

Franco Fanelli interviews Andrea Chiesi

*A single moment is ten thousand years,
a single hair sweeps across myriads of flowers.
You alone can pass the test,
you alone can beat the crowds*

Dogen Kigen 1200-1253

The themes in your paintings have been dealt with by photographers (Margaret Bourke-White, for instance) or other artists that used the medium of photography, such as the Beckers, Sugimoto, Luisa Lambri or Dayanita Singh. Compared to yours, their aims were certainly different. I would like to talk about the relation to the medium you have chosen: Why do you use painting?

Because I love painting.

As you know, I used to be a sketcher and a comic artist listening to CCCP fedeli alla linea in the early Eighties, and then – in time – I fell in love with painting. I cannot tell the exact time it happened, maybe on looking at Giorgione's Tempesta, but that moment launched me onto a one-way journey; painting is an all-embracing choice of life requiring practice, good sense, and folly. I appreciate photography but to me it is just an in-between in the artwork creation; using oil on linen allows me to achieve a dimension that only painting can create. Photography is just the first glance, forming a sort of interface with reality, enabling me to absorb the subject. When I carry out my exploration of abandoned places, I do not have much time; my presence is rarely authorized and I must be really swift. But later, in my studio, everything changes: it is the slow time of observation, of drawing, of paints and the smell of turpentine in the air. In the pictorial dimension, time slows down and actual space gets de-actualized and becomes mental space: here everything is suspended. What fascinates me about painting is the manual element it implies; the fact that you can create a unique and irreplicable object, the very idea of creating something by hand and doing it well. I probably owe this passion to my father, who was a carpenter and a restorer. I liked to watch him while he was busy in his workshop: he was patient, dedicated, and silent. One day, when I was a really small child, I was at home with my mother. She was knitting, I was drawing, and I remember thinking – This is what I want to do for the rest of my life.

Can you expand on the relationship between painting and photography today? Some art photographers are now producing images which are deliberately ambiguous, thus blurring the borders between these two disciplines.

Painters have always been about technology and innovation, particularly in the field of optics. In the matter, I found David Hockney's book *Secret Knowledge* quite interesting. Hockney shows that many artists from the past – from Caravaggio to Canaletto – painted using mirrors, lenses and camera obscura.

An image reaches our brain through the eyes, but we actually see with our mind. Infinite worlds appear through painting, none of them belong to reality, yet they become evident.

Painting is a primal instrument which is constantly updated and in continuous evolution. Today it is still one of the most effective ways to express what we might term “spirit”, for convenience.

Painting has a great power, it uses the archetypal language of colour symbolism, and allows the revelation of the naturally unrevealable. The act of painting is the same magic and apotropaic gesture our ancestors in the Palaeolithic would do.

Man first developed self-awareness through the cult of the dead and painting.

The human being will exist as long as he paints

The paintings in your recent production essentially fall into two categories: on the one hand we have close-ups which highlight the architectural structures and their skeleton; on the other hand we have long shots which show how the architecture engages with its surroundings, with the horizon and reflected skies. Your work seems to have a double soul, with the first type of painting leading to abstract or kaleidoscopic representations – and working mainly on the evocative level – whereas the landscape paintings, the views, clearly imply a form of narration. I would be curious to know how these two very different souls can live side by side in your production. And also, how can a “cold” approach to the subject and a neo-romantic outlook coexist in your work? How do you manage?

Well, this often makes me wonder, in fact. They might not be contrary types; they could be seen as complementing each other, actually. Some painting cycles of mine focus on the more “abstract” quality of the structures; the lines are extremized, artificially mirrored and complicated to the point of saturation. In some other cycles I have preferred to dwell on the study of light, shadow, penumbra. For me it is always fascinating to observe how light rests on things, caressing them, or the fact that light can actually open doors which for me are mystical.

Sometimes I like to paint the suburbs, apparently nondescript places in which I often find extraordinary beauty. On other occasions, I focus on a single highly visible element, like the gasometers or certain metal constructions. There are times when my study concentrates on the structure, and other times I just get carried away by the emotional contemplation of the landscape. I think it all depends on my state of mind at the time, or maybe by the phase of life I am going through, or simply I am interested in both aspects.

My residences in New York and Berlin gave rise to several paintings. My studio in Brooklyn was located near a canal which inspired many paintings on the theme of reflection. This is a place where a semi-abandoned industrial area and a more residential neighbourhood overlap and mingle: just cross the road and you will find yourself in a completely different environment. People suddenly disappear from view and all you can see is buildings reflecting off the water.

My research in Berlin was different; I worked with photographer Paola Verde, exploring various areas in particular in the former eastern part of the metropolis. In my career I have often collaborated with photographers who have also been my companions in urban exploration, such as Roberto Conte, Sarah Sartore and the group of urban explorers, Lara Zibret, Emily Stone, and the Save the Industrial Heritage association.

Your paintings often make me think of Piranesi, whose works are characterized by aberrations in proportions or perspective, emphasized by peculiar slants of light and angles of shadow, or – even more typical – by the presence of the human figure, completely absent in your paintings. I wonder if one could say that in your work, you refer to 18th-century artists such as the Bibbienas or utopian architects Boullée and Ledoux. The work of the two architects above seems particularly meaningful as it constantly brings opposites together: design clarity and visionary qualities; hopes and aspirations for a free and progressive future, and the recurrence of melancholy, nostalgic or tragic themes such as the mausoleum, the cenotaph, the pyramid, and the gaol. The same atmosphere of uneasiness pervades Sant'Elia's or – in a way – Speer's architecture. To get to the point, who do you consider to be your ideal model and reference?

Not much is left of the Bibbienas' projects as they were either made of perishable materials or designed for temporary installation/s, which leads me to see a parallel /similarity with our time: I often wonder what will remain of our own age besides the obvious loads of garbage...

On the contrary, the two Utopian architects you mention have really impressed me. During my explorations, I sometimes come across structures which strongly remind me of them – the spherical radar in an abandoned airport in Berlin, for instance. Sant'Elia and Speer are part of my

imagination, as well.

However, my interest for such places originates in my formation years, when for me they were first of all abandoned places used for concerts or occupied spaces. There began my work on the post-industrial landscape, certainly influenced by a romantic fascination with ruins. I am an accidental archaeologist, and from an emotional point of view, I can see little difference between a Mithraeum and an industrial basement.

I certainly count time and memory among my deepest obsessions, but I do not deal with them by painting abandoned places, only. Influenced by Borges, I have painted archives and libraries. I love books, the stories hiding in archives, the quasi-religious atmosphere typical of libraries, and the dusty light in their corridors; the useless and therefore admirable attempt to collect all human knowledge and histories in one place; then, from a pictorial standpoint, these places are rich in fascination.

All in all, I agree with you when you say that my work tends to join a study of architectural forms and melancholy atmospheres. I would say this is the reason why I use a particular palette, ranging from Payne gray to blue and dark green; sometimes I add yellow or, rarely red, in a tone possibly tending towards the purple. At times I use complementary colours to create the shadows without using black, but I have never painted using strong chromatic contrasts. Doubtlessly I prefer those colors which have a centripetal quality, which move away from the observer, withdraw and concentrate inside. What counts, however, is observing light. I look for light through darkness; you could even say this is a good metaphor for life.

*As evening falls,
the autumn wind of the fields
penetrates all of me,
Then I cannot endure
the crying of the deer.*

Kamo no Chomei 1155-1216

Don't you think that your choice of subject, namely abandoned architectural structures in metal – a material that in itself symbolizes the modernist pride – is somehow didactic? Doesn't it implicitly criticize today's positivistic emphasis, which is reflected in the continuous push for development and consumption, with the well-known present results? This question also concerns other subjects of yours – disused amusement parks, for instance – which follow that melancholy current, like *Vanitas* artworks, allegorically expressed in the form of the abandoned toy, to name but one.

Well, my work certainly has an indirect social aspect, observing and exposing the evils of our time. As a painter, I am more interested in the creation of worlds which belong to the mind, yet nobody can elude history or present. When Romulus Augustulus was deposed, no one realized that event meant the end of the Western Roman Empire; they were already living in a new world, and the same might be happening to us today. We have an imperfect system, doing enormous damage, based on greed and the exploitation of both individuals and resources. It ignores virtue and kills beauty. We humans tend to apply corrections only after many disastrous events.

Melancholy is palpable in disused amusement parks, that's why I love them. I have explored several such places: Coney Island, of course, and a funfair in Beijing, where I got halted by the police at once. I am attracted to them because they do not function “normally”; they used to be devoted to fun, a free zone, a world turned upside down, a never-ending carnival in which subverting ordinary habits was allowed. And today they, too, lay dormant.

I was reminded of your work a few days ago, when I happened to go through the Olympic Stadium area in Turin at dawn. Free of spectators, the stadium looked like an enormous ruin,

an empty shell, a vessel for metaphysical echoes. It dawned on me that the temporal dimension has little influence on the fascination of certain ambiences, of the deserted places which you are so fond of; whether they have been abandoned for centuries or for some days does not really matter. The temporary vacancy of just one of their functions is enough to change them into specters, or at least sufficient for them to unleash anxiety and concerns (let's think of Hopper). Which one plays a fundamental role in your work, time or your notion of pre-existence – that is, what can evoke the consciousness of presences that have disappeared and of de-activated functions? I must confess that your work often eludes me in this respect; I cannot understand whether your thought is a-historical, or at least one expressing a severe criticism of the notions of time and history (then we would be in the territories explored by Nietzsche and De Chirico), or a work on history and memory as tragedies – and in this case we should evoke Sironi's spirit.

As in other cases, I believe that both aspects you mention are included in my work, side by side. The abstraction of certain paintings of mine leads me to an a-historical perspective, whereas in other works I am enraptured by melancholy.

I sometimes feel that paintings simply appear, and I am just their vehicle, their medium. I can talk about them, I can try and explain them, but whatever I do, I cannot get beyond their surface. Defiantly, I could tell you that painters do not have to say anything: painting speak for themselves. A painting is a silent and unfathomable presence; observe it, and sometimes it will sing for you. I have collaborated with Alessandro Gualtieri, a Minealogy professor at Modena University, to study the symmetry and the reflection planes in my paintings from a scientific point of view. However, I am equally enchanted as I look at the ever-changing sky, restless clouds taking my breath away and touching the chord of pathos with me.

In my research, I am lead by Apollo and Dionysus alike.

I am a Scorpio and my rising sign is Leo, Fire and Water: a real mess.

In the last few years I have hosted several students from the local Art School Istituto d'Arte Venturi for a period of job-shadowing and training; I have also taught painting at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Ravenna and the Accademia di Belle Arti in Macerata. Both bobs have been of the utmost importance to me. Being in contact with students, assisting them in their individual projects, understanding and activating their potential are absolutely rewarding activities: they make me find new solutions and open up my mind. The way I am constantly challenged and inspired is making me a better man, sentient being, and painter, too.

We have discovered that we have something in common: a passion for Late Antiquity, an age of osmosis and transition, between “the no longer and the not yet”. As I understand, you also love the notion of *limes*, border, those geographical or imaginary areas that embody the conceptions of both continuity and permeability, just like urban fringes. A few years ago, you wrote to me from London, explaining that you were following the tracks of the Romans, looking for their outpost. It would be interesting to hear how this passion, together with other similar interests of yours (I hear that you have recently read *Hypnerothomachia Poliphili...*), has influenced your work. Or, being more consistent with the existential and behavioural background of your work, should we rather talk about your interest in martial arts and Buddhism?

When I am on a journey/ When I travel, I always have the *Tabula Peutingeriana* in mind; it is an ancient Roman map showing the military road-network of the Roman Empire, so if I go to a place, I try to figure out what it was like in antiquity. For instance, when I was in Vienna, I tried to find the location where Marcus Aurelius was supposedly headquartered when he died. One of the teachings of the Stoic Philosopher-Emperor is that you must always conduct yourself according to the principle of reason - which is strikingly remindful of Kandinskij's “principle of inner necessity”. It

is in painting that I have found my principle and direction.

I spend months on reading *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, and I got lost in Poliphilus's turbulent initiatory journey, leading him to his inner transformation; a journey rich in symbols and meanings, which are often difficult to interpret. There I found the Augustan motto, *Semper festina tarde – Always make haste slowly*. With these words the prince would advise his interlocutors to always act hastily but prudently. The motto is accompanied by a xilography which was adopted as a trademark by Renaissance printer Aldus Manutius and also mentioned by Italo Calvino. It shows a dolphin entwined around an anchor, two contrary motions that complete each other. Frankly, I perfectly recognize myself in it.

After falling in love with Mishima (Giovanni's influence, once more, singing "Praise to Mishima and Majakowskij") and developing a passion for the *Hagakure*, a treatise written by a samurai after he had become a Zen monk (this time inspired by *Ghost Dog* by Jim Jarmush), I took up karate because I could sense a correspondence between painting as a discipline and martial arts. I decided to take the path "the empty hand" in order to reflect on the conception of emptiness in Zen Buddhism, in which the maximum distance is equal to the maximum closeness. Cultivate the spiritual qualities of man, his sublime spiritual side, the spirit of humbleness.

Unfortunately, not much of this is left in today's martial arts, so I decided to give them up and took interest in the disciplines of the mind, following the teachings of some Tibetan masters, Lama Tashi in particular.

In a moment of time, a marked differentiation is created;

In a moment of time, Perfect Enlightenment is obtained.

Bardo Thodol

Many artists and galleries consider China just a new promising marketplace; your journey to China, on the contrary, had deep spiritual motivations and implications: has it changed anything in your works?

I stayed in the People's Republic of China for a month in Autumn 2015 for my solo exhibition at Being3 gallery in Beijing. I visited the city, its urban landscapes and the surviving temples, in particular the Lama Temple. Then I left Beijing and moved towards Datong and the Northern border, which used to be the bulwark against the Mongol invaders coming from the North through the Gobi Desert.

This is a place it would be nice to disappear into – I thought.

Along an impervious mountain track, Xuankong Si appeared, a hanging monastery clinging to the rock where are preserved and guarded some sculptures belonging to three doctrines: Taoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism. In Longmen and Yungang I saw some rock reliefs and the remains of paintings from the Wei dynasties, a fusion of Indian, Chinese, and Hellenistic Gandhara art. Moving farther south, in ZhengZhuo, after passing by the Shaolin Monastery and going along a path/track up Mount Songshan, I got to the grotto of Bodhidharma, the legendary Indian monk who is credited with the transmission of Buddhism to China, the invention of martial arts and the elaboration of Chan, or Zen, as we know it today. In the grotto an ancient Buddhist nun performed a rite which revealed me a lot. Nothing happens by chance. Some years ago, while I was on my way back from New York, I met the Dalai Lama, who was travelling on the same airplane I was. Everything is inter-dependent. Before leaving for the USA, I had already entitled my new painting cycle *Karma*. Karman is the intentional action that charges our deeds with either positive or negative consequences. It is the Law of Universal Causation, the Principle of Cause and Effect: a butterfly flaps its wings and creates rainstorms.

I became involved in Buddhism many years ago: I was interested in its fusion with the preceding Bon religion, an animistic and shamanic creed. For the more, I had previously heard of Tibetan music during the Eighties thanks to Current 93 – a band whose leader was not accidentally called David Tibet. According to the Tantra, through the monks' throat-singing and the sounds of particular

instruments made of human bones, you can achieve different levels of perception and consciousness, and even reach Perfect Enlightenment. *The Tibetan Book of the Dead: The Great Liberation through Hearing in the Bardo* is very important to me; it is a collection of rites performed in order to help and guide the dead in the Afterworlds.

Getting back to painting, at some point I realized

that that my artistic research centred in fact on the two main concepts of Buddhism that is, impermanence (all compounded things are impermanent and subject to vanish) and emptiness (all phenomena lack inherent existence). Those abandoned places, which were once busy and full of life, are now decaying and fading into oblivion. Moreover, according to the Noble Truth of Emptiness, reality does not exist, it is but a projection of our mind; similarly, in my paintings I re-create non-existing worlds which are just the reflection of my mind or of the observer's thoughts, and a manifestation of painting itself.

The end of all accumulation is dispersion.

The end of all construction is falling.

The end of meeting is separating.

The end of life is death.

Siddharta Gautama Sakyamuni, *Udanavarga*

The slow pace you maintain in the creation of your paintings goes against the frenzy which the contemporary art market imposes. I feel you might be trying to put into practice a paradox (or a utopia), namely the one that sees painting – the most commercial of all visual arts – as an antidote to a certain voraciousness of the market, which is leaving less and less room for an artistic practice that is existential or spiritual experience and for contemplation?

You are right, As time goes by, I am painting more and more slowly; by now each painting takes almost a month to be completed; this is utterly counter-productive from the economic standpoint, but I cannot help it. I think I am trying to oppose, or rather to counterbalance our time: the more accelerated and digital our world gets to be, the more unrushed and physical my painting becomes; while images are consumed in an increasingly bulimic way, painting becomes more precious and contemplative, a synthesis of collected thoughts and images. Digital stuff flows, it an aseptic numeric code; painting stays, it is made of pigments and canvas, it has a peculiar smell. You need a screen to watch a video but a painting is a painting, be it in a gallery or in your attic. The so-called conceptual works of art need explaining, paintings does not require any explanation.

Although I am inevitably part of the art system, I do not pay much attention to it, I do not deal with market strategies or the like; I am no good and I get bored. I prefer to paint. Painting is complete in itself. When I am painting a bridge, I do nothing but paint a bridge, but the act of painting is has deep meanings in itself, it holds great value, which goes beyond that of simple representation. You just have to learn and listen to the painting, learn to observe it.

Some of my compositions remind me of Mandala paintings, the geometrical representations of the universe, and I paint them as if I was reciting a mantra. I am fascinated by the nameless medieval painters-monks who used to pray before they set to paint their illuminated codes. I was brought up as a Catholic, I studied the art inspired by the Gospel and the Bible, and although my paintings are not religious in nature, a spiritual and mystic element is always present in my work.

Talking about slowness, I have read that if you leave a plot of land to its own devices for about forty years, it all reverts to woods. This gives me hope. Whenever I sneaked into an abandoned building, I always found wild nature inside, but I had never painted it till today – apart from few exceptions. I didn't feel ready in the past, but the time seems ripe now. On reading Gilles Clément's *Manifesto of the Third Landscape* I felt at home; for years I have been wandering in the kind of landscape described in his book, large or small abandoned areas, mostly invisible, where nature is slowly

taking over again. My gaze is not a botanist's. I am interested in the magic, oneiric and mysterious atmosphere that emanates from these places. For me woods have a deeper fascination than gardens.

Although I paint abandoned industrial sites and urban space, I live by the ring-road, on the borderline between the city and the countryside, surrounded by nature; a thicket wraps up my house and studio in trees.

This, too, is a form of counterbalance.

Everything flows; in the long run nature re- appropriates all things.

Nature wins.

I paint such things because I feel them close to me.

Turin- Modena, 2012- 2018

When pursued by snow, rain, wind, and darkness, Let it come that I see with the celestial eyes of bright Wisdom.

In all the various lores, great, small, and intermediate,

Let it come that I be able to obtain mastery merely upon hearing, reflecting, and seeing;

In whatever place I be born, let it be auspicious; Let it come that all sentient beings be endowed with happiness.

Bardo Thodol

And am I born to die?

To lay this body down?

And must my trembling spirit fly

Into a world unknown -

A land of deepest shade,

Unpierced by human thought,

The dreary regions of the dead,

Where all things are forgot?

Soon as from earth I go,

What will become of me?

Eternal happiness or woe

Must then my portion be;

Waked by the trumpet's sound,

I from my grave shall rise,

And see the Judge with glory crowned,

And see the flaming skies.

Charles Wesley (1707 - 1788)