

The power of imagery. Andrea Benetti's neograffitiism

It is highly probable that these paintings are the most ancient relics of the universal belief in the influence of imagery.

Ernst Hans Gombrich

Gombrich dedicates the opening pages of his essential work *The Story of Art* to the paintings discovered in the nineteenth century in the caves of Altamira, Spain, and in Lascaux, southern France, which represent the tribal origin of the incredible history of Western art. Art is a long and articulated linguistic journey that since the beginning of the last century has undertaken significant detours, and having separated from its norms and statues, separated into myriad codes and strongly influenced visual perception on many levels. And yet the primitive paintings that have been since relegated to art history books regain attention once again as they live on through Andrea Benetti's artistic inspiration. First of all, the Bolognese artist's work points out the power that painting and art in general have had over entire communities throughout history.

Andrea Benetti uses the language of primitive invention, but he is mostly interested in travelling from the sedimentation of prehistoric imagination to the description of contemporary landscapes.

His works brazenly depict visionary scenes, laden with primitive iconic memories that graft onto very personal ideas of what art is.

In his mind, after September 11th the time has come for the western world to start anew ("We need to start over from the origins of man and primitive art, to build a new world where respect for nature and human dignity are at the center of human desires"). In other words, in modern society we need to consolidate meaning and realign our focus towards our existential condition, respect for nature ("that same nature with which we need to regain harmony and that we need to learn to respect and love"), and especially in artistic endeavors, we need to avoid those self-referential gestures and conceptualizations that are gratuitously provocative in nature and an end in themselves ("a broken washing machine or a rusty bicycle are not art, they are just a broken washing machine and a rusty bicycle. Art is something completely different").

In the midst of an epoch in which we risk the self-destruction of our planet, this is what Andrea Benetti reveals in his *Manifesto dell'arte neorupestre (New Cave Art Manifest)*, presented in 2009 at the 53rd Venice Biennale (Pavilion I.I.L.A. – Costa Rica, *Nature and dreams*). In it, he declared his intentions for his works: "Art has to return to its origins [...] must have the foresight to retrace its steps all the way back to its roots, conscious of the need to send a strong and clear message that it is ready to rebuild the foundations of our very existence".

Benetti leverages the strength of symbolism with modern language and icons. In this sense he is an artistic strategist who calls on his multifaceted background and particularly, his corporate manager mentality comes to the fore, with his aptitude for organization and communication techniques, his acute attention to the environment and politics. He knows how to attract the right kind of attention to his body of work. With the precision of a manager, he bypassed the art system and earned accomplishments of undeniable value. From the Venice Biennale to the 61st edition of the Michetti Award, to Francavilla al Mare, and to Palazzo Taverna in the Italian capitol, in the home of the Amedeo Modigliani Institut Archives Legales. In those expositions as well as others that we present in this occasion, the artist has shown his recent works that—as Silvia Grandi often points out—have adopted those linguistic characteristics that can be placed alongside the symbolic experiences that have found a place in pop art, where the artist moves through conceptual action. And I think I can add, he does so not without implying relationships among the figures, marks and forms, lending a surrealistic flavor, and not without borrowing from abstract styles of the avant garde masters that Benetti so loves

(Vasilij Kandinskij, Paul Klee, Joan Mirò), which give his own style such an eclectic flare. He places an intricate set of easily decoded figures on the canvas. They bring about a sense of annulment and of a chronological collision of meanings that are sedimented in memory, now in the context of a *repechage* of the repertoire of prehistorical symbols. There stylized animals and hunters, that is prey and predators, play out magical scenes—propitiatory, a contemporary projection that alternatively presents compositions that are decoratively phytomorphic; a renewed gallery of prey and predators or more precisely—consumed objects and consumers; toy cars, airplanes, boats, marine landscapes, golfers and golf courses.

It is an assortment of abstract forms and fields of color, suspended in the unreal atmosphere of space, that identify the new symbols of the cultural moment they depict. As we examine the materials with care, we find he has combined acrylics and natural substances (coffee, karkadè, cacao, hennè) on a chalk base in order to satisfy his chromatic choices. Figures emerge from the thick material so that his icons gain thickness and height, almost alluding to spatial three-dimensionality. In a sort of *cloisonnisme* like that of Gauguin, he defines his figures in an attempt to provoke visual immediacy and a simplified interpretation of the outlines of the figures, which being surrounded by fields of color are immediately recognizable.

Andrea Benetti's visionary outlook focuses on his poetics, between reality and imagination. He constructs fragments of calm and sometimes amusing scenes from contemporary life. His depictions are metaphors of the growing ineptitude of a habit of upholding an irresponsible, if comfortable, almost libertine light heartedness—lacking all sentiment and emotion or even worry. His works show a precarious journey towards imminent ruin, as the artist himself interprets it. His themes are a call for a more political reflection on the questions about our current condition that humankind has removed. He sees nature as the only possible form of rehabilitation.

With a wise ability to hint at things, while setting in motion the ambiguity of visions, Benetti intends to reawake in each spectator an appreciation for iconic symbolism through ironic yet functional imagery. He makes the dialogue between artist and his public much more explicit, using the magical evocative power of images.

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