

Daniel Maillet. Bodies

1.

The sheets of paper that Daniel Maillet uses are immense. Two by four meters. A good deal more than the span of the arms, to paraphrase De Kooning. The figures are carved out *al vero*, from life. A curious expression, if we consider how clichés accumulate in our trade, until they become “the truth.” Grandeur nature it would be better to say. Given that they have some minimal intention of having something to do with nature.

These paper sheets are not the customary ones of the painter of theatrical scenery or frescos, which are gentle, humble sheets, though also theoretical, passive vehicles for the painter, lacking the confidence of canvas; in other words, sheets that are still private, in which testing and *souplesse* prevails. But these are different: they are candid and stiff, with a plastic consistency. They are physical places, like walls, yet not endowed with their own internal structure. They are concrete, resistant to gesture, merciless to mistakes. But at the same time they are the “blank” of the Conceptual artist, now incorporated and digested into the look of a desired design, but a design, still. Ambiguous.

A territory of ambiguity.

2.

Maillet has a sovereign vision, splendidly ambiguous. The exercise of portrayal, by way of abstract drawing, passes through a *mise en abîme* – lucid in its ferocity – of the sensuousness of the stroke and an almost empathic instinct for color.

The figure is there, as present as it is distanced, defined by its high degree of likeness, and at the same time indifferent to that likeness; elucidated, scrupulously specified, Jansenistically reduced to the point at which you perceive a loss of corporality.

At the same time, you perceive the persistent exhalation of the sheer sensuality of the body, with its temperatures, odors and secretions.

The exertion of extreme attentiveness and awareness, in which each mark is a concentrated incision. The anxiety – not nostalgia – of loss. In the sensuality of the body you feel the passion and the peak of desire that makes Maillet stiffen in a spasm of visual concussion; you feel the eroticism that abruptly determines the mastery of the image, at the beginning of the selection process, and the linguistic decision that extends the historical time of inscription to the reverberations of a faint hallucination. “If only paintings could scream like stuck pigs! And images did not die as soon as they were born,” as Gastone Novelli appealed, in search of a “writing without rancor.”

Without rancor, but baring its teeth, to stop at least a ghostly hint of tenderness.

3.

It is like the long filtering of an obsession that’s been rearranged, deconstructed, projected myths and models even within the art itself. The marvelous, dramatic shadow of Leo Maillet, so close by: the effect of the hard-pointed incisions, ossified, on and on through the genetic phylum (as if freezing Beckmann’s *autre ferociousness*) until the desolate bodies are denuded of the physiology of the sign: and the slab, the wood grain surface, resists like the strong material of Daniel’s paper.

And the obsession of identity, through which Maillet may live thinking himself to be Mayer, reverberates in images of deadly hardness like Kafka.

And this door leads to another legacy for Daniel: photography and August Sander’s Anton Räderscheidt, an image of absolute beauty; it reminds one of Tintoretto (again, body and visible skin... reread Thomas Bernhard), because it makes one think that a place is a person, the crossroads of that person’s history, and that person and place are a unity that cannot be abstracted from one another (if not in the blank that is so full of unwritten projections).

Indeed, perhaps the memory of other forms of ferocity and visionariness, extending from Hans Baldung Grien and Matthias Grünewald to Otto Müller’s dejected bodies and the intellectually tainted sensuality of Albert Heinrich and Franz Radziwill, triggers off in Daniel the definitive clash between photography’s capacity for mendacity (I recall a celebrated essay by Umberto Eco, *Sugli specchi*, which

points to photography as a “feeble designator”) and the imperiled truth that the gaze succeeds in finding when it makes itself the subject. Which, to judge by other ghosts and myths, is the question that, in a problematic triangulation, Daniel reads in the questioning style of Pearlstein or Kitaj, and not in those drawings tinged with literature and tempered with taste, such as by López and his circle.

4.

If this work were photography, it would be comparable to the ruthlessness of a Close or the ennui of a Strüth. Daniel loves the bodies and faces that he depicts, and in each work there is an embrace and an immediate alienation: the tension of an affective polarity, not the fiction of a Linnaean neutrality. The meaning of the work is this desire, this love, this impossibility, this loss.

5.

Again the body and the obligation of individual existence.

A perfect comparison: Mel Ramos’s pin-ups. In the imagery of desire, pin-ups have been a case of plus que réel since at least the times of the goddesses, the Helens and Beatrices. And at the same time they are preeminently body and form, from Giorgione’s Venus to Courbet’s model: even Duchamp, with his staircase, makes a nude descend. In a worldly and at the same time anthropologically foundational version, they are the paradigm of the beautiful that blends the senses and the intellect: for the Romans, formosissima means supreme form. Pin-ups are the incarnation of the ancient painter’s dream reduced to the proportions of the meretricious, modern, sacred status of the star, inspiring confidence yet distant, a suggestion of possession and an insuperable remoteness.

The mythical beauty of painting, the pictorial myth of beauty, the allure of form: from which Daniel definitively, peremptorily, conclusively distances himself. His work is not about form, but about the quality of seeing and the sensual density of the body that is seen, from which the image is made; but already a different image, unrelated to any model, unique in its own mortal desperation. A different plus que réel, recalling Alberto Savinio’s celebrated reflection: “It is the depicted man that becomes the real man, the living man. The other, the original, the model, passes to the status of a remnant, a dead weight”: perhaps living is the fiction: who is the doublure for whom?

6.

I am looking at Bianca and the trio Alberto Flammer, Flavio Paolucci e Gianfredo Comesi. A Weimarian sense of triumph and deferred defeat of the physical body; the biography translated into appearance. And at the same time a kind of new objectivity, asocial and acultural, which rejects the code of mask and cinema, attempting an immediacy at the extreme conclusion of docta ignorantia. Like an anthropology of the eye, returning to the origin.

Life, love and death. As always.

Flaminio Gualdoni, Milano, 2002