

# Mysterious baths

by Andrea Cortellessa

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Between the 'heroic' period of Metaphysical Art, universally a favourite, and the 'ironic' period of Neo-Metaphysical Art, which now knows almost as much success, there is a *great deal* of de Chirico. And in this regard the game is more open than ever. We should know well by now, with the Pictor Optimus one can never sleep soundly.

But in this journey, there is an "intermediate" stage which, in spite of ever more meticulous research, still seems to be unexplored. I'm referring to *Mysterious Baths*, a cycle of paintings that occupied de Chirico continuously in the period 1934-36 and was exhibited for the first time at the Quadriennale in Rome in 1935, to be presented the following year at Julien Levy's gallery in New York; but was elaborated from the illustrations for the posthumous edition of his mentor Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (Gallimard 1930) and became more precise in the other cycle of lithographs produced for Jean Cocteau's *Mythologie* (Éditions des Quatre Chemins 1934). As with his other repertoires, in later times de Chirico would return to the *Mysterious Baths* with the homonymous construction of the large fountain installed in Parco Sempione, Milan, for the '73 Triennale. But his departure from New York in June '37 marked the interruption of this interlude. The 1940s were to be consecrated to the genius of Disguise, in painting as in writing; and it was to be, that, an entirely different season.

Aware of the questions that these images raised and still raise - even more than his own, always enigmatic images generally do - de Chirico wrote this handwritten note: "The idea of the "Mysterious Baths" came to me once when I was in a house where the floor had been highly polished with wax. I looked at a gentleman who was walking in front of me and whose legs were reflected in the floor. I had the impression that he could sink into that floor, like into a pool, that he could move and even swim there. So I imagined strange pools with men immersed in that kind of water-parquet, who stood still, or moved and sometimes stopped to converse with other men who stood outside the pool-floor".

In truth, the psychic genesis of the cycle can be dated back at least to the Ferrara period: "Villa Seminario, May 1917" sounds in fact the date at the foot of the *poème en prose* that with the title *Villeggiatura* de Chirico published in August of that year. There is already this flash: "The hurricane erupts. O tremendous fatality, where have you led me? | I look all around at the wonders posted on the terrible stages of spring. Each booth contains a ghost. I discover them one by one by peeling back the curtains. | - I am the survivor and the unborn.

Once again, the metachronic de Chirico patron of the circle emerges, in which an indefinite past suspended in a fog of meridian mysteries is reflected - just like those well-dressed gentlemen in the motionless waters, where their denuded avatars are immersed - in a future yet to be written. The extraordinary fortune that his painting encountered among the artists who came after him is an integral part of this metaphysical future. And it is symptomatic of the polymorphous plurality of the Monomaco that the many artists who have looked to him have done so in unpredictable and very different directions. From the meta-painting of Giulio Paolini to the disguises of Luigi Ontani, from the post-classical references of Kounellis, Salvo and Parmiggiani to the *d'après* of Schifano and the new meta-physical landscapes of Luigi Ghirri, without forgetting the Pop art of Jasper Johns and Andy Warhol, a whole crowd of prestigious art holidaymakers has passed through the Pictor's lustral water: they have all taken their Mysterious Bath. So it is up to us, today, to take that Bath in our turn.

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