

CRISTIANA PERRELLA

When Daniela Papadia uses a photograph as the basis of one of her paintings and it doesn't matter whether she finds it in the "National Geographic" or if she herself takes it specially, on purpose she is undertaking a more complex action than simply reproducing a pre-packed image on canvas. By painting from snaps, she goes beyond the facts which are represented in them; she filters the phenomenological aspect of them and shows up their basic content, the meaning of things. She draws on the present, even the immediate, as captured in real time by the lens, and she carries it to a metahistorical plain rather than an historical one, and then gives it back to us with a symbolic value rather than just an informative one, a piece of mere reportage.

Facts in themselves are stupid, as Nietzsche wrote; they do not produce knowledge, it is what they symbolise that confers value on them. The aim of Papadia in choosing and painting a fact, an image of the real, is therefore to suggest its connection with problems to which the image itself is or can be linked, problems of which it is, or can be, a symbol. Thus in one of her 1994 paintings, the Image of the charge of a group of young Demonstrators against the police in the Far East is transformed into an emblem of every conflict, man against man, white against black.

Their universality is strengthened by the reference, in the light of the night and the composition bristling with lances and teeming with figures, to the mother of all battles in art, that of San Romano painted by Paolo Uccello around 1456. Denuding the initial image of all reference to particular connotations, or at least clearly attenuating it, is one of the strategies used by Papadia to stress the rejection of the contingent, which instead brings immediacy to the photo. Her figures often stand against monochrome backgrounds which deny, depth and all additional information to the characters.

In any case, the "here and now" of their Capture by the camera is never discernible. With precision; indeed it is sometimes made deliberately mysterious. What, for instance, are the seven identical figures, leaning forward and viewed from the side, doing in a major picture of 1996? Even the most active imagination is not enough to identify them as a baseball team as it bows to the public before a game.

In other works, a few details, such as vaguely indicated bodily outlines, or ways of dressing, barely point out the scene as being from one part of the world or another. Paradoxically, the more indeterminate the place, the less it turns out to be a common place. The commonplace chains us to the event, to the story, to the constant celebration of some event which has already taken place.

In contrast, Papadia's painting avoids being informed of the story, in order to foster awareness of the universal human condition of which the event is a sign. The only things to be described with a certain care, therefore, are those which it is fashionable today to call non-places; i.e. the new public areas; places of anonymity, of transit, the same in any latitude, becoming more and more numerous every day.

Stations, airports, factories, waiting rooms, supermarkets, places which do not proclaim any relationship to the individuals who frequent them; places which hold no memories, traces, intentions, which do not evoke stories and which retain nothing of those who pass through them. Places which are everywhere and nowhere, the true great novelty of our contemporary landscape, and the object of reflection for many of today's artists: the Italians Pancrazzi, Lambri and Bernardi to mention just a few. In the metropolitan cities of all the world, non-places are taking over from piazzas and historic centres now emptied of every urban, collective function as places for the mass and the crowd.

And it is precisely on the multitude, the Group, the anonymous nucleus of people where nothing seems to distinguish one from the other that Daniela Papadia's attention is focused. From her gigantic archive of media images, she chooses only those which portray groups of people. The isolated individual never appears in Her paintings.

Thus as we look through the images of her numerous works, we find images of couples dancing, Moslems at prayer, bathers, children playing, people waiting for an underground train or working in a factory or an office; passengers seated in a carriage or squashed in on a bus; women arm-in-arm at a demonstration, or caught in an embrace of sisterhood and friendship.

We realise that the basso continuo over which the polyphonic meeting of faces, destinies, acts are played out in her paintings, the "Big Issue" which has animated them since their first formulation, is the relationship between the individual and society, between single identities and collective identity, in all the contradictory formulations which such a theme may assume in the present day.

There is in fact a double and opposing tension in our times: that of the loss of the subject in the crowd, and that of the claim of absolute power on the part of the individual conscience. This situation is charged with risks, paradoxes, conflicts; but it also offers flexible contexts for innovation and subversion, margins of freedom, reinvention of rules and roles.

"This is our contemporary state: always torn between unifying, totalising urges, and paths of specific detail, frontiers on which as fugitives from life we only look for moments", writes Assunta Viteritti in an essay on Papadia's works, entitled "Profughi d'identita" (Refugees of identity).

Refugees in the sense of people in transit, in search of a point of embarkation, deprived of a country but always on the move, often portrayed, and not by accident, in the actual moment of departing, of moving away. The redefinition of our essential being in the world has never demanded a path so devoid of reference points as it does today: almost a case of blind navigation.

This is what Daniela Papadia's images speak to us about; drawing symbolic elements and examples from reality to tell of the unquiet identity of our contemporary existence. Her insight into our times, concentrated only on what is meaningful, what is essential, recalls that of Baudelaire on the modern city: "Les deux mains au menton, du haut de ma mansarde/ Je verrai l'atelier qui chante et qui bavarde/ Les tuyaux, les clochers..." (With my chin resting on both hands, from high up in my attic, I will see the studio which sings and chatters, the tiles and the bell-towers... "from Tableaux parisiens).

It seems capable of summing up in a phrase the two worlds which characterise it: religion and work. Her insight, however, sees things from on high and from far away, without belonging; the same insight that Papadia has used for a long time in her paintings, where collective events are observed from an aerial, distant prospect, without the people taking part in them ever "looking the camera in the face".

In the works created in this last year, on the other hand, this insight unexpectedly changes, and with it, the "tailoring" of the paintings. "Distance as dwelling" is the title of the new cycle now presented in exhibition; it signals a descent to ground level by the artist, who not only portrays herself in the midst of the people she represents, but above all tackles a theme which affects her closely: that of feminine identity understood as difference, otherness, distance. Inhabitable and practicable, but still distance. The new pictures portray a group of women, always the same ones, this time given character and individuality (the artist and her friends).

They invade the canvas cheerfully, consciously take possession of it, looking the spectator right in the eye. "Women and men only become identical artificially. There is equality between them only by a submission to a law which demands it.

But from that moment, a model of humanity is imposed which alienates men and women from each other", states Luce Irigaray, the leading spokesman of the philosophy of "difference", in his celebrated book "To you I love".

Thinking of the universal as the place where sexual difference has name and voice means presupposing an intersubjective relation where everyone can exist in their own belonging to a gender, without reducing every experience "ad unum". Irigaray also writes: "I will never be you, you will never be me.

A gap remains between me and you. I will never be capable of perceiving you right to the depths [...]. My perception must remain a journey towards you, towards an "us" which will always be disunited, detached, always a "two" which cannot be reduced to one". In her new works, Daniela

Papadia "images" this difference, represents it; here, her restless ranging over the uncertain identity of our contemporary existence perhaps finally finds a home.