



SIMONA DOLCI

Portraits of contemporary archetypes. The sweet sound and memory of life

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“You will draw figures so that this will be sufficient to demonstrate what the figure has inside its soul; otherwise your art will not be commendable” (Leonardo Da Vinci). Inspired by 17th-19th Century painting and oriented towards a bottega kind of research, Simona Dolci’s artistic path suggests to us that a symbolic search is always essential, both for content and aesthetic reasons, guided by a contemporary language.

The attempt to plumb the idea enlivening an artist’s work is always a complex and delicate challenge. But Simona Dolci meets our concerns, since she repeatedly stated her affection for the great figurative art, as she considers that every experience lived by man throughout his life leaves a sediment in his memory, and this eventually creates the individual. The painter’s realism is devoted to man, his emotions and his daily fate, with a clear and recognisable reference to the world, and it draws inspiration or rather “experience” from the past in order to be present. “Men wrongly complain about time taking flight, and while they blame it for being too quick, they don’t see that this flow is actually correct; but the long memory given us by Nature makes everything that happened long ago look like it is present instead.”

This statement is a passage from Philosophical and literary fragments by Leonardo da Vinci and it illustrates a disarming truth using simple words: everything is closely linked to another one of the same kind through a mnemonic leitmotiv, even if this is dozens of years, or centuries, distant from the first one. Everything turns memory backwards, but time states firmly the present and makes us think - fascinating us.

Dolci shows a willingness to be rooted in a distant, yet glorious and to some extent still valid tradition. This is based on a high opinion of figurative painting, drawing and techniques. When choosing a theme she prefers genres like symbolic portraiture, house or atelier interiors and updating classical themes by depicting figures who become effigies of a contemporary thinking and state of mind, similar to their clothes: the result is an effect of estrangement and awareness of the actual human condition. This is where incommunicability and loneliness - despite the amount of available technological connections - are a kind of “ace beats everything” man can react to, by repossessing himself and his own history. The artist brings to the spectator’s attention the poetics of today’s historical realism, so that her paintings find their right place in the varied and many-sided landscapes of current art production, as made clear by the exhibition set in St. Augustine’s complex in Pietrasanta. The human body is the heart of Dolci’s painting. Bodies of men and young women, signifying beauty, truth, physical and anatomical evidence, gracefully showed sensuality; but also, insoluble, bodies stating something else, struggling to go beyond what can be seen, beyond the surface of things, “under the skin”. The artist’s physiques and their unpredictable poses even when referring to traditional models, crave to convey a substance, an essence regarding spirit, consciousness, deep,

intimate and impenetrable human identity. A ceaselessly renewed search for transcendence, that must be intended in a literal rather than religious sense: her painting questions the same reality whose main part is represented by bodies. Art and Life, Myth and Reality - consider for instance Mercury-Hermes or The Messenger, where stylistic mimicry reaches the limits of virtuosity - Psychology and Alchemy: different and converging stimulations to portray the human condition, the presence of man in the world - something that deep down remains a mystery, fascinating and inspiring. The artist summarises these suggestions through a painting characterised by a noble figurative style: her language is mainly modelled on the plastic art urgency of illuminated bodies and in a less determining way on mannerist researches on the various articulations of the human figure. These are typical of the Mannerism after Michelangelo, even the international one. They are also mediated and absorbed, some of them by way of elective affinities, by means of her solid education as an architect devoted to painting - thanks to the encounter with Nerina Simi and, after that, with Daniel Graves and Charles Cecil, with whom she carried out neo-renaissance and neo-16th Century studies. These were typical of that Italian 20th Century which wanted to claim also in Tuscany the high content value and great tradition of the artistic studios in our country. This was during a very hard time for figurative painting - an example could be Annigoni's or Sciltian's Caravaggio-like style, closely related to the thinking developed by De Chirico or the one elaborated by the fine critic Roberto Longhi. This was also the same Italian 20th Century that continuously had proselytes in foreign countries, above all in the Anglo-Saxon enclave on the Arno bank, in England and in the north of the United States.

Nowadays, this furrow made of professional pride and love for a noble artistic tradition is where we find, both in Italy and abroad, the multi-faced work by Rocco Normanno, Michelangelo della Morte, Roberto Ferri and Giorgio Dante. There are also hyper-realist artists like Claudio Bravo, Sharon Core, Paul Cary Goldberg, together with Simona Dolci's works and her teaching at the Florence Academy of Art, a painter who combines History with today's turmoil and poetry. Here following are the essential elements gleaned by the painter from the glorious models of the past, whom she considers incomparably more alive, true and stimulating than her - and our - contemporary models: Andrea del Sarto, Caravaggio, Battistello, Ribera, Velasquez - because of a certain chromatic note of elegance - Degas, Annigoni. The depiction of flesh, blood beating and running under the skin; an extremism which is physic and metaphysic at the same time, a realism absorbed in formulas characterized by classical compositional elegance; the joy of life, prevailing over everything even if it is necessary supplied with regrets, disappointments, melancholies.

The artist's unique style lies in the naturalism of her paintings, declared in depicted subjects and atmospheres: if settings are not defined - studios, libraries, home interiors, rarely open landscapes - volumes of bodies often come out from "the darkness of the scene" or grey and ochre backgrounds tasting like sky and earth, monochromatic and vibrant. Through a hand to hand fight between figures and background - a kind of dialectics suspended in an infinite yet closed space - the artist illustrates the eternal conflict between good and evil, thanks to the creation of an original style, far from the rough and macabre manners that are usual in the New Figuration.

As we can see in The Sea Man and in Cedric and Ghibellino - two paintings composing with a third one the triptych in the apse of St. Augustine's - the key of Simona Dolci's poetics consists in controlling the individual figure. This is strenuously busy with a fight to be there, to assert its presence - here and now; an inner and psychological fight, that is never shouted or violent. It is a fight in which the young models depicted, sit on wooden boxes or small armchairs, show the spectator their half naked bodies and their faces often looking somewhere else, with genuine or unconscious challenge. In these paintings we bump into these contemporary warriors and little else, represented for instance by Ghibellino the cat - who increases the sensuality in the picture with his felinity. The exceptions we find in the structure of Simona Dolci's pictorial tale show that

“her” human figure is immersed in a particular atmosphere and seems to be meditating on the future. We can see this in the painting *The Day After, Rethinking About It* where a young dandy reflects after a night of pleasure - underlined by the empty champagne bottles - and maybe the only thing satisfying him is his knowledge. This knowledge is symbolised by the library and the bronze manneristic statuette likely to be possessed by an antique collector. The body next to other symbolic things conveys to us existential geometries and frequently enigmatic sceneries. And then we have women, Today's Venuses, who are highly considered by the artist, not only when she acts, but also when she meditates and questions herself in a philosophical, ethical and aesthetic way about the idea of being a woman in her art and in her life. The characters in Venuses and the two icons of Eros in *Sacred and Profane Love 2* by Dolci, keep each other company and reveals themselves to us in the Chapter Room.

The transparencies of ambiguity, fear and mystery are told in *Venus*, where a young woman characterised by a pleasing-itself eroticism thanks to every allusion or illusion, is sitting with her legs apart on a stool covered with a precious cloth and she's wearing only a snow-white silk stole embroidered with pearls. We meet contemporary women supplied with a damask large canvas in the background like the female figures in Giovanni Bellini's paintings, or even supplied with the coloured drapes used in art ateliers - which are again in *Venus* or in *Sacred and Profane Love 2*. And they “sing” loud, sending the young women inside and back to History or - if you prefer - they take us towards History. And, again, maidens with plants, who offer a vital blow to interiors kept closed but never claustrophobic, increasing the vitality - sensuality - typical of women, like in *Mediterranean Nymph*: goddesses in a very modern attitude, thrown in our world wearing the same jewels, clothes and things decorating us and our places. The artist is not afraid to confront History and to contaminate Modern era psychosomatic neurosis with the physiognomic researches of Renaissance humanism. We can read in *Warrior of Seduction*, depicting a modern Minerva fighting for love, a new version of the vanitas theme, not only the revival of Degas' and Sciltian's teachings, who were able to elevate popular portraits to an ideal of icy perfection. The woman is completely naked, her back is turned and her body twisted in a way between Prassitele and Mannerism. She is sitting unstable on a Thonet stool - her precarious balance is strengthened by an endless geometric floor - and she seems to observe carelessly the evening gown that was prepared for her in the other room: mirror references, rooms one after another - like Serebriakova's paintings - a concatenation, an initiation path, a journey and at the end. Her again, here preparing for a carnal love fight. Eros-Love: it is no coincidence *Sacred and Profane Love 2* is the title of the painting going with Venuses, which is a tribute to the very well-known work by Titian having the same title. In Vecellio's painting the female naked character represents, according to platonic thinking, celestial Venus holding the fire of divine love in her hand, while the dressed character is earthly Venus, who is the embodiment of sensual beauty. Here once more, in a bare room, “naked Venus” has the sacred blessings as it was in Classic and Renaissance era, and the other Venus, a new-Renaissance lady observing us from her throne, is the symbol of earthly love. Dolci seems to remind us that only later this kind of female body identity was dissolved under the heavy blanket represented by the bourgeois thinking and she goes back to the past to counterbalance the present.

The classical elements are transfigured by the strength of an energetic painting, solid and vibrant at the same time. This is also piercing the time barrier to return to us the centrality of the human figure as a whole, which is a permanent fusion of body and psyche. Today's Venuses depicted in Dolci's paintings are real women, practical and aware, even if they are affected by a fragility inherent in human beings, with no sex distinction.

The men and women depicted by the artist apparently remain where they are, they do nothing very exciting. However, they do not only show themselves, revealing their society role as it was in the portraits of aristocrats in the past: they acquire little by little different symbolic meanings, through their classical poses and through the fact they are

totally post-modern. Therefore we can describe the painter as an archetype portraitist of today. The identity of the figures often remains anonymous, making them more ambiguous and closer to us at the same time. The impulse towards an identification with the existential obsession is felt deep down in our flesh and in the troubles of the soul, and it is very strong in *Narcissus* and *Narcissus 2*. These are depicted through an expressive use of the male nude, and they can be seen in the Putti room together with other paintings belonging to the cycle *Men of Love and War*.

Among these masculine, but not brutal, warriors we meet *Narcissus*, finding again the theme of mirrors. In the Middle Ages these were related to the risks of vanity - in particular female vanity - or, as a consequence, to the loss of contacts with the world - for instance the man in the myth of *Narcissus*. From the 20th Freudian and psychoanalytic Century onwards the mirror becomes more and more a symbol of the "double" every one of us has inside him. It is something shaping the psychic stratifications of the human being, characterised by deep contradictions. We can find it among moral rules, basic desires, social expectations and fears that daily have been made bigger and bigger by terrorism since the start of the new century. What about modern *Narcissus*? As we can see in the paintings presented in the exhibition, he endlessly meditates in a mirror trick, which is flaming, Renaissance and Magritte-like. Otherwise he meditates posing like a modern dancer or, if you prefer, like a Momix dancer; he turns the land where he lives into his mirror, he lies on it and falls asleep because he is satisfied with his self-consciousness. This began long ago, starting with man's history, and was guided by God in the ancient times. It also touched Joseph's mind and heart when he was betrothed to Mary, as in *Joseph's Dream*, the only painting in the exhibition characterised by a sacred theme: Dolci's Joseph is reassured and appointed to take on Jesus' vicarial paternity by an angel who does not come to him in a dream. He does it in a pause during work, while Joseph is in his workshop - and the scene is set nowadays, as it is suggested by the shape of a glass Coke bottle. The most interesting and estranging aspect is that the angel resembles the main character, so we have a human effigy and its double, again. A blonde angel shining with divine light, who is, in a modern sense, Joseph's good conscience, fighting against who mocks him and against his own earthly and legitimate doubts, against the Evil... Once more, we have a contemporary warrior with a very ancient origin and a sensitive soul, as only artists have.

Other paintings show us young people caught in "reality moments": the boy portrayed in *On the stage* is about to pronounce his monologue on the stage that is suggested by the presence of wooden boards, just what we are expecting! This art is characterised by a huge narrative and theatrical dimension and the paintings offer a stage to living scenes and intense emotions: *Jago*, *The Actor (Hugo)*, *The Actor's Loneliness* and *Pierrot* are only a few titles that reveal a portrait of life by virtue of the theatrical scene. There man can be more real than he actually is, and he can also unveil his inner self; these titles and images suggest a pictorial procedure in which the highest realism corresponds to the highest internalisation. *The Actor's Loneliness* reveals how hard it is to live on the stage and in the world, and it shows us a mannequin chest - indeed a kind of archaic Kouros - we will find somewhere else, but this time depicted as a whole figure. Simona Dolci mediates between the vitality of painting her models in studio, and the force creating her artistic culture. This can be seen in *Jago*, where we can admire one of the darkest theatrical main characters of all times, wearing a Lorenzo Lotto-like jacket with jeans; the same thing is in *The Actor*, where the young man who is wearing a red-Titian shirt and who is in a dancing pose, seems to lead by the hand our imagination. As it happens in the painting with an evangelic theme, in *Absent Dialogue* the painter shakes again our fragile uncertainties, using man and his double: a sad and disconsolate actor wearing the Hamletic uniform - black tights and white shirt - "lays down his weapons", which are masks, while another one of him without costume is beside him, facing nothingness: he is a man who is not communicating to anyone, not even to himself, a man who is outside time, in a narrative dimension that we can at least connect to nowadays and to us, who

are more and more alone despite modern technologies used to “connect one another”. Art and theatre are linked in a sacred union even when the stage is not so obvious. In *Unlikely Conversation* and *False Secrets* a boy seen from behind does not communicate, not even to us, or he meditates - his eyes are down - on his destiny neither good or bad. He is in the middle, like the fabric of the trousers he is wearing on his left leg, and he is accompanied in both of the paintings by a seated mannequin, who seems to be more alive than the boy; denial and immersed torpidity are disturbed by a mannequin who, like a mirror, place man in front of himself, like “a character in search of an author”: a materialisation different to mirror reflections, that alters the erotic idyll with ourselves, and do not permit a dialogue between equals - as in Pirandello’s *Dialogues Between Me And the Little Me*. It also produces a lasting perceptive shock, not as much in the portrayed character as in the spectator. Tailor or art studio mannequin is an artistic topos typical of the 20th Century: it is an effigy of the man who was deprived of his senses, a symbol of the incommunicability; because of it so much was said and done in art, and it still is a protagonist in today’s painting and sculpture - for an example see the works by Cattelan and Hirst.

There is something enigmatical in the overturning of the image, in its double, and in the paintings where man openly deals with spectators, like *The Actor* (Hugo) and *Mars or About Desolation*: the painter is aware that eventually the only way to catch the psychological truth is to carry out an accurate observation of subjects’ gestures and expressions. Painting - as a sort of image psychology - can indeed reveal the *Secretum Secretorum*, if we pay attention to the eyes, *speculum animae*, and postures. Theatre, art studio with mannequins, but also mythology and sacred history: these are places, worlds and spaces that become natural features of contemporary humanity.

Often Dolci feeds herself with figures from classical mythology, wearing contemporary clothes, and they are Jungian - and Hillmanian - archetypes of the collective subconscious: *Mars or About Desolation* in a three-times sequence as in Masaccio’s *Tribute*, takes up his weapons showing no violence. He then moves a beam taking steps - and wearing clothes - as he were performing martial arts, and he is sitting defeated or like a thoughtful winner while a fire is burning in the background; *Adrian and Antinoo* stand out against a classical loggia background - depicted in a concise way. They deal with the theme of the double polarity in human nature, something that is inevitably dialectical - for instance: the encounter or conflict between masculine and feminine elements in the same body. The two characters also show us to be proud of their love and culture, and they look royal, standing on a throne only identified by a purple cloth; *Mercury-Hermes* offers himself to the spectator with physical and psychological complicity: he brings us news coming directly from the gods, but he is also the one who guides souls to the Underworld. At the same time he is again another symbol of melancholy and artistic creativity, striking for the beauty of plasticity, of the yellow drapery, and of the classical pose typical of a harangue who is not presumptuous.

Then the artist becomes lyrical and softens her tones: she lightens interiors and theatre wings, and she creates landscapes where Poetry prevails and Evil, in every aspect, seems not to belong to this world. In *The Messenger*, a large painting occupying by itself the vestibule of the Putti Room, a new *Apollo Belvedere* in painting, who is the son of north Europe and is “clothed in his virtues”, comes towards us with his red hair blowing in the wind, along a countryside road, bringing us good or tragic news with divine nonchalance... it is up to us! He is meaningful and at the same time he is the meaning: he is a bearer of good news, nowadays of illusions, and, as Mercury, he is capable of simultaneously guiding us to heaven and earth, to the peak and the abyss of our souls.

The artist ferries the painting of the 17th and 18th Century to the present day, with a will to enter the subject’s intimacy: this is where the figure more real than reality becomes a mental abstraction, unconsciously tidying up the remains of our artistic civilisation. From the 18th Century onwards this has been a continuous and endless search, and that was where reality was subjected to the most tragic transfigurations. Continuing the fine

figurative tradition of the 20th Century in Tuscany, whose bright lighthouse was Pietro Annigoni, we find in Simona Dolci's works not only a virtuous artist, but a new and authentic "reality painter", telling us "the sweet [sour] noise of life" (Sandro Penna).
