

Total Painting
by Angela Madesani

This commentary on the work of Maria Morganti is also a brief reflection, without pretensions towards judgement, on the state of abstract painting in Italy. Though abstract painting has a level of success in the United States and in other European countries, such is not the case here in Italy.

Too often, in fact, we are tied to cultural styles as light as they are useless, which provide scarce reflection on the problems and crucial questions of art. These styles are given too much consideration by institutions and private galleries. It seems to me, instead, that an artist is not interesting in relation to the medium used, but to the investigation pursued.

Our time is one of details, of small visions, of facile languages. But what makes art interesting is not a simple reading. In that sense, the exploration of abstraction by young painters is too often overlooked, even when it is interesting and engaging.

One of the most significant aspects of Morganti's work is precisely her relationship with the medium, aiming at an exploration, which has persisted for fifteen years: daily, laboriously, meticulously. Paraphrasing Deleuze, repetition and difference. Her works have grown, changed, and yet remain poetically close to one another.

Her painting brings with it a long labor of looking to discover its meaning. It requires meditation. It is often a critical reflection on the media, expressed through painting itself, free from mannered conceptualism, false elaborations, and artifice.

One of the first problems she set for herself at the start of her exploration, was precisely that of clarifying her physical relationship with space: that in which she moves and that in which she paints. She had been interested in tactility, in the experience of making art. An experience which initially was more physical than visual. A sort of primary impulse, where the body acts directly, relating itself to space, the limits of which it desires to touch. This has nothing to do with Body Art. The body is not the subject of the work, but rather of the exploration leading to the realization of the work. The attempt successfully creates in the work a real, non-illusionistic space. It is a "primitive" experience, which made her soon understand that it was time to turn the operation into something visual. It is a kind of artistic growth through an empirical experience. It is a result whose proof is no longer needed; like when applying a mathematical theorem. Forgive me the prolonged metaphor: once the proof is ascertained, what is important is the application. It is at this point that Morganti's real work had its start. She herself, distinguishing this moment in her development with a phrase I consider very intense, says she took the skin off her body to place it on the canvas.

Maria Morganti works with a feeling for the scale of paintings and its relationship to the activity of painting. The canvas - the surface - has demands. It is impossible not to take these into account. Between her body and the surface there is a kind of detachment. The critical dimension becomes important. Circularity and concaveness enter the gesture of her painting-making. For a long time she has worked only in red. A red which, however, comprehends the other primary colors and some of the secondary.

All of this is coupled with drawings taken from paintings by masters, such as Titian and Vermeer; from the architecture of Bernini and Borromini; from many 16th C. and baroque domes all revolving in a vortex around themselves. The role played by art history, even through drawings, is captivating. It is a work of studying, of assimilating a space which is different from her own.

Her work, the canvasses are more and more containing spaces, concave shapes, which construct themselves in the course of painting. She lets things happen, in each painting she puts in question again herself, her work, her exploration. During this phase of the work she has made paintings with concave and circular shapes, with several types of reds, and called them cupole, domes. A sort of

representation of the inner physical space, her own body, boneless. This phase ended with a red monochrome, in which it is as if the light illuminating the circular and convex shapes had disappeared. Following this, after a period of reflection lasting a few months, she created a red painting with a blue fissure in the middle. A kind of hole towards the outside. The recollection of Fontana's cuts is immediate, although reductive. That of Morganti is an outlet through painting, which finds both the norm and the transgression within itself. The blue is a light, a passage. The meaning of what has occurred is realized at a second stage. The interpretations come during the secondary process, when the work is recognized as such. Hers is not an affectation, it is a deep feeling, each time determining her choice.

At this point cross-like shapes appear. Other colors enter the painting.

The importance of her training becomes even more evident, especially in regards to the works of the Radical Painting artists: Graubner, Frederic Mattys Thursz, Reinhard, Marden, Howard Smith, Hafif, Zeniuk, Ryman; in Italy Carmengloria Morales.

Space has been swelling, with a thrust upward. Once again the influence of art history is present: Giovanni Bellini and his extraordinary spatial constructions, in which the Renaissance precepts are interpreted, assimilated and reposed in a new key, which is just as rigorous, but less declarative; Lorenzo Lotto, whose perfection is sometimes dizzying. It is as if she were making an incursion inside the complex space of a 16th C. painting, where the perfection is fractured by a detail, capable of giving life to the painting; almost as if it were the beginning of a voyage across their work.

However, once again I stress these are not direct references: it is as if what she had seen, emerged elaborated almost uncsciously. Historical reasoning, in this sense, might be a hindrance to the process. Asymmetrical rectangles are formed without need for visual precision. Without real or mannered rationalism.

During the last period, her working rhythm has changed: if before Maria Morganti worked on one painting at a time, as if it were meant to contain her entire understanding at that moment, now she develops a series of paintings simultaneously. If one looks carefully, one still perceives that peculiar way of coloring, in a circular sense: the dome. Physicality is still very strong. Also strong is the action's weight: nothing to do with gestural painting. It is just an absorption of her way of being, of living art day by day.

Each painting is an object needing care, preparation and, therefore, a totalizing labor. The paints that used to be prepared each time, like in an ancient bottega, now come from tubes. They are acid colors, more industrial and artificial: green, purple, blue. The paintings are, in this sense, brighter. Hers is a path toward the pureness of abstraction, where a type of "artisan" practice is ever less important, even if the attention to the work is daily, incessant, patient and determined.

Some procedures have become part of her art. They are by now assimilated. Each time Maria Morganti faces the canvas she places herself in a virgin state. Like for an initiation process, where, over time, the rules change, though not the meaning.

Her work has now something in common with that of artists such as Lydia Dona, Stephen Ellis, David Reed, Stephen Westfall, Shirley Kaneda, Sean Scully.

Hers is a new type of painting, which is getting further and further away from the Italian abstraction of the 70s. It is as if a break had occurred. Morganti's work is a refounding of painting, the reproposal of its rules. Painting needs new sap: it is no longer possible to have the same models, the same considerations. What changes in her work, besides the form, is first and foremost the substance: the way she confronts painting, but also the world. This is the actuality of her work: a work within the world and about the world - abstraction notwithstanding - in which the body and the feeling of one's own presence in space have great importance.

It is time to renew certain lines of support. Quite often we find ourselves in front of formal exercises - more or less perfect, more or less elegant - but sterile, self-involved. The task is to separate

ourselves from all this, and to have the courage to blaze new paths, in which painting is instrumental, and in this sense Maria Morganti is on the right direction.

Angela Madesani is an art critic and historian. She teaches at the Istituto Europeo di Design in Milan. She has curated numerous shows and publications on contemporary art. She is contributor to various newspapers and art magazines, such as "Juliet" and "Ipso Facto".

Among the rare institutional examples of interest in abstract painting in Italy, the following shows should be mentioned: Italia-America. L'astrazione ridefinita, D.Paparoni curator, at Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna of San Marino, 1993; the XVIII Premio Nazionale Arti visive Città di Gallarate 1995. Riflessione e ridefinizione della pittura astratta, the catalogue of which (Gallarate, 1995) has contributions by G.M.Accame, Vittorio Fagone, P.Fossati, R.Lambarelli, D.Paparoni, E. Zanella Manara (Maria Morganti was also in this show); Arte Italiana. Ultimi quarant'anni. Pittura aniconica, D.Eccher and D.Auregli curators (with a catalogue published by Skira, Milano, and contributions by several scholars). Held in Bologna at Galleria d'Arte Moderna, from November 1998 to February 1999, this show extended from the first informal achievements up to the present day. Few of the younger generation were represented. Morganti, for instance, was merely cited in the essay by Giovanni Maria Accame: "[...] Pursuits based on difference, precisely because all of them share proximity to the reflexive enquiry into the extreme articulations of language. Among these artists, the following require notice for the quality of their work and the determination with which they proceed: Aldrovandi, Arrighi, Cascio, Casiraghi, Cortese, Costantini, De Marchi, Gamba, Morganti, Negri, Pellegrini, Querci, Ruaro, Sonogo. [...]".

Few - but the signs of a revival are visible - are the galleries which are regularly concerned with abstract painting, such as Invernizzi, Lorenzelli, Ala, Grossetti in Milan; Tossi in Prato; Plurima in Udine; Peccolo in Livorno, Marabini and G7 in Bologna, In Arco in Turin. Her training took place in Milan, where she studied at the Brera Academy, and New York City.

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