

Towards Absolute Painting

by Antonello Tolve

In Olimpia Bera's paintings (Zalău, Romania – 1983) *time does not stand still*, it is not frozen in the inertia of a *phatic image*¹. Viewers feel like they are experiencing *brushstrokes applied in various moments in time*; they relate to a story without an end, and perceive different movements which were created with months, days and hours of intense work, all compressed into a single visual perimeter. With the help of her works, viewers relive their memories and experiences through a familiar vocabulary in which everything is appeased and mixed with chromatic overlays, veining and veiling, *fantasia senza fili* (Marinetti), all of this leaving a visible trace of a fully lived life on the canvas. The artist is attracted by life and its infinite meanings². These become the favored territory of a never-ending narration, an *entretien infini*³, a path which passes through life and describes the intimacy of a few years marked by the comprehension of small things, small stories and small occasions.

Olimpia Bera elegantly re-evaluates artistic genres such as landscape, seascape, portrait and genre painting (the latter being characterized by representations of scenes and events of everyday life). She creates a visual environment composed of nuances, sketches, drawings, models, studies, thoughts which redefine memories, and she transfers them onto the canvas with the help of smoky transparency effects, with the force of *incomplete vision of the representation* (apparently *non-finito*), in order to bring forth to the same table culture, nature and the heroic chaos of matter.

With her project entitled *Imponderable* (2016), the artist reflects upon the different modulations created by ink on paper, imagining vast and whirling spaces, which bear a movement similar to that of William Turner's painting style, and reminds the viewer of the poetics of the sublime (- the cycle is composed of small-sized artworks to which 105x266 cm sheets of paper are added) thus pushing the onlooker towards a "*marerbosio*" (which refers to an idea elaborated by Gabriele D'Annunzio about a mysterious and unpredictable world). Olimpia Bera unveils new paths of communication which go beyond the ensemble of materials used in her previous studies about informal art, in order to establish a definite association with painting, as well as primordial shapes with intimate, ordinary and mundane references⁴.

In *Unnatural Circumstances* (2014-2016) nature is objectified by using heterogeneous materials (rope, glue, canvas, satin paper and magnetic ribbon), or fragmented, by using watercolors in small horizontal squares (14.5x21cm) which resemble film frames. On the other hand, *Landmarks* (2015-2016) is a captivating series which represents fragments of landscapes with an alienating emotional charge (even erotic, synthetic, abstract); the artist redefines her intimate pact with nature and seascape through a renewed *Weltgefühl* (*world feeling*) and a restored *Weltanschauung* (*world view*).

Abreast with these cycles dedicated to various approaches to natural landscape, there is a more personal, more narrative and poetic model, which follows the moments of day to day life, marked by mundane concerns, familiar places, games and objects, joy and sorrow, magnetic elegance or irresistible moments well-placed in her topographic memory (an assimilating, visual memory inherited from her ancestors).

The illusory disorder of *Sentimental Monographs* (2015-2016) precedes a *total Malerei* (which brings to mind Monet's water lilies), and highlights clear brush strokes, a mark, with the shadow of

1 From the Greek word φητικός; a stereotyped phrase which, according to Bronisław Malinowski, has the meaning of a mere affirmation.

2 Cf. A. Trimarco, *Il presente dell'arte*, preface by G. Dorfles, Tema Celeste, Siracusa 1992.

3 M. Blanchot, *L'entretien infini*, Gallimard NRF, Paris 1969.

4 Daniel Buren affirmed «art has never been an underlying problem, but a problem of forms». G. Boudaille, *Au Salon de mai / La nouvelle vague ne fait pas oublier celle de 1950*, colloquy by Daniel Buren, in «Les lettres françaises», n° 1233, May 8th-15th, Paris 1968, p. 31.

the present, implying the nostalgic traces of a process, an action fed by pulsating materials and hidden nostalgic traces. A woman looking out of the window, with her back towards a bookshelf, a sun-kissed old kitchen, an old woman with a child in her arms in a living room with a stove, a look out the window which brings together the interior and the exterior, or the corner of a house full of traces of paint and childhood. These are just a few of the artworks which compose this pictorial cycle, which manages to retrieve the present from a continually forward moving past, happening somewhere far away, in a distant yet not indifferent manner.

Endless Game is the title of the artist's most current project, one of her most important works from 2017, in which several children play together in a circle, forming a Ring-a-ring-o'Roses. In this, everything becomes ethereal and fluid in order to highlight the chromatics of the elements – for example, the canvases are embellished with bits of furniture, “the deaf and loyal companions” that we find in our homes⁵. Thus, art marches into the everyday life, widening its acting ground in order to encompass simple tales (similarly to the novel *Una storia semplice - A Simple Story* -, written by Leonardo Sciascia in 1989, based on the theft of Caravaggio's *Nativity with St. Francis and St. Lawrence*⁶ in 1609) and experiences of the artist, presented directly to the viewer. Olimpia Bera experiences and unravels the biographic painting of her own manifest, creating a close dialogue not only with painting and its tools – such as color, surface, structure, form, and light above all – but also with her firstborn, who participates directly in these visual tales. The child is present as the subject of the work, and in some cases she makes childlike gestures, intervening with her own hands in order to leave her very own trace, her very own mark.

In *Endless Game* objects are painted with several minimal and quick brush strokes, still they are clearly perceived even if barely sketched: the figures become one with the ambience in order to create and highlight a shared environment. Sparkling colors and a constant rain of light make everything light – *The King II* (2016) portrays a girl with a horse, presenting the majesty of childhood – and viewers' attention will constantly shift from real life to its representation, from what seems to be ordinary towards the evidence of an extraordinary phenomenon.

Fuelled by a constant need to weave together the real with the unreal, Olimpia Bera's paintings offer expressive territories of gesture, sign and material, in order to turn everyday life into dreamlike sceneries, into reflections of memories and thrilling landscapes. These are capable to steal the viewers' smiles and to transpose power and tenderness into a future that resembles past and revives the present, its moments, its unpredicted situations and passing joys.

5 G. Bassani, *Il giardino dei Finzi-Contini* (1962), with preface by E. Montale, Einaudi, Torino 1980, p. 155.

6 The artwork was stolen during the night between 17th and 18th October 1609 from the Oratorio di San Lorenzo in Palermo. It has never been found.