *L'Illustration* in July 1855. In this derisive version by Quillenbois – nom de plume de Charles-Marie de Sarcus, we see Bruyas and his servant on their knees, beseeching and supplicating a haughty Courbet. Facco was particularly struck by the size of the artist's feet as they are depicted in the satirical vignette, an element that he then took and reproduced repeatedly and obsessively, substituting the gaiters for a pair of canvas and rubber baseball boots (the popular All Stars). A small painting on canvas followed the drawings on paper, in which the idea of the journey is associated with large and comfortable shoes, an attribute that has the effect of conferring modernity to the stereotype of the wandering painter.

Not by chance, nor for the first time, Facco has interwoven his iconography with that of the greatest of the Realist painters. Already a number of years ago he paid homage to the ethical and aesthetical life of Courbet, extrapolating from a close-up of *Lo studio del pittore*, a detail accompanied by a quotation of the same author: "the perfect painter must be able to scrape away and repaint, ten times over, his best work, to demonstrate that he depends on neither nerve nor chance". In emulation of the French master, in whose unlimited talent there was no room for carelessness, Facco strives to perfect the methodology and morphology in his work, forging a union between practice and theory. The decision to reproduce a detail of the painting conserved in the Musée D'Orsay is emblematic, above all because the attention is centred on the society that the painter is surrounded by, "as though the ego", as Julian Bell explains, "were the only thing that mattered". In Facco's case however, we do not find ourselves in front of a narcissistic, but a chameleonic ego.

Despite the fact that many artists have the habit of painting themselves many times throughout the course of their lives, up to now Facco has produced only a single self portrait, in the guise of an eye chart of the type used by opticians "to be read from a distance of three metres" (the letters repeat the artist's name in a rapid sequence scaled according to the diopters of the eye). From that distance, both in time and from a general perspective, what we should perceive is his *iter artistico*, or artistic process, developed over the course of three lustra (three times five years). Results and evolutions, variations and delays make up a unique dialectic, whose sequence is intelligible only through continuity and correlation. An oft-used Italian expression, "*fare un quadro della situazione*", a play on words which translated literally becomes "to make a painting of the situation" and which means "to take stock", leads aptly to a investigation of this artistic scenario, where we retrace, step by step, the artist's solo exhibitions.

We begin with the project *Room with a view* which opened in New York in 2005. The exhibition gravitated around a small painting containing all of the details that an attentive spectator would discern in the other artworks on display: a postcard propped up on a table, a milk carton, the label of a bottle, a poster on the wall, television transmissions or photographs printed in a daily newspaper, become in themselves subjects that, through virtue of being painted, are decontextualised into a kind of visual autarchy. The notions of zooming and zapping, characteristics of all of Facco's explorations, recur in the exhibition of the following year, *Escodentro*, (word "invented" by the artist, composed of two words meaning I go out/inside). Here each painting conducts inexorably to the next and, with a concatenation of event-images that first develop and are then reabsorbed into each other, the artist creates a *mise en abîme* with no start and no finish but which instead revolves around itself to create a perpetual loop.

The exhibition *Waiting for Beijing* was the culmination of a protracted stay in the city's Chaoyang district in 2008. The artist depicted the Chinese capital – which at that time seemed like a huge open-air building site – with all the contradictions of modern day China, still weighed down by the burdens of its past and hopeful for the future. By thwarting the experience of time and space, the painting medium allowed the artist to create an overlap between reality (the metropolitan skyline) and illusion (the billboards). The retina's logical artifice is what the artist used to activate a kind of mechanism of similarity and discernment in the evasion / window perspective that the billboards opened up within glimpses of the urban landscape, con-founding different layers of verisimilitude.

Another solo exhibition, *Le cose che pensano* (The things they think), where the act of painting itself was adopted as the instrument of critical and formal analyses, was inaugurated in the same year. The protagonists of the collection are the furniture and objects that featured in the most important ateliers of the last century: from Picasso's chair, invaded by paintbrushes and jars, to the monumental parquet that Pollock dripped colours onto. A representation already "once-removed", filtered not from photographs of the objects, but from the reproduction of the photographs in magazines or catalogues (and from there converted into paintings). To reveal the inherent insidiousness of the work, Facco called to our attention the page layout, the accompanying captions, the inside covers, the page bindings. This representation thus led to a reconciliation and re-equilibration with the creative process, done by taking possession of images that could be considered as unpublished masterpieces by the great artists of the nineteenth century. The artist even went even further with the cycle dedicated to the vases, bottles and boxes of Giorgio Morandi. The compositions dedicated to the master from Emilia have been painted with *grigiocolore*, (greycolour), a tonality obtained from the leftovers on the paintbrushes that the artist had used to paint the other artworks in the exhibition. When the brushes were rinsed and left in the container they left on the bottom a rich and multi-chromatic deposit which, when mixed, became a paste rendering colours that oscillated between ash and wax: rather than discard the "*materiale di risulta*" the "leftovers of the result", Facco resuscitated these leftovers, gave them a second life and an identity reminiscent of the diaphanous compositions of Morandi.

The 2010 exhibition *Apparenti circostanze* was not dissimilar. On this occasion the artist chose his subjects from the urban landscape: walls, graffiti and advertisements were used to create overlaps between two and three-dimensional objects, placing the styles and genres of the history of art on the same plane. A poster of Giorgio de Chirico could be called upon to dialogue with the signatures of the graffiti writers and the votive images found on the walls of a building, offering proof of the involuntary coexistence between metaphysical art, graffiti art and sacred icons. The stereometric form that the artworks take is reminiscent of detached frescoes, creating an exchange – profitable and reciprocal – between the different artistic techniques.

This latest exhibition, where we are presented with a synthesis of the visual prospecting of the artist, can be considered in much the same way. With avid and untiring attention, Facco has drawn together a collection of details apparently disparate, such as spray writing on walls, votive tabernacles and the ample range of macabre images that infest the modern world. Vice versa, the effigy of the skull is exalted in the attributes of Saint Rock, at whose shoulders the outline of one can be made out; concealed within the background, the death head emerging from the light and dark contours of the landscape behind, creating an effect which is alienating–disconcerting, where the rituals of death are associated with Nature's fertility cycle. The symbol par excellence of the memento mori is verbalised in the iconography of Saint Expedite, a religious man that the martyrology of St. Jerome describes as holding a cross in his hand, on which the Latin word *hodie* (today) is carved, while he crushes underfoot a crow cackling an onomatopoeic *cras* (tomorrow), an idiom that reminds us of such Latin epitaphs as *hodie mihi, cras tibi* ("my turn today, yours tomorrow"). Saint Rock and Saint Expeditus, pilgrim and protector of the oppressed the one, patron saint of merchants and navigators the other, are employed here as figures that conceptualise and reinforce the idea of the *flâneur*, that wandering-viaticum that is the basis of Facco's metapictorial investigation. The ability to interlace relationships between the images becomes therefore an exercise in style, or rather: a hyperstyle – as the artist defines it – where every day grievances get lost in a mnemotechnical labyrinth. The promiscuity of the subjects appears to stimulate, not by chance, the hippocampus, the region of the brain that is important for the function of both memory and orientation. In this way Facco's 'itinerarium mentis' effectuates a recombination of the act of painting and by so doing renders evident the specificity and the linguistic contamination inherent in it.

The apparent diversity of the works that make up the exhibition respects however criteria of proximity of language and visual analogy, and it is exactly this promiscuity that circumscribes a reamalgamation of the genres and problems that personify the research of the artist. Although many of the paintings seem to be incompatible, the truth is that it is not impossible (but rather, plausible) to discern the relationships between them. There is no doubt that an eclectic, euphoric and exuberant liberty, that fears comparison with neither Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, nor Jin Georg Dokoupil, imposes itself inevitably on Facco's work. Dokoupil in particular, built his own (a)typicalness on the absence

of a coherent style or recurring elements. In the same way Facco plans his exhibitions as though they were a “White Paper”, that is, a collection of documents on a single but fundamental problem: painting. In his handling of the images that we are surrounded by day in day out, the artist has created works which are heterogeneous, adopting and adapting the medium of painting as his own intellectual intentions dictate.

By freeing himself from the dogmatic constraints of a recognisable style Andrea Facco is master of and identifies with all styles, and by doing so manages to demonstrate that “he depends on neither nerve nor chance”. His work is essentially conceptual: it is itself the subject! Revealing *the modus pingendi* (way of painting) as his *raison d'être*, Facco reveals more about painting than he does about the image, obliging us to see not the subject but the object itself, that is, the painting or more precisely: the problem-painting it has generated. “Facco’s strategies”, Peter Weiermair had discovered before anyone else “are more than just simple narrative: in his images, essentially conceptual, the artist reflects on how the image itself is used and clearly aims at the development of a critical knowledge”.

It appears obvious how Facco’s intention is to put on trial the entire range of parameters, codes and pictorial models, and to do so with a particular attention to the formal preoccupations-complexities. To use a definition of Mary Shelley, we could say that they are works of art created in the “mad pride of the intellect”, that they embody the ambiguity between that which is authentic (the image) and its facsimile (meaning its perception). As if that were not enough, the artist does not limit himself to inducing crisis in the dominant logics, he virtually sabotages them. It is difficult to collocate some of his paintings under the aegis of the iconic or non-iconic; often an abstract image is more figurative than it seems. This can be seen in the cycle of the “Stratigrafie” (Stratographs) where the canvases, invaded by a uniform chromatic mass, give the vague impression of a late-romantic landscape. Only thanks to the titles, such as “*From the red mantle of the saint, From the right-hand margin at the height of the altar boy’s head, From the yellow of the rays above the cross*”, can we reconcile the millimetric restoration of a masterpiece with these outsize details. When it comes down to it, Facco’s Stratigrafie are works of hyperbole, a perfect paradox of the art of painting “in the era of pictorial reproducibility”.

In the works presented in this exhibition the artist demonstrates “painting” in its tiniest details, just as he does in his perceptual illusions and in the leftovers from the creative process. He has been collecting and numbering his *Resti di pittura* (pictorial debris) since he was at art school; some of these pieces are re-proposed exactly as they are, in the guise of painting-sculpture (for example the bristles stiffened by dry paint or the sediment deposited in the bottom of jars and on the studio floor); at other times the leftovers are incorporated into a new work, such as the strips of paper tape removed from finished canvases and applied to an oval support to form a multicoloured sunburst. Neither should we forget the notes or the sketches placed next to a drawing in the area in which the element “left over” is reproduced in the image.

The brusque stylistic fragmentation hides an exclusively internal coherence, more than apt for the visual and cognitive confusion of the current age. Whereas in previous exhibitions we could easily follow a chronological order, this time the application of a taxonomic criteria is necessary. Looking back in time we are (inevitably) constrained to reconsider a cross coloured red that the artist painted on the example of the supremist icons but whose original font can be traced to an advert for a toy ambulance; the symbol of the cross collides and at the same time converges with the cross that appears, in *Monumento alla pittura*, a life-size representation of the commemorative stone that marks the place where Umberto Boccioni lost his life after falling from a horse. In Facco’s immaginarium, what stands out is not the gravestone in the monumental cemetery in Verona where his mortal remains actually lie, but an almost unheard of commemorative stone abandoned and ravaged by time and weather on the outskirts of the city. By re-establishing the place where he died Facco transforms the commemorative stone and, ideally, the sculptures of the young futurist, into painting. This automatism of cross-references and connections is more explicit in the larger works depicting a control-room, where the monitors transmit images that are reproduced in smaller paintings. Considered singly, each one seems unconnected to the next, but considered globally they are like the tiles in a mosaic.

Facco’s research is something more than a mere vicious circle: it is a *circulus methodicus*, developed at different times and with different themes. We think back to the postcards of the early 2000s, with on the front, a photograph of the artist’s hands, both employed in painting a miniature which would then be applied to the back of the postcard. Fooled by the realism of the stamp, the post offices delivered the postcards to their destination, the postmen unaware of the fact that the franking on the back was actually a philatelic work of art. Over the years the front of the postcard changed depending on where it was posted, alternating scenic views with tourist attractions that the artist reproduced on canvas in large format (the stamps could be therefore, vice versa, a miniature of the artist’s own work or that of

others). Retrospectively, this gradation of dimension means we can connect the minutiae of the postcards to the cliché of the billboards that were the focal point of the exhibitions *Waiting for Beijing* and *Apparenti circostanze*.

Goethe said “There is nothing worth thinking but it has been thought before; we must only try to think it again” and that is what Andrea Facco is striving to do, used as he is to thinking in images and philosophising through painting. As a wise philosopher should he questions everything, because it is reasonable doubt that pushes him to reflect and to (re)paint everything that goes through his mind or passes before his eyes. As he himself explains “painting is the testimony to that which exists, of the physical world and not; the painter is not a creator, he or she is only a “means” through which, by virtue of the light, we can make contact with the image, can mould it to give back not a “copy”, but a place where something small talks to us about where it came from”. Bring back therefore that subtle relationship that is artist and muse coming together; the combination of gestures that is the making of this silent art that suspends everything that moves. That which seems like creation, is nothing more than rendering palpable that which has been understood”.

There are artists who prefer to assault painting head on and those who approach it from the side, but Andrea Facco can stand up to all of them from every point of view. The endeavours he puts himself through give him the authority to conserve his own freedom of expression, relieving the work from any kind of restriction of form or format. Even though at times the observer may feel bewildered and confused in this pictorial meandering, Facco satiates his craving for visual stimulation and puts his own talent to the test, conscious of the fact that painting is an eternal challenge, and one both personal and intellectual.

Andrea Facco Bonjour Monsieur Facco Viatico Pittorico, Otto Gallery, Bologna 2012