

Introduction to the catalogue "Telling Portraits", published in May 2001, on the occasion of the homonymous exhibition at the Palazzo Annoni mudimadue, Milan.

The depth of silence
by Denis Curti

I approached these photographs in the firm belief that I could fully comprehend their obscurest secrets, discover their mystery, reveal their background and manage to fathom the deepest ones. Each encounter, I said to myself, like this one with photography, always leads somewhere. Then I changed my tune: all that space and all those suspended things had somehow immobilized me.

So I thought of Joyce and I thought of total silence, of nothing, of writing for the cinema, film scripts, symbolism, Duchamp, the poetry of Duane Michals and the dramatic force of Robert Frank and I discovered that Francesco Pignatelli is a photographer of the imagination. His stories and sequences are anything but a pretext for recounting something else. The message blends with the contents and there is no possibility of separating the picture from its context. This keeping things together without revealing anything reminded me of J. Rodolfo Wilcock, who, in his introduction to M.P. Shiel's book "The Purple Cloud" wrote: "Just as the evolution of language leads to the elimination of communication, the evolution of literature always leads to the author making closet contact with himself. In other words, he writes for himself...".

I am not sure that Francesco has created these pictures just for himself. If this were the case, I would be delighted. What I am quite sure of, however, is that Francesco immediately appeared to me to be both destabilizing and enormously and consciously dissociated. Marginal in his centrality, he is anarchical in his capacity for planning. In his photography there is a way of seeing and presenting things that seems to be impromptu. The appearance of coolness is continuously being dragged along so that things heat up by friction.

In these brief scenes, in these short stories told through pictures, one finally senses the depth of silence that, by its very nature, belongs only to photography.

The first sequence features the photographer Nobuyoshi Araki.

An unexpected encounter in the street. It's the beginning of a game in which they are accomplices; the moment becomes the actor, director and creator of the scene. Who is photographing whom? Ambivalence, objects and subjects decompose and reform themselves. The roles chase each other.

It is the total synthesis of visual language, it is an invitation to enter a private world, so intimate that one comes close to impossible communication. It is the experience of vision that meets its own story and superimposes itself on it, giving rise to an unreal dimension.

The second sequence is dedicated to the director Nagisa Oshima and it is the articulation of objects, this time, that materializes. This is an archive of sentiments of parts, components, compositions, traces and sections.

An incredulous and astonished gaze: eyes, mouth, ear, nose and hand; the open palm facing the sky. The figure of a man. Seated, he looks at us calmly. He watches us. Impenetrable calm, impregnable confidence, a shield from any attempt at intrusion. The voices-over are imaginary and the harmonious development of the story reveals its respect for the other, of the subject before him. And Francesco never attacks, he never imposes himself, he does not invade, he does not persist.

The third sequence is a tribute to Takeshi Kitano.

Gestures, signs, movements. Paths, signals. Invitations to decode the language, the mime. The body is a communicative tool, consequently we must become skilled interpreters of visual codes, common and individual gestural expression.

Silently, he gathers vestiges and details, tenaciously pursuing his design. These are portraits freely executed. The sitter does not succumb to the lens, neither does he remain imprisoned in a mawkish role: he is not the photographer's model. For both, the relationship is an open one. And this is why there is surprise and revelation.

The last sequence is that of Peter Greenaway.

A city. A street. The outside wall of a building and the flagstones forming the road surface. Between the two, a long, narrow pavement.

In the following picture the scene does not change, but, on the pavement, a man is arriving, looking at the ground and walking quickly. He crosses the photographic space, going out of the camera's field of vision. Then he reappears, holding a towel: he handles it and remains on the ground, between the pavement and the road.