

Pittura felice

A note by
Marco Meneguzzo

This original text was written for Repetto Gallery by Marco Meneguzzo, art critic and member of the commission of the Archivio Mario Schifano, on the occasion of the exhibition *Schifano. Pittura Felice*, at the Repetto Galleri exhibition spaces in via Clemente Maraini 24, Lugano, from 2 May to 12 July 2024.

Something had changed. The sense of intellectual oppression experienced in the 1970s showed signs of abating, but then collapsed almost abruptly between 1979 and 1980: the almost total occupation of the visual arts by Conceptualism and Process Art disappeared in the face of the return of painting, to whose definitive and not apparent death all intellectuals would and had sworn. Someone had shouted in the middle of the art world that “the king is naked!!!”, and the fragile ideological conceptualism of those years had shown its limits, which consisted in mortifying the desire for lightness in favour of a rigour that had become a tired tautology, without thinking that lightness itself is a conceptually strong element, even and especially when it is not openly declared. Apart from small hints scattered throughout the second half of the 1970s, it would have been hard to imagine such a radical change, to which the market was certainly no stranger, but which met with the common sentiment of the public and collectors, who could finally come out of the closet and say that “La corazzata Potemkin’ è una c....a pazzesca” (even if it is not true...).

In this climate of intellectual revanchism, painting emerged from the neutrality of tools or a specific language to take on an ideal meaning, a political banner ‘against’ something, ‘in the name’ of something else: this was the case for the critics and the history of the time, but not for the painters, who may have lived a hard life in those years, even full of existential crises, but who continued to do what they had always done.

Mario Schifano had come through all this (almost) unscathed: his personality was too strong to be subjected to any diktat, and his creative history had been going on since 1960, with a series of themes and typologies that had become, as we say today, “iconic”. It is true that for almost a decade he had been pondering the fate of painting, or rather the fate of his painting, devising ingenious series such as the *TV Landscapes*, a mixture of ‘cold’ media such as the television screen, raped by painting - a ‘warm’ medium - superimposed on emulsified canvas, in order to resolve the dilemma of painting’s ‘resistance’. In the 1980s, this pictorial continuity, stubbornly maintained when all artists were doing the other, had made him an icon, a pioneer, almost a hero (the other would have been Emilio Vedova). In reality, Schifano had created his own life, followed his own path, influenced by the context but at the same time a builder of the context, and all this was finally acknowledged to him, although he probably did not care.

Just as Claude Monet, in the last years of his life - the Impressionist exhibition was in 1874, and we are talking about a good forty years later, when everything had happened in art - painted some of his most beautiful pictures, because he was finally free of all avant-garde labels, so Schifano, in the eighties, only had to worry about painting, and painting what and how he wanted: no longer an exponent of Pop, of European figuration, of this or that ‘school’ (Roman or Piazza del Popolo, as you will)... Just Schifano and painting. Probably his painting of these years is

the true demonstration of his innate ability to escape the historical period and to enter art history more from the side of art than from the side of history. But this is the talk of a critic... the artist, on the contrary, painted with an almost bulimic happiness and speed, and not only in response to the success that once again rewarded him. Painting for him was like breathing, and he was finally doing it at the top of his lungs, with the sole intention of continuing to do so.

In the 1980s, which for him began around 1977 and ended stylistically in 1991, Schifano produced countless series - the *Botanical Gardens*, the *Acerbi*, the *Architecture*, the *Biplani*, the *Acquatici*, the *Campi di pane*, the *Deserti*, the *Casa*, and then countless paesaggi, each with a specific title or single subject, all usually made for specific exhibitions that marked his path in those years - , On closer inspection, they show various

stylistic changes and a differentiated use of the pictorial material, sometimes more fluid, sometimes more lumpy, sometimes with the addition of sand and earth, but all with a 'family air', given by the perceptible and visible freedom of sign and colour with which the artist approached the canvas, or rather the hundreds of canvases piled up in his studio. This "freedom" is what they have in common, what makes them sisters, even if the stylistic and pictorial differences are obvious, because even more visible is the freedom with which they are conceived, executed and, perhaps, constantly repeated. It is not easy for an artist kissed by the market to remain true to himself and not to appear chained to the stylistic features most desired by the public, but in the face of so many others forced to repeat themselves for needs external to their feelings, Schifano's action seems natural, simply because it "is" natural. Painting like breathing, it has been said...