

The crisis is real...

The crisis is real... I refer obviously to the crisis of the arts. And it lies in its semantic substance. The 20th century, in an outburst of apparent democracy, declared that all human beings have a right to the same dose of talent, which effectively abolished the concept of talent. The various avantgardes demanded that every language be accepted, which was understood to mean that every language is acceptable, comprehensible, equivalent. The resulting confusion is such that, today, we must struggle to understand: anything created by anyone can be taken as a work of art. Yet common sense continues to tell us that between a bowl of spaghetti with plum tomatoes and the Sistine Chapel, there needs to be an ascertainable difference.

This is precisely the premise of the debate. To the extent that no one is interested anymore in current art except for a militant and priestly core group of initiates, a few speculators with teeth as sharp as Mackie Messer's shark, a public of moths who show up for openings and then flutter away, and lastly a handful of art magazines gasping their last breath in the absence of advertising revenue.

Great disorder under the heavens, then: the situation could not be better. In the vast dimension of an art world that thinks it is global because the Internet enables one to travel low-cost from one exhibition to another, from one Biennial to the next, there remain pockets of silent resistance, rebels determined to perpetuate a way of working not unlike that of the 9th-century scribes during the final incursions of the Hungarians and the Arabs. They are the monks of knowledge, the custodians of talent.

Luca Leonelli belongs to this scanty gang of rebels. And he knows all too well that talent without knowledge is entirely useless. Talent must be regularly exercised through technique. But this alone is not enough to remain among the few secret sages. The science of making is not sufficient. As Rabelais said, "science sans conscience n'est que ruine de l'âme". The esoteric combination is as follows: talent, technical ability, density of content. This is very hard to find nowadays, such that it is completely incomprehensible to the general public.

Yet Leonelli holds some unexpected surprises for those with eye and sensibility free of those conformist filters that opacify the brain. I saw him create a series of engravings where the delicacy of drypoint is combined with the knowledge of the most complex etching. The dimensions of these works explain even to the uninitiated the mastery of the artist when he reaches the most complex levels of virtuosity. I saw that which was once called the masterpiece - that is, the exemplary work. And these epiphanies are combined with many other works, those which I had the fortune of monitoring regularly as Leonelli developed them. He moves from playful experiments of brush, pen or watercolor, treated as daily exercises of his expressivity, just like a pianist practicing the fluidity of his scales and arpeggios before taking the stage, to consolidating them into apical works when he spreads the paint across a large canvas. He offers to those who know him, and have the silent patience to admire it, a one-of-a-kind illustrated book, a painting that summarizes and consolidates the painterly mark in existential, supra-real phantasmagorias. He indicates a path known only to a few, preparing the way for the sensibility of tomorrow.

PHILIPPE DAVERIO
Translation by Jeff Jennings

Dialogue with the artist

The science and philosophy of every period compels us to an awareness of a reality that eludes our presumption to understand it. This is why Einstein wrote, "There is no logical path to universal laws, only intuition", and Planck observed, "Every advance in knowledge brings us face to face with the mystery of our own being". And these premises, necessary for any kind of scientific research, enabled Hölderlin to rebut Hegel by saying that "logic cannot make us understand the divine, but art can make us feel it". An observation that offers us an opportunity to reiterate that any pretense of rationalizing or cataloguing a work of art should not make us forget the traditional criteria of observation and judgment, taking into account the way in which every image presents itself to our gaze, to our sensibility, and how our being is affected by it. I will now list a few short quotes and considerations suggested to me by the art of Luca Leonelli and the richness of his touch.

I will start from a statement that critic Mario De Micheli made in 1993 to introduce an exhibition by Leonelli: "Impulse, fervor, dizziness, intelligence: this is the impression one immediately gets in front of

his canvases and prints. Leonelli assaults you and doesn't let go. There is an energy in him that excites the imagination". And I should add that, along with the power of this expressivity, there is often irony, sometimes self-irony, that muffles or dilates the violent aspects and renders the lyrical ones effective.

There are many images and emotions in this show as well: swarms of insects, crowds of heads in diverse contexts (theaters, town squares, conference rooms), and then there is the child of the self-portrait, the false prophet, the oracle, the walking pig (the title of which is *Allegretto o Andante*), Adam, Eve...

Let us look for a moment at the various 'swarms' or 'crowds'. There is invariably something that traverses them and pulls them, whether in the form of a flowing hair, voices and gestures, or simply the contiguity of crania. The artists' mastery gives his touch the intensity of a gust of wind that sweeps everything away, as if wanting to upset destiny. Sabina Leonelli rightly observed in one of her writings that "the misadventures of the swarm disturb the mind, drawing it as much into the violence of pointless revolt as into the irony of fragile calm". However, in representing the obsessive action of the swarms, Leonelli avoids reducing men to "masses". Indeed, authentic individuality is often present in the movement: one notices, for example, the many eyes and postures of the heads at odds with the wave that washes over them. And here not only irony comes into play, but the consideration that the artist feels for humans and their resources: one looks over his shoulder, another observes curiously, another tries to get away - sometimes the number of eyes doubles in a single head.

Hands are often featured in his images, which confirms that gestuality which is part of the character of the Mediterranean peoples, particularly the Italians. Behold the politician, who makes the gesture almost into a ritual, using his hands to emphasize the rhetoric of certain assertions, or attempts at coercion. The drool that hangs from his mouth is thus transformed into a black line: it is there for a technical reason, for sure, but it also conveys the darkness that descends upon the listeners.

Il falso profeta (mezzotint and drypoint) emanates a darkness while also enveloping the subject, his eyes covered by his own swarming hair. The fate of those who preach nothingness and those who listen to it is always the same in the case of recurring false prophecy, since the word means not only foreseeing a given future for the masses who are subject to it, but for those who believe they can dominate or provoke it. One thinks of the fates of heads of state or "revolutionaries" in various historical periods. It is often said that "revolution eats its own children", but the same holds true for false prophets and statesmen.

It is only the word of great art that, as Karl Marx wrote, "is always the thermometer of time", insofar as it reflects the human condition over time, or as Laozi put it, "it is the discovery of the eternal present within every history", adding that "the vast and distant and profound understanding of not-knowing is the most concrete approach to the incessant flow of things and prophecies". Indeed, the false prophet will always postpone the reality right before our eyes to the future, whether speaking of country or theology or any other ideology - he relies on "the light of the future" and "progressive destinies".

We've already talked about it, but I would like to re-examine this other aspect of Leonelli's process: humor, his way of looking at so-called "human seriousness", rendered all the more evident by the "knowledge and penetration of the individual and social soul which can sometimes push itself toward commiseration" - i.e. the self-portraits.

Let us pause for moment before *Oracolo* (burnished etching and aquatint). A black bird of prey darkens a lighted space - above, an oval volume suspended by a wire - below and to the side, a lightly sketched audience turning its backs to these images. Why? What does the hanging oval represent? A meteor, an egg about to bring forth new life? Or is it just a frivolity?

Then there's the extraordinary drypoint *Ricordi d'infanzia, ritratto a due anni*. The body of the child with two faces: the one projecting its gaze externally seems intent on discovering and learning about the world. This brings to mind Jung when he talks about the "archetypes" that lie deep within all of us, and the inscription on the Temple of Delphos, in the Latin "Nosce te ipsum", and every cultural tradition that invites man to "know thyself". But why add a second, blindfolded face to that body, apparently drawing attention to the first, or discouraging it from the propensity to embrace that which lies without? This image may allude to the need that, from the first moments of life, compels us to observe and seek to understand the world; or perhaps the blindfolded eyes allude to the not yet pressing, still unformed interior life of a child. That blindfold may be telling us that we, as adults, must turn outward, that maturity consists in the constant balance between external and internal knowledge, and if this rule is not followed, the greatest risk is madness and the most common one is being absorbed into a swarm or into the slavery of an ideology. The two heads - which seem to want to merge - must at least interact in order to give the child a single one.

Autoritratto a quarantadue anni (drypoint). This is certainly the most ironic piece in the show. Again, exiting from his mouth is a swarm which is partly lost in the void (empty chatter?), but partly re-enters the subject, enveloping him. In what? His own art, or his own words, now aware? Or the interior ear that his Self loudly implores? Perhaps it is the artist's own consciousness that wants to reclaim the not fully understood swarm? I would now like discuss three other prints on display: two depict *Adam* and *Eve*, while the third is a large figure seated on a chair in the forest. Adam seems to me to belong to the series of self-portraits. Not that there is a resemblance to the artist, but I see there one of the less recognized aspects of his character: sweetness, along with the ability to look and understand, to gently accept the ineluctable flow of events and judgments. This does not diminish his "capacity to assault" that De Micheli mentions in another part of his essay. Adam is, as described in *Genesis*, a man who finds himself naked and covers himself. Not because he is afraid, I would add, but because he feels helpless before his immense responsibility.

The image of Eve, on the other hand, is imposing. Again from *Genesis*: "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make him a helper as his complement". Look carefully at this figure - her sensuality is most evident in her loins and bosom, while her legs are strong, sturdy. Such energy bursts forth from this image that the delicacy of the pubic hair is barely enough to soften it. "How beautiful you are, my beloved / without stain or blemish..." (Song of Solomon IV).

Lastly, the extraordinary drypoint *Figura nel bosco*. A large figure slouched in a chair, an exhausted face that looks without looking. What he sees can be intuited. The forest, masterfully rendered, is behind him. You will forgive me if I've given much space to the content of several prints that seem to me among the most significant exemplars of Leonelli's art without paying much attention to his exceptional technical ability, enriched by experience and culture, but I take his manual skill as a given. Eugenio Tomiolo, painter, engraver, poet and great friend, wrote, "Technique is not enough to create a work of art, but can only free us to the possibilities of the material and our way of using it".

I am convinced that, since everyone has their own way of looking and thinking, or incorporating what they see into their own knowledge, and that, since the role of true art is to stimulate even our unconscious memories, discussion of the intentions and various aspects of an image can be useful to everyone, myself included.

FRANCO LOI
Translation by Jeff Jennings