

An Inner Path
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Her paintings are apparently only of one colour With these words Giuseppe Panza di Biumo, perhaps the most important international collector of monochrome painting, introduced me many years ago to a cycle of works painted in 1975 by Ruth Ann Fredenthal, an American artist of considerable merit, protagonist of this very sophisticated art but unfortunately still little known in Italy. The key for reading the works is here, in the apparent obviousness of this lucid affirmation. In fact, it would appear logical to maintain that the definition of monochrome painting can be given more easily by means of the subtraction of meanings. Monochrome painting is not one of the figure, it is not 'gestural' abstraction, it is not pure colour given on the surface, it is not two-dimensional surface, it is not only matter and it is not the zeroing of meaning. Therefore what is it? By way of this approach one could define its nature as radical abstraction, light, depth, chromatic vibration, multiplicity of meanings - in short, as being complexity. To critically approach the work of Sonia Costantini requires the same point of view: that is, the same exercise of focussing on a visual and spiritual emotionality capable of offering precious indications for reading her research work, itself complex and at times even hermetic in the eyes of most people. As Fabrizio D'Amico suggested, when one remains for a length of time which cannot be too short in front of a painting by Sonia Costantini then our cultural and semantic background indicates the road in order to place and contextualise her work within the course of that line of abstract radicalism - monochrome, that is - which has passed through all of the Twentieth Century and that now allows an historical and critical operation which is quite useful for setting her work in the sphere of international research. It should also be said that Sonia Costantini's certain belonging to a precise class of experimenters does not remove importance from the responsibility of the critical judgement but, if anything, broadens its horizons in accordance with a simultaneously diachronic and synchronic vision, one capable with greater approximation of defining the tesserae of that grand puzzle of contemporary painting of which she is part. To point out that her line of research is to be found with the category of painting seems important for delineating the focus of the critical reasoning and for reflecting on her cultural affiliation (painting, we have said, as a genre that is always actual in the vast field of art although one that has certainly been 'shaken' throughout the whole of the Twentieth Century by alternating vicissitudes which have inevitably conditioned its destiny and fortune). When one reasons with regards to the expressive and linguistic choice of an artist it would be necessary - in my opinion - to reposition this choice in a biography which can very often reveal particular forms of occasions that have germinated propensities and vocations in the individual consciousness. The case of Sonia Costantini confirms this thesis: in belonging to a cultural context like that of Mantua, crowded and compact with art and with a bent for a status of an elevated lineage with regards to painting, not practiced in an episodic manner but the expression of a cogent demand that came from one of the most significative 'adventures' of European collecting of all times; and also that physical and above all cultural proximity to the experience of Italian analytical painting of the 1970s about which criticism always writes with reference to the work by Costantini. In the latter case we are speaking particularly about the work by Oliveri, Aricò, Griffa, Verna, Battaglia and Pinelli, artists to whom Costantini certainly 'refers' and in part follows like a compass on an equal footing for orienting herself in the vast field of experimental research. The above factors appear

as being two 'hinges' that delimit her excellent network of relations and cultural models when precisely in the opening years of the 1980s her work began to define itself as a profession, a craft, a primary existential need to which to dedicate her entire life and attention. And yet other experiences should certainly be brought into play in order to understand the exegesis of Costantini's monochrome painting, experiences more removed in time but which on a par with those indicated above with even greater accent and consequence filter her extremely personal interpretation of carrying out painting.

All the others are pupils.

It is to the painting created in America in the later post-war period that we should certainly look in order to understand the course of Costantini's monochrome vicissitudes, without disturbing Kasimir Malevich who in 1918 exhibited *White on White*, perhaps the maximum example of the radical rejection of the sign of all time, as Malevich himself explained: "As soon as we address the instruments of our intelligence to the objects of the material world these are broken; the highest point of intelligence, the most profound, the most vast and the most distant is breakage". Or a certain zeroing of sense which derives from Dadaist poetics and in primis from the experimentations by Duchamp and from his firm desire to substitute painting-painting with the painting-idea. From among others, including giants of the importance of the Swiss migrant to America, Joseph Albers, the Latvian painter Marc Rothko or the New York artist Barnett Newman, two names seem to be particularly important due to their refractivity on the work of the artist from Mantua. On the one hand there is undoubtedly Ad Reinhardt and his subliminal monochrome painting while, on the other, we have Robert Ryman with his white canvases, new realities of the world. Born in 1913, in his painting between the two World Wars Ad Reinhardt experimented the search for a totally American path, capable of expressing identity values that freed creativity from European influence. From the very beginning he showed his inclination for an abstract sign painting (in certain ways in debt to Indian decorative art and also to a somewhat Oriental influence). Closer to the Color Field Painting of Newman, Rothko and Still, in his research he acted by way of subtraction, gradually eliminating the image, the drawing and finally the colour, in this way aspiring to the absolute in painting. As he wrote in 1957: "Art can only be defined as exclusive, negative, absolute and timeless".

His paintings do not contain a search/research tending to what he himself ironically defined as the 'transcendental absurd' of the abstract expressionists but certainly the absolute purity achieved by his painting transforms them into real icons of that non-objectivity, rarefied and essential, that was to become one of the most important elements to pass from the New York School to the period of the minimalists. Although what we are interested here in bringing to the centre of the reflection treating the cultural models which have influenced the history of European monochrome painting is the "Reinhardt case, as seen by Barbara Rose in her fundamental book entitled *Autocritique: essay on art and anti-art 1963-1987* She in fact writes: "There is no doubt that his is classical art (perhaps with mystical nuances) and there is no doubt that it is abstract and that more precisely it is abstract painting". Therefore, going by these annotations, Ad Reinhardt in the systematic reduction of every object element prefigures a classical symmetry - the square format of his canvases is also proof of this thesis - whose expression is a flat monochrome painting and yet one differentiated in the tones and texture, to the point

of revealing to a little less than subliminal perception that cruciform geometry of the geometrical planes which mark his surfaces. Although while Ad Reinhardt's chromatism is limited to a dark, greyish matter which rejects whatever emotional seduction of colour in favour of an absolute abstraction, it is evident that his lesson soon became the mental condition for the person who wanted to follow a new path in the field of painting by exploring every excess and taking experiments to the extreme limit of expressive possibilities, all within a 'frame' of symmetry and measure that curiously once again led his example to the 'mould' of European semantics. It was instead thanks to Robert Ryman if the course of monochrome painting found a new expressive vein, in certain respects still concretist although also spiritualist. Born in 1930, Ryman achieved critical success at the beginning of the 1960s together with many acclaimed artists of Minimal Art such as Agnes Martin, Brice Marden and Robert Mangold. Differing from Ad Reinhardt who did not concentrate on the chromatic variability of his paintings, Ryman 'pledged allegiance' to white, initiating a profound interest for monochromatic experimentation understood, however, not as the zeroing of meanings (Malevich), of conceptualism (Duchamp) or the absoluteness of painting (Reinhardt) but as the search for the essence of painting.

Besides the canvas he also experimented with new and also anomalous materials like steel and aluminium which were added to those traditionally used such as paper, the canvas or cardboard. Similarly and indifferently, he also used new media for painting such as opaque enamel and acrylic colours, all of which aimed at perceiving painting as place of the infinite, of new expressive possibilities. His attention at the time was above all attracted by the very physicalness of painting, therefore removed from a programmed or conceptual vision which referred the final meaning of the painting to something other. His painting is severe and rigorous while at the same time being extremely visually seductive in its results. It was the internal syntax of the painting which in his experiments interested him most, even in his large works that characterise some of his important works of environmental art. Paradoxically, his is a "realist" painting which produces and creates a new object in space. As Giuseppe Panza di Biumo wrote regarding Ryman: "The creation of abstract art does not eliminate realism but upsets its importance"(and, we could add, its meaning). Square and white surfaces are the instruments of a personal construction of the world which Ryman transmitted to the younger generations, to those who like himself want a confrontation with the physical and mental exercise of the monochrome. Between these two 'masters' - and therefore at the crossroads of an absolute experience of painting and a research regarding essence - one by definition finds the array of contemporary painters who have chosen monochrome painting as their field of observation and principal identification of a personal existential path. Sonia Costantini forms part of this group - in fact, she belongs to the youngest generation. Behind her there are certainly the experiments of some of the aforementioned Italian painters of analytical art although I think that her work, due to its coherence and quality, can easily be compared to that group of American artists which 'arrived' in Italy during the 1980s thanks to the interest and passion of Giuseppe Panza di Biumo. In particular I am talking Stuart Arends, Ruth Ann Fredenthal, David Simpson, Michael Rouillard, Winston Roeth and Phil Sims, all artists who employed monochrome albeit with different sensitivity and diverse technical means. Certainly for Sonia Costantini, professionally 'born' precisely at the beginning of the 1980s and is a number of years younger with respect to these American artists just listed, the immersion in this practice has meant a very original placing, even if

marginal at the same time vis-à-vis the currents present in Italy at the time. Only by way of example, let us remember the so-called 'poverism' of some artists in the rear of the great formation of the 1960s and 1970s, the new figuration of the Transavanguardia and the conceptual (all offspring of Duchamp) which nurtured the enthusiasm of the generation born in the 1980s - and continue to so. And yet isolation did not constitute an obstacle for her peremptory desire to experiment areas of creative experience that in certain respects were new and untried, fields of empirical and spiritual knowledge which were hardly being sounded by the majority of Italian painters. If - and certainly only due to contiguity - from Reinhardt she learned the search/research of the absolute and from Ryman - once again due to empathic closeness - she imported the investigation regarding essence, one must nevertheless say that it is her profound belonging to classical artistic culture which impresses her work with the most profound signs: are the ecstasy and the melancholy which have always been found in her painting not perhaps the primary sources of all the great European artistic tradition of the modern age?

Mental or natural operation?

In the exploration of Sonia Costantini's work from the onset one immediately comes across a problem that regards the pictorial practice adopted by her in the creation of the work of art. A practice that reflects a very original specificity of her carrying out painting. Above we observed that the two great 'masters' of monochrome painting, Ryman and Reinhardt, in their experimentation introduced work modalities which were quite different - evidently dependent upon their individual research. This is also true for Sonia Costantini who has elaborated an extremely personal work redefinition of the space. For this reason I need

concision, simplicity in the plan although also complexity in the construction of the pictorial fabric. The rigour of the forms and the laying of the colour are conceptually and expressively necessary, the one to the other".

So in the colour-light dialectic two very important variables come into play in order to understand Costantini's work: on the one hand that of an imperceptible sign weaving which is only registered after some minutes of observing the painting and that takes us towards the most profound strata of knowing; and on the other hand that of the space which is not dilated beyond the frame but in following a centripetal motion - clarified by Bonomi - is almost sucked in within the surface, in this way not only attracting "the eyes and thoughts of the observer" but also the immaterial fluidity of the minuscule particles which define its physical structure: space annulled, therefore, in a massing of meanings that all lie inside the perimeter of the painting and that refer to nothing but themselves. The titles of her works confirm the absolute non-objectivity that characterises all of her work: they are equal to assertions, they clearly state fields of investigation. They are interpretative means that always and in whatever case are identified with the principal instrument of the painting, with the name of the colour which occupies the surface, changed in its peculiar luminous essence: a sort of filing system of the infinite expressive possibilities of matter-light encountered in the mystery of the creative act with the intimate and existential drives of the artist. And it is in this encounter that the colour acts and reacts on the semantic plane to the most profound psychical solicitations, exploring their mantra, soliciting their expression, the exploitation and evaluation of the most acute emotive notes, vibrations and palpitations of the most secret essence of creation. Costantini's answer to the question by Claudio Oliveri regarding the meaning of her painting seems to be steered in this direction: "It is the go-between in order to better think the

world, a place of transit where things seem close to revealing themselves. It is the urgency of saying with the knowing how to say, fragment of space where colours, figures and forms tell the ineffable, visited by light".

She uses adjectives and verbs that immediately refer to the mysterious visionary quality of creation: are revelation and ineffability not perhaps words that refer to the inaccessible nature regarding every description of the creative act? And yet we know that thanks to empathy, to the *einfühlungstheorie* theorised by Vischer - who in this way denominated the emotional relationship of participation that one feels before a work of art - the mystery of artistic creation is substantiated between the doing and the looking, between the searching for and the finding, between accrediting and revealing, all actions that coexist in the artist's relationship with his or her public, by now become protagonist of a new creative act which is brought about in sight and in the awareness of the unveiled truths. We are therefore faced by a true epiphany of painting which is freed before our eyes in the naturalness of its pure essence: that is, in the rarefied rituality of the spreadings of colour, in the prophecy of a material doing which embodies unimaginable consequences, discovering the most profound meaning of a melancholy descent towards the elusive nature of life which passes through the inexpressible solitude of the soul. By what road to once again emerge onto the surface, to return from where one arrived, to take a rebourne the paths of the descent? What stirs the heart of the artist in the experience of the infiniteness of her own creation?

The requisites for doing/making art are the search for the absolute and for universality.

Probably this old sentence contains a part of the truth and shows a path possible for the ascent. Above all it seems appropriate in order to reply to that search for the sense of monochrome painting, for the most part subject to a simplistic interpretation or else judged as superficial painting which denies/rejects the ethical and aesthetic value precisely due to its obsessive reductionism. And yet, if less is more as the minimalists declared, to which very little is owed today by monochrome painting, then also in the field of this specific genre the rarefaction of the sign, of the colour and of space - forced onwards to the limit of absolute formal Nothingness, 'matteric' and chromatic - could mean very much more than an intellectual exercise. Moreover, for more than sixty years from generation to generation we have seen the repetition of the same anxiety to experiment these so-called 'off limit' zones of painting. Can one believe that the destiny of this particular creative experience - still not yet exhausted in its most authentic vein - can be marked by a descending parabola? Do we not perhaps owe this inexhaustible vitality of monochrome art to the 'disenchantment' of much of postmodernist conceptual painting, as also to "today's flowering of an ephemeral art that marks the second phase of the secularisation of art prophesied by Marcel Duchamp", as Barbara Rose explains? And that hope in its ability to resist the media flows and the adverse powers of the market is not perhaps identified with the search for the absolute and for universality to which it has bestowed all of its energy? In looking at the works by Sonia Costantini, capable of always transmitting new meanings, new perturbation but also new prophesies, it would really seem that this is one of the few fronts of contemporary art capable - today as in the past - of touching the invisible and most sensitive chords of that existential search which grips the heart of the artist and which before our eyes opens to the ecstasy of a possible truth.

1 F. D'Amico, *Il tesoro lento e inattuale di Sonia*, in *Sonia Costantini*, exhibition catalogue, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Palazzo Massari, Ferrara, PAC, 8 December 2001 - 3 February 2002, Ferrara, 2001.

At the beginning of his introduction D'Amico writes: "In front of the canvases by Sonia Costantini one has to linger at length, and in silence: the necessary condition of seeing".

2 D. Vallier, *Abstract Art*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London/New York 1970.

3 In B. Rose, in *Autocritique: essay on art and anti-art 1963-1987*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London/New York 1988.

4 S. Hunter, J. Jacobus and D. Wheeler, *The New York School*, in *Modern Art*, Prentice Hall (3rd edition), New Jersey 2004.

5 B. Rose, *Autocritique...*, 1988, op. cit.

6 G. Panza di Biumo, 1995. *L'arte alla fine del secolo*, in *La collezione Panza di Biumo. Artisti degli anni Ottanta e Novanta*, exhibition catalogue by G. Belli and G. Panza di Biumo, Mart, Trento, Palazzo delle Albere, 12 September - 8 December 1996, Milan 1996, p. 38.

7 G. Bonomi, *Documenti di pittura 2*, Costantini, D'Oora, Iacchetti, Exhibition bulletin, no. 179, new series, Galleria Il Milione, Milan, 10 April - 30 May 2008, Milan 2008.

8 G. Bonomi, *ibidem*.

9 G. Bonomi, *ibidem*.

10 C. Olivieri, *Colloquio con Sonia Costantini*, in *Sonia Costantini*, exhibition catalogue, Ferrara, Galleria d'Arte Moderna, Palazzo Massari, PAC, 8 December 2001 - 3 February 2002, Ferrara 2001.

11 C. Olivieri, 2001, *Colloquio...*, *ibidem*.

12 An argument fully treated by Barbara Rose in the chapter *The Politics of Art*, in *Autocritique...*, op. cit.