Beyond the Circle of Confusion

Exhibition
From January 24th to February 24th 2024
NAAN Gallery, Tirana

Exhibition organised by Alessandro Gallicchio

Leonard Qylafi's solo exhibition brings together in an optical-photographic metaphor the pictorial works made by the Albanian artist in the last decade. This choice is justified in light of certain elements that characterize a research inclined to the analysis of the aesthetic tensions underlying the image, its scientific, social and ideological construction, as well as the different states and transformations it can undergo over time. In fact, in optics and photography, the "circle of confusion" represents the effect created by an image point and allows one to determine the boundary between what is perceived as blurry and what is instead identified as clean and sharp. The result of this process thus oscillates between a set of blurs and dots. Beyond the technical interest such a metaphor arouses, it is important to imagine the evanescent boundary, which Qylafi wants to confront, interrogating the state of the image at the very stage of its revelation. From his earliest paintings, the artist has always sought to understand reality as an interstice between subjective consciousness and the physical state of things. Through a symbiotic process with his surroundings, he has immortalized those instants in which reality is revealed through the possibilities made available by the means of representation.

In the specific case of the unreleased series exhibited on the ground floor and titled "Unloaded" (2021-2024), it is a project born by chance, and prompted by a surprising fact: while consulting on his cell phone the sites of the most famous international newspapers such as CNN, Qylafi realized that sometimes the screen took longer to load the images of the articles, which were thus blurred and almost illegible. A series of ephemeral screenshots, furtively captured by the artist, provides this transitory state of things and is in the origin of his latest series. The paintings, mostly marked by a hazy patina, play formally with abstract-figurative frontiers, and suggest anthropomorphic silhouettes, gaseous states, cosmic spots, ghostly portraits etc. While going through the catalog of forms created by the artist, one immediately realizes the aesthetic power expressed by his painting, precariously balanced between shaded surfaces and great chromatic vitality. By stimulating a visual and mnemonic symbiosis with the screen, Qylafi decides to take into consideration the space that exists between us and technology, only to reveal the image at the moment it appears as a trace of the mental process, and certainly not in its final form. Here, not only the subjective dimension of the artist's gaze, but also a more social awareness, which challenges certain behaviors that result in the subjugation of man to digital and information technology, act as determining factors for the pictorial research. The painting then intervenes in a context in which the concept – or perhaps the idea – of an image prevails over the result for which this same image, used for informational purposes, was conceived, made, and reproduced from the screen. By defending a profoundly humanistic approach to painting, Qylafi emphasizes the importance of the link nowadays between images and technical ultra-reproducibility, but at the same time gives new meaning to the act of painting as an analytical tool necessary for a better understanding of reality.

It is inevitable at this point to mention what theorists and art historians have wisely referred to as an "infrathin attitude," in reference to the category coined by Marcel Duchamp to encapsulate what eludes human perception, and which can only be grasped with the aid of gray matter. Take, for example, the case of the image: the image, according to this theory, is never just what it is, nor does it show only what it represents, but is above all a door to something else. Duchamp considers infrathin "all substances, states, minimal differences, sharings, transitions of state on the border of the imperceptible and distinguishable, real but not optical, not retinal"[1] .

Unconsciously, Qylafi renews Duchampian reflections in an original way and in a context as particular as that of contemporary Albania, and he does so from an analysis that takes its cue from photography, a medium that has after all changed the way we look at an image. In the same manner of the fashion photographer in Antonioni's film "Blow-Up", zooming in on images reproduced in the propaganda magazines of Enver Hoxha's regime or on digital screens, the artist goes in search of the gap that separates us from the visible, and addresses the ambiguity of this space. On the first floor of the exhibition, it was thus decided to present to the public the two pictorial series that precede "Unloaded", and which seem to develop some of these problematics: "Morphological Variations" (2017-2021) and "Imagery" (2014-2024).

"Morphological Variations" is the work that is most open to the microscopic gaze. Like a biologist, Qylafi scrutinizes the structures of digital screens, new technological bodies, and paints their details. Abstract and vaguely geometric, these canvases reveal the surgical nature of his research, attentive to the most

hidden parts of the "image factory." "Imagery", on the other hand, is a series in which, again by using the technique of zooming in, the artist focuses on reproductions – which are also of poor quality – published in official magazines such as "New Albania" during the last years of the Albanian communist regime. Some details of such representations, expression of a collective memory constructed by default to convey an enthusiastic feeling of carnivalesque ecstasy, are extrapolated as a pictorial subject. Qylafi not only takes an element of the ideological spectacle, but even preserves its blurred patina, evoking both the materiality of the images on the one hand, and the flow of time on the other, which settles on these media, imposing on them a more memorial significance. Among the numerous works belonging to this series, it seems appropriate to dwell on a new production, devoted essentially to female portraits, often in a work setting. Beginning in 1966, Albania had pushed women to actively participate in socialist production, and many of them had thus found themselves on the front lines not only in factories and collective works, but also in the representation of the new state. In front of this explosion of women's images, the artist decided to pay homage to a series of profiles that, although immortalized in the service of the regime, they represent an extremely interesting iconographic theme. Displayed as if in a small gallery of portraits, the faces of these women bear witness to an attempt at uniformity, but they conceal, behind an apparent serenity, a series of psychological states to which these works sensitize us. If "Imagery" redefines the relationship between the individual and his or her representation in different eras and contexts, "Morphological Variations" emphasizes the importance of the technological supports made available to information organs. The two series thus come to complete an expositive journey that reinforces the optical-photographic hypothesis of the "circle of confusion" and offers a comprehensive overview of Qylafi's recent work.

Alessandro Gallicchio

- [1]Marcel Duchamp, «Infrasottile», in Elio Grazioli e Ricarrdo Panattoni (by), *Sovrapposizioni. Memoria, trasparenze, accostamenti*, Bergamo, Moretti & Vitali, 2016, p. 45.