

Riccardo Paternò Castello. Sublime Totems by Myriam Zerbi

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The artist finds inspiration to create, through his daimon: "I needed to paint, to go back to painting." This is how Riccardo Paternò Castello puts into action an iconoclastic gesture that, from the etymological meaning (the Greek *Eikon klao*), paradoxically, aims to destroy the image. Perhaps it is the subconscious that triggers this artistic action, which proceeds according to a philosophical method that goes back to the classic Socratic thought: the *pars destruens* must inevitably precede the *pars costruens*.

After having worked extensively on the art of portraiture, crossing the fields of a blatant and clear evidence of photographic reproduction, Riccardo Paternò Castello strongly felt the desire for freedom, that he instantly envisaged as a struggle. He felt the urge to indulge a categorical imperative: to disengage from the rulesets of descriptive mimesis, which led him to 'portray' through the pictorial physiognomy, grasping from the subjects he painted a sweetened and improved likeness. The time had come to conceive those portraits differently, as actual "visions from the inside" — outside and beyond any kind of idealisation.

He chooses to confront himself with works from the past, he engages with portraits that were conceived during previous centuries and in distant settings. He brings together powerful paintings, full of their specific strength, that were made by artists who were glorified throughout history, such as Bronzino, Goya, Velasquez. He chooses the masters with whom the confrontation would prove courageously and inexorably as a clash. To begin with, the artist is interested in the resumption of the subject. His brush starts by recreating the countenance as it manifested in pre-existing paintings. He transfers it onto the canvas, not without sudden and stimulating variations, he lets it enter in, slightly changed, imperceptibly modified, in the space of 'his' outline. He pictorially displays its undoing. The painter's gaze possesses the intensity of an existential intuition, which is a melancholic sense of breakdown of the visible.

Then comes the attack. It's invasive and wrecking, and was anticipated, even if only partially, by the phase of image reconstruction. The face is attacked, its shapes are utterly altered. Upon the faces, where paint is tossed, the appearance, covered and concealed, disappears in the audacious and fatal act of negation. Subsequently, little by little, from that layer of colour that is deposited, scraped, and removed, evanescent layers emerge, ambiguous figures appear "until the subject acquires a new, different personality that speaks to you and strikes you."

There can be no indulgence or hesitation, but only the ineluctability of an act that must be carried out with firmness and courage, "the painting understands if you are afraid." This is the phase to unhinge the image, erase the icon, denude it from any unnecessary appearance, deconstruct, disassemble the consolatory. What transpires is a quiet certainty of a posing humanity that, even during the assault, does not give up, and struggles to lose the frozen elegance of the comforting courtly posture. And whilst the portrait gets sucked up into an oblivion, that parts it from the original resemblance, the painter's vertigo of denied recognisability is the yearned liberation from the grids of every refined pleasure.

The creative metamorphosis takes on the things that live in darkness, it transforms the pictorial material into a wrapped and painful lump of unveiled and throbbing flesh, and the characters become puppets, reduced to their essentiality. Chance intervenes by bringing out new livid, evocative, effigies from consumed and obliterated stratifications.

The light, that can either be a vivid presence or a palpable absence, penetrates and unveils the wounds at the bottom of every being, wrapped up in gold or shadow — the very essence of the existential situation where melancholy, restlessness and fear, flourish and belong to the majority of beings. These are artfully hidden within the static parade of courtly portraits, within the stereotyped flaunting of smiles that are abundantly used during worldly occasions, within the vain display of garments that become mere scene costumes, as in the well-planned demeanour of a proud or seductive look .

It's a hand-to-hand combat that is being carried out by Riccardo Paternò Castello, who is confronting the image that undermines all conducts, and unmasking any simulacrum. During the duel, the action of the painter is not a bomb that aims to destroy, but a personal revolution, an impactful force that deconstructs the regularity of the figure, to fathom the abysses and the inexhaustible depths of shadow.

"I dig, I build, I remove," every painting that is made is a work of art that has achieved its harmony and *raison d'être*, right on the threshold, verging on its possible destruction: "The paintings work if they are in continuous, dynamic tension."

The disappearance of identity creates, in those who look at the work, disturbance, estrangement and even repulsion. But the emotion must be lived and followed through in one breath. The disrupted balance triggers a mirroring effect. The brush stirs, hits, swirls. It forges. The enterprise of Paternò Castello is a tormented process of transfiguration and revelation of the self in the other. He seeks, through detail, the essence of being, the beating heart of the human condition, within the tangled unresolved structural knots of the individual.

An expressive, powerful and desecrating energy transforms emblematic portraits of the past into contemporary totems. Grotesque and sublime, serious, poised between life and death, they embody substance and spirit, and appear as nocturnal and disturbing presences. They reflect, through the language of art brilliantly mastered by Paternò Castello, the storms of existence, the tortuous paths of being and the infinite turn of events of the theatre of the mind.