

CONVERSATION WITH FLAVIO MICHELI Stefano Chiodi

Stefano Chiodi: We're having this conversation in Italian, which is not your mother tongue, is it?

Flavio Micheli: Right. I have Italian origins, but my education was in German.

SC: Where did you grow up?

FM: In Lucerne, a small city, and then I lived mainly in Zurich.

SC: Have your origins had any influence on your path as an artist?

FM: When I started showing in Switzerland, they told me I had a southern esthetic; in Italy, on the other hand, they ascribed a northern-European conception to me. In any case my Italian-ness, as we can call it, has influenced my choices: after studying in Switzerland at the Kunstgewerbeschule in Lucerne, my friends went to Beuys in Düsseldorf or to Franz West in Vienna. But I wanted to work in Italy; I'd seen some of Luciano Fabro's work, and so I enrolled at the academy in Milan.

SC: In what year?

FM: In 1980.

SC: That was a time of great change in the art world, with the rise of the trans-avant-garde. What was your position with respect to that climate?

FM: The trans-avant-garde didn't attract me much, I always perceived it as a diktat of the market – maybe it's going too far to say that, but after conceptual art, after Arte Povera, going back to the figurative seemed to me a rather speculative thing.

SC: So you arrived in Milan while the city was shedding its skin after a very intense and difficult decade. What was the situation you found?

FM: The Milan experience was rather disappointing. The academy closed early, which was incomprehensible for someone like me who was used to spending all day at school in Switzerland working, exchanging ideas, etc. I lived outside Milan in a little house in the country, where I had a beautiful studio available, so I worked along a lot, and every now and then went to the academy to attend lessons and talk about my work. I never "clicked" with Milan. Besides, in those years incredible chaos reigned at the academy – there were protests or student assemblies every other day...

SC: Were you ever into politics in a general sense?

FM: No, it didn't interest me then. All I thought about was my work, which has never had political tones in any case.

SC: What artists did you feel close to in that period?

FM: Even though I was living in Milan, I was always more attracted by the art scene north of the Alps.

SC: Who, for example?

FM: Imi Knoebel, Blinky Palermo, Gerhard Richter and Beuys.

SC: What did Fabro represent for you?

FM: What I liked about Fabro was the poetic language. He was capable of transmitting a different sensibility from that of the artists I'd grown up with. His use of materials seemed unusual and open-minded to me. For example, when I saw the installation of his *Piedi* made of blown glass and silk for the first time, I was shocked by that juxtaposition of materials. I'd never seen such a beautiful work of art. And it was the allowing in of beauty, the use of materials that recalled the "Thousand and one nights," that struck me. For me, it was a reassuring event, because it gave me the courage to go beyond my education, which had set up aesthetic rigor as the first commandment.

SC: So his example mattered to you?

FM: His work helped me to believe in imagination and to develop a personal language. Plus, it conveyed the idea of the work of art as expression of an emotional or poetic potential.

SC: How have you maintained this attitude – are you still attached to a vision of objects as emotional triggers?

FM: Yes, this approach is still the common denominator of my works.

SC: In what way?

FM: I like to think of my works as “healthy carrier” of contents, capable of arousing an emotional reaction in viewers, and maybe even a reflection on their own autonomous perception.

SC: What other artists were you looking at in those early years?

FM: I admired various artists, but I remember a particular consideration for Blinky Palermo’s work, in which I found a spirituality that struck me profoundly. He was a romantic.

SC: Were you also interested in him because of his personality, his mythology? From the experience with Beuys to his mysterious death in the Maldives...

FM: His myth may have fed my adoration, but in any case I still think he’s an important artist.

SC: At as far as Switzerland is concerned, did you have contacts with or interest in artists from there?

FM: I loved the work of Fischli & Weiss, which had a revitalizing effect not only on me but, I think, on all of Helvetic art, which in those years was very much oriented towards and perhaps even the succubus of the German school, Beuys in particular. In a certain sense, they managed to give it a new identity.

SC: Was that because of their accent on the absurd, on playfulness, and naughtiness?

FM: I really like their way of working because it manages to shift fundamental themes to the plane of humor and irony.

SC: From that point of view, are you also interested in Erwin Wurm, for example?

FM: Yes, although his irony seems at times a bit too declared... he repeats himself like a punchline: after the third time, it’s not funny anymore.

SC: Getting back to your career, your earliest works were sculptures, weren’t they?

FM: Yes, my training was initially oriented towards sculpture. My first pieces were colored objects that thematized the ambivalence between the physical presence and the epiphany of color.

SC: Observing your work from those years, we can see elementary shapes and forms that are rather undefinable. Although you were working in three dimensions, you often presented your objects hung on a wall, against a background...

FM: The forms were conceived as supports for color, and in a certain sense I was seeking congruence between physical and aesthetic functions. For example, I liked to imagine that a sack covered in red pigment would be perceived as red in the shape of a sack. And it’s true that, even though they were three-dimensional objects, I almost always conceived them as wall installations. Thinking back on it today, maybe I was anticipating the propensity towards two-dimensionality that I later developed.

SC: Was there a drawing or a plan at the beginning, or did you use another strategy?

FM: I was intuitively trying to create stagings in which every individual element interacted with the others to become a unified whole. For example, for a work entitled *Partitur*, I had created some blotters, like the ones used to press paint onto engraving plates. They were saturated with Prussian Blue pigment and then hung on the wall like a musical score. The evocation of the musical dimension and the optical vibration of the pigment amalgamated to create a sensorial and temporal event. In another work, I applied sacks over monochromatic paintings, so that the paintings could only be seen through small openings. In this case too, the objects were arranged in order scattered along a wall. The effect was rather unsettling.

SC: Was there a critical or polemic intent in that gesture?

FM: I wanted to give the idea of depth...

SC: In the pictorial sense?

FM: In a broad, metaphorical sense... I liked the idea of a painting seen through a hole...

SC: But isn't it sort of the form of an asshole?

FM: There was also an ironic component to this work, without a doubt.

SC: In other words, it was a prank?

FM: No, but rendering the idea of depth implicates a series of connotations I didn't want to specify. As I said, I liked the idea of a painting, covered with a sack, looked at through a hole.

SC: Were you already doing photography at the time?

FM: No, I refused to use photography for a long time – I felt a sort of diffidence about the medium.

SC: When did you realize that the way photograph was being used by artists had changed?

FM: Seeing the works by young artists from the Becher school.

SC: Struth, Ruff?

FM: Yes, and Gursky, too.

SC: And what was your reaction then?

FM: At first I was very impressed by their works, but at the same time I also thought they were speculations: the enormous photographs and that incredible clarity were like a trick, a sleight of hand. That was the first impact.

SC: But at a certain point, you also ended up picking up a camera. How did that happen?

FM: In a fairly random way: I was working on some monochromatic paintings behind glass, a technique I really liked for the excellent rendering of color. Looking at glass painted from behind, you see the color, not the surface, not the brush stroke, just the color in its pure state. They were like colored mirrors. At that point I started to get interested in reflection, the place where the apparition of the viewer and the emotional charge of the color intermingle. My first photographic works were on the theme of this duplicity of the image.

SC: What year was that?

FM: Around 1999.

SC: And this step led you directly to photography?

FM: Let's say that photography had become an integral part of my work.

SC: When we talk about monochrome, it inevitably evokes a whole series of ideas and conceptions. Annulment, tabula rasa, the transcendence of pure color, or tautology and self-referentiality... The idea is that pure color is a preferential way to achieve a sort of release from the everyday and an entrance into a world in which experience become rarefied. Could this idea apply to your experience?

FM: I was interested in the emotional involvement of color and its appearance, its energy. I wanted to make works in which the viewer was exposed to this oscillation between perceiving and being involved. So on the one hand there was the reflection in the monochromatic painting, and on the other the photo of the reflection.

SC: So the color is painted in one case and photographed in the other...

FM: Yes. They were diptychs in which the photograph was the same size as the monochrome, practically a 1:1 relationship...

SC: You were interested in highlighting the semiotic caesura between painting and photography, between symbol and sign?

FM: Absolutely. I wanted to highlight the difference between representation and presence, reality and the subtraction of reality.

SC: Does a person approaching this work understand right away that he's looking at a "duplication," a painting and its photographic reproductions? Can the viewer come to this conclusion on his own?

FM: I think so, although perception of these works requires a capacity for analysis, to verify the various levels of the image. The colored glass with its reflection, on the one hand, and its photographic reproduction - further amplified by the reflection created by the glass covering the photo - on the other hand, can make it somewhat difficult for the viewer to focus.

SC: The fact remains that in this case photography is used at the zero degree: the photo is of the monochrome alone, what's around it doesn't interest you.

FM: The photo of the monochrome involves what's around it through the reflection in the glass. In this sense, the photo testifies to the original perception, in relation to the perpetuation of the real reflection. So my works take on the aspect of instruments, they're instrumental.

SC: So they serve to achieve a certain result - which is...?

FM: A synthetic perception... in German we have the term Zustand, which I don't know how to say in Italian - it's a moment...

SC: A condition...

FM: Yes, Zustand means the state of things...

SC: So to sum up, you place yourself inside a mechanism of representation, of relationship between the image and the perceived reality around us. It seems to me that something similar happens in your works with the mirrors placed directly on the outside, a bit like "natural photographs." For example, the work *Miroirs*, which you showed, if I'm not mistaken, at Expo 2000.

FM: Yes. They were large stainless-steel mirrors placed along the Zihl River. Walking along, from a distance you had the impression of paintings in motion, and from closer up you perceived the slow movement of the river in relation to your own pace, and at the same time, the image of the space behind you. In a certain sense, it brought to mind videos...

SC: Also because they produced a temporal image... Did you also have in mind the mirrors traditionally used by painters?

FM: Yes, sure.

SC: But at a certain point you started to use photography that was recognizable as photography. Do you take the photos yourself, or do you get them from somewhere? What sort of subjects interested you at the beginning?

FM: One of my first series of pure photography consisted of views of exteriors, taken from inside my apartment at night, through the glass of a window that became a sort of membrane between public space and the private sphere - you can see the lights outside, but also the reflection of the interior space...

SC: Two levels, a permeation...

FM: In this case as well, the theme was the layering of various levels of image. Unlike my earlier works, here it was the subject photographed that created the effect. The idea for this work came to me when I was reading an essay by Jeff Wall, in which he describes Philip Johnson's glass house as man's desire to be part of nature. But this desire becomes a nightmare when, at night, the glass reflects only our own image.

SC: Does photography regain a temporal, narrative dimension here as well?

FM: The narration is added by the glass that's physically placed in front of the painting. Looking at it, the viewer is involved through the reflection, so the original situation is re-proposed. It's a sort of loop.

SC: You quadruple the reflections... At that point you also started to work in series; was that because

photography is serial by nature, or was there another reason?

FM: I just think that serialism gives more body to the concept developed in the work. It amplifies perceptive capacity, and therefore the opportunity to grasp different facets of the work.

SC: We haven't said so yet, but in the meantime you moved back to Italy from Switzerland, this time to Rome. Was this new move just a biographical detail, or did it have consequences on how you worked as well?

FM: My friends couldn't understand my decision to go and live in Rome. They said it was impossible to work in such a beautiful place, so imbued with history, but I had a desire to live in the south. My way of working obviously underwent some changes. I experience the city like a sort of perpetual stage set – you could say that Rome, in spite of all the difficulties, brought me closer to the themes that I've always pursued in some way.

SC: In your work the human figure never appears, at most there's a transitory sign, but the body as such, the living body, isn't seen. On the other hand, there's almost always glass that reflects the viewer's body. Is that the idea? The image is uninhabited until someone looks at it and is reflected in it?

FM: I think that the representation of a human figure would condition perception in a one-way direction, and the work would lose its instrumental character.

SC: Now we come to the current decade: at a certain point, photography and painting became a unified thing, because you started to do photographs and painting under glass and place them on the same surface, in the same painting.

FM: Putting different categories of images on the same surface creates a visual interaction. I'm interested in the simultaneous action of these elements, their intermingling and the perception that arises from it.

SC: Do you combine bands of color and photography according to a precise method? Is there a relationship between the photo and the color, between the dimension of the photographic part and the painted part?

FM: The process is purely intuitive, it's a question of balance and formal precision.

SC: There's a lot of Blinky Palermo in that, I'd say! Certainly there's a harmonic proportion in both the tones and in the proportional relationships; are you doing great abstract painting, do you want to recuperate a certain idea of harmony, or am I wrong about that? Aside from one repeated module, the vertical rectangle, you create various segments: do you plan them as a whole, or are they realized one by one and then brought together and composed?

FM: I don't perceive these works as abstract painting. For me, the tones have the same value as the photographic parts and their relationship is dictated by thematic criteria.

SC: How do you choose the color?

FM: The choice of color is thematic as well.

SC: So it's a function of what's around it?

FM: Yes – in the series *Parks*, for example, through the tones I chose I tried to highlight the atmosphere of artificiality that hovers over the representation of nature of a park. The function of color, in this case, is to give an atmospheric value. The same thing happens in the series *Scenics*, which refers to Cinecittà stage sets.

SC: Are the series, like the one on zoos, open-ended, or do they have to be finished at a certain point? Do you decide in advance to limit them to a certain number?

FM: I decide the number of a series during the process of development. After constant verification of the completed work comes a moment of intuitive approval.

SC: Is there a conceptual or temporal unity according to which the photos have to be, for example, all from the same place and at the same time, or have a certain subject or a certain arrangement?

FM: In this case as well, the formulation is substantially thematic. After I decide on the subject and complete the photographic work, I start the phase of revision, in which I define the aspects I want to

highlight. In the end what's left is the work with the single image.

SC: It seems to me that the next step was the even more recent abandonment of the monochrome, as in the series Kalib.

FM: The monochrome, in this series on zoos, is reduced to a color "test" inserted into the fabric of the photograph.

SC: A sort of colored "patch" that represents an average of the pixels around it.

FM: Exactly. The tone is developed with the Photoshop color sample tool.

SC: The patch is by necessity outside the iconic field. Is it a way to incorporate an ironic charge in the image, to challenge its naturalness?

FM: Let's say that these patches serve as tools for verification. They're parameters for calibrating objectivity.

SC: A way to bring out the reality behind the illusion.

FM: Definitely. These zoological landscapes fascinate me because of their scenographic quality and their illusionism.

SC: And do the colored patches fit into this idea of de-mystification?

FM: The patches constitute an element of reference between the photographic medium, with all its implications about the concept of reality, and the real subject photographed, which in some way paraphrases this concept. So, these patches serve as pseudo-instruments of calibration of reality, ironically speaking.

SC: In other words, the viewer looks at the image as he would any photograph of a real space, but at a certain point he realizes that there's a piece missing here, and another there, that the background has been erased and replaced... In other words, an element of contradiction or of disintegration of its own credibility is installed within the fabric of the image. Is that right?

FM: Exactly.

SC: And all of this is of course made possible by the use of digital photography and Photoshop. What's your attitude towards these means? Have they changed the way you practice and conceive the photographic medium?

FM: I now consider the use of digital photography and its computer manipulation as a traditional artistic discipline with the addition of an innovative factor that allows for a very immediate work with the image. But I realize that this immediacy requires a very high level of critical exactitude during the creative process.

SC: And so we come to today, with the works from the series Duett. How would you characterize them overall with regard to the path we've reconstructed up to now? Is your attitude more one of cutting things out, or of adding them?

FM: In this latest series, I add a new imaginative strategy: I introduce the juxtaposition of two different images to create a new one.

SC: Which consists of images that are invariably cut in half, which the halves two opposite classes of images, one is the reproduction of a painting...

FM: ...and the other is the photograph of a real situation.

SC: What meaning is there in this contrast? Why are the images physically juxtaposed and so different at the same time?

FM: For several years I've collected reproductions of paintings by anonymous artists that I find by chance in everyday contexts, like bars, waiting rooms, hotels, etc. The juxtaposition of these reproductions with photographs created in the usual but non-planned way, using a camera to capture aspects of everyday life to which I'm unexplainably attracted, triggers and associative mechanism that goes beyond the

iconographic aspect.

SC: How do you create the contrast, the difference?

FM: In the first case, the photograph stands for the work of art, it's in place of the work of art, a substitute. In the second case reality becomes the work of art through the medium of photography.

SC: Have you always been interested in "popular" painting?

FM: So-called popular painting interests me from the point of view of emotionalism. The paintings are done with a sort of ingenuity, an innocence, a faith. Those are aspects that presuppose a strong imaginative force.

SC: I wonder if it's really ever possible to be as innocent as that... under certain conditions maybe it is, but is the significance of what you do really received as such by the viewer, without complications? In the past, in naïf painting or in ex-votos or folk-religious images or allegorical parade figures, it might be possible to find that attitude you're talking about. But I think that today, and for decades now, the popular visual universe is dominated by very different models, by photography, by cinema and above all by television: the mass media, not painting, is the force that shapes popular imagination.

FM: You mentioned ex-votos. What I find interesting about some types of ex-voto is that they're painted images. Paintings, not photographs. On the one hand, they're products of the imagination, and on the other they're considered more authentic than photographs.

SC: Due to nostalgia?

FM: No, I don't think it's nostalgia – the person who commissions and ex-voto believes that there's more truth, more authenticity in the painted image. This is an interesting aspect: photography is much more objective, but the painting is more true.

SC: And would you like to have that kind of innocence?

FM: If I ever had it, unfortunately I lost it, and all I can do is make "substitute" images. I envy anyone who manages to do an authentic painting. But I don't think the right conditions still exist to work like Giorgio Morandi.

SC: There's another aspect in the *Duett* series, the illusion of continuity: for a few seconds it seems like what we're looking at is a single field. Here you're playing with the viewer's expectations – you feed him a deceiving image.

FM: I think that deception is a legitimate strategy. It creates a moment of emptiness where imagination and perception intermingle in a playful way.

SC: We can say that in your career, in some way you've pursued a phantasmatic image: you started out from the zero degree, from pure color and flat surface, which was the final degree of evolution of a certain idea of abstract painting, and you've been moving backwards ever since – from the monochrome you went back to the image, the illusion, to "taste" and emotionalism. But recuperating a form of innocence of the image in today's civilization of spectacularization and simulacra seems like an illusion. And you just said it, too – innocence is impossible. Is that true only for artists, or for everyone?

FM: Innocence isn't impossible tout court, but I don't think we can pursue it. In the *Duett* series, I use the innocence and emotional potential of "popular" artists by juxtaposing them with images that feed on it like parasites and, assimilating them, exalt them.

SC: And in effect, the mechanics of the juxtaposition, the montage, is very powerful; you can transform two valueless images into something much more interesting.

FM: The method of juxtaposition and montage imposes different approaches in terms of reading. Without trying to list them, the thing that interests me the most about this method is that it forces you to take a "real look." Looking at these works is a voyage through various iconographic layers, which doesn't lead you to a definitive conclusion, but if anything stimulates the imagination to continue the game.

SC: So at the end of this path we've taken, there is no conclusion; we might say that, viewed through the lens of your work, the world appears to us even more clearly, with its unstable, ungraspable constitution, and consequently we can't trust too much in the appearance of things, because it takes so little to disguise

them, to alter them. And at the same time you set shimmering in front of us, as if in a kaleidoscope, a completely different, poetically dense image from which an enchantment with the world emerges. Is this simultaneous need for lucidity and enchantment the nucleus of your current work?

FM: My current work is hermeneutical, dealing with the transformation of what appears to be real through interpretation and perception of it. I'd like to suggest different tactics for reading that manage to unhinge sensorial conventions, so that the work shows not what it is, but what it could be and isn't yet.

Translation: Theresa Davis