

The poetics of poiesis

Catalogue essay for the exhibition by Austin Camilleri and Pawl Carbonaro entitled *Camilleri-Carbonaro*, Münchner Künstlerhaus, Munich; 12 – 26 November, 2009.

We are individuals but we also form part of a complex social system. In order to interact and develop a relationship with this system we need to make a considerable number of judgements and decisions daily, be they trivial or otherwise. These relations in turn bestow meaning and mould our daily routine. At a personal level one may include such seemingly insignificant decisions as, for example, which clothes item or colour to wear; if the shirt cuff buttons underneath a jumper should be fastened or not; watch breakfast television or read the text on the back of the cereal packet, and so many others. These decisions are normally prejudiced by deep-rooted or even habitual values, but nevertheless shape our interaction with the world around us. They also provide meaning to and establish relationships with the outside world even though we never really stop to consider the complexity involved when such actions are performed. It is therefore these outwardly straightforward relationships that form the basis of a more complex communal structure, one that also embraces more compound relations, such as that of Art and Culture.

Making meaning out of the complex relationship of a work of art and its immediate, possibly contemporary culture necessitates placing the act in the context of its creation, which in turn opens a wide philosophical enquiry into the act of the creative process itself, as informed and perhaps also driven by the relative period of time surrounding its creation. It is therefore intriguing to reflect on the stage that immediately precedes this relationship and dwell on the concept of *poiesis*, on the dynamics of an artist's daily *working practice*, on both the willed and the unconscious perceptive decisions that stem from the artist's psychic and bodily

being which ultimately have bearing on the vital significance of the work and its communal function.

It is even more interesting, albeit rather convoluted when the focus of such reflection are two forceful and equally prolific artists, Pawl Carbonaro and Austin Camilleri, whose sole point of relative convergence is merely geographical and can be found in the short physical distance between their studios on the small island of Gozo, the isle of the mythical sea nymph Calypso.

Pawl Carbonaro's art embraces intense yet considered emotion framed within a resolute exploration of the spatial, the chromatic and the organic. His work constantly references the same medium that breathes its life, playfully wigwagging between gritty crests of variegated hessian, gestural brushstroke and flattened suspended space. Like the dark creative force of the Andalucian *duende*, Carbonaro's gesture signals an innate energetic instinct, a surge of power in search of an unwavering impression; one that may equally vent in exuberant crescendo or brooding tranquillity depending upon the sway of the artist's cathartic mechanism of self re-invention.

Carbonaro's works are beacons by an earth-force, by the artist's insatiable commitment to travel and to the exploration of his much beloved expanses of untainted land, sea and sky. It is of small wonder therefore that the land or the seascape is a recurrent theme that has been explored by the artist since early artschool days, a concern that has also been honed through living amidst an island reality where virgin terrain is seriously challenged through substantial building development. In this respect, the title of the work 'Silver Lining' seems to emit a cry of distress rather than embody the famed ray of hope as the shimmering white rim light normally associated with backlit ominous clouds, or indeed the locally well known glisten of the last rays of sunlight on Mediterranean shores is here replaced by a pearly white stripe that sits uncomfortably sandwiched between two horizontal

masses which in turn float in black vertical limbo. One wonders if this is the artist's way of sounding the alarm bells to the ravage of his much beloved countryside.

The chosen paintings in this small selection also testify to an expressive maturity which although embracing the artist's perennial abstract concerns, bears an almost violent rawness and leaves no space for earlier chromatically lush and romantic expressions to surface. The uninhibited and agitated brushstroke present in Pawl's abstract paintings since the mid 1980s has now taken on an almost literal reference to the material makeup of its tool. The brushstrokes especially in such works as 'OP 0809' and 'OP 1108' impart an impression of this earth-force as it flows through the conduit of the artist's body, hand and brush as if to reassure us that each decisive action is the finite result of the unexplainable mysterious power that is Carbonaro's duende. The titles of four of the exhibited works (OP [Opus] month and year) seem to also identify such activity and furthermore fix it in chronology by making reference to specific time segments that have been witness to varying powers of conception as if to assume responsibility for each work's creation. It seems that the artist is here trying to create an intimate diary of his most personal experiences with paintings as their proof for posterity.

At such a distinguished age of creative maturity, Carbonaro's work continues to become more physical, his actions more hefty, even brutal at times. The once lyrical intimation of constructed space is replaced by one that cuts across expanses with immediate and menacing speed and force as if, like the last remaining gasps of air wrenched out of a deep sea diver's lungs before resurfacing, the time window allocation for the creative energy that spawns each delivery is menacingly becoming shorter and shorter. The artist's palette has also fallen victim to a similar fate and echoes a nostalgia of one that was more multifarious in earlier years. Even though works like 'Astratto Lilà' and 'Allegro ma non troppo' still bear traces of a lighter colour variety, the artist restrains its full exposure in order to retain complete uplift, referencing back to the artist's current daily working practice which leaves no room for anything other than the power of the work itself, an unceasing undercurrent that

strives to capture as rapidly and forcefully as possible each varying light of every new day – beyond doubt a truly unpoetic process of poesis.

Austin Camilleri's painting process is reminiscent of the sixth century Western European practice of 'Palimpsest', one of the earliest processes of recycling of material, with the exception that the artist does not re-use his canvases for economic or ecological motives but rather re-appropriates his own existing work as hostage to act as new reference framework for further inception. Camilleri's final forms are not witness to the complete erasure of the original, but through a complex structure of layering and masking, the various histories of the paintings retain parallel conviviality. The origin of the new works therefore do not know a recent tabula rasa, but unfold in a performative fashion through a dialogue between the younger and the contemporary Camilleri (and even at times a totally extraneous artist), a tour de force of the duality of characters and of concepts. Austin is here presenting us with not one but two or possibly more works per hanging – a curious dichotomy of forms which bears true testimony to the artist's creative process, one which leaves no stone unturned in its strife to work for and against the grain contemporaneously. Like Carbonaro's paintings, Camilleri's works go through an elaborate process of re-invention with the exception that they not only reference the original or earlier work but also incorporate it physically on the same canvas.

This working practice is a relatively new direction adopted by the artist, a phase which saw its beginning around 2006 with Austin's revisiting of his own paintings of the 1990s, following intense phases of sculptural, installation and video activity. This process of using existing paintings to serve as significant departure points for further image intervention by the artist was also extended to incorporate appropriated, acquired and even commissioned works by other artists. It is through this practice of parallel representation (which also echoes the imagery created when two video streams are frozen in mid transition) that Camilleri manages to create a metaphor that stands for his own characteristic restlessness, a trait that permits not

only self-reconsideration but also finds methods of reconciling opposing polarities of concept through transparency of paint and masking of forms.

The video mix or transition is a device that in the language of media many times symbolizes a passing of time between the former and the latter scenes. Freeze frames caught in mid transition by their very nature put across two strands of parallel, possibly diverse information that fuse into one visual composite. The practice of adding veils of colour onto an existing colour structure in both the (visual) electronic and digital media as well as in painting many times result in a neutralising of the overall picture vibrancy through a process of cancellation produced by opposing chromatic strengths. Camilleri makes full use of this technique and couples it occasionally with strategic scraping and masking to reveal the various intensities of forms and layers of paint residing beneath. Through this fragmentary practice of conceptual and visual (re)intervention the artist chooses to suspend both the original and the new versions of the painting in their newfound metalanguage, a strategy that points to the well-worn practice of parallel narrative, involving the coexistence of simultaneous and interconnected points of view so relevant to today's Internet screen culture.

A further element that contributes to the works' construction and a further conceptual and at times communication or narrative device within these complex structures is the element of text – scratched, painted, written and stencilled. This common ploy within Camilleri's work adds a capping layer which, although in many instances occupies a rather discrete area or is painted in a muted tonality and therefore intended to whisper rather than shout the intended message, it nevertheless manages to create an incredible presence through its readable nature within the work's overall schema of divulgence. Text in Austin's work is therefore premeditated to perform on two main perceptive levels, the semiotic and the visual, acting as an important reference marker that pushes further the viewer's 'reading' of the painting both as a work of art but also as an object of mediation within a lived contemporary culture.

These charged paintings by Carbonaro and Camilleri go way beyond pure aesthetics. Each work establishes a unique poiesis of self-location – grounds and boundaries within a world that are defined by the same works themselves – an act which sustains the crucial dynamic of the artist-work-receiver bond. Encountering such a *poietical* space even through this modest collection is a promise of sheer enjoyment to be had through the same works' audacious insight into the artists' working practices as much as through the encounter's yields of new and surprising discoveries with each new viewing.

Vince Briffa

CURATOR