

## A Special Man

by Elio Grazioli

The idea, says Pignatelli, first came about in front of Cimabue's frescoes in Assisi: the effects of chemical reactions in the colours made them appear like bizarre negatives of themselves. In actual fact, these are not true negatives, but all the more strange because they are mixed and altered. Pignatelli thought of the photographic negatives that he was already using in his *Reversed City* series (from 2002) and of the other possibilities they could offer.

He had used them in *Reversed Cities* to transform the urban landscape. On that occasion, however, he may have thought that the reference to painting contained a sort of twofold destiny – of painting that becomes photography and, at the same time, of photography that goes back to painting. A real, and indeed chemical, destiny. In other words, while photography came from a desire to find a chemical means to fasten the image that light projects, now it is going back to painting, almost as though wishing to waylay it, in the manner of all destiny, as the famous legend of Death in Samarkand so clearly shows. Here, precisely because of the strangeness of this pseudo-negative, instead of dealing with Death, what is involved is life and revitalisation.

This is not some sort of return to painting, nor is it a nostalgic recovery of old techniques or references. It is not a quotation of origins but rather a reformulation, a working-through, as Freud put it in reference to the memory process of rewriting and reinterpreting, as when one tells a dream. Don't these images have the look of dreams? Painting is reinterpreted by photography, and vice versa. It is worth noting that its destiny is all the more fascinating for its paradoxical aspect, since it is brought about by a digital, postproduction process.

And indeed, when faced with the negative, we are always caught up in these plays of cross-references and reversals. I don't know if particular studies have examined the use of negatives in the history of photography, but they were certainly used right from the outset, for the way they show reality is so surprising. Examples date back to Fox Talbot's *Pencil of Nature* (1846), the first photographically illustrated book in history. Man Ray made special use of it, as in the famous *Noire et blanche* (1928), in which the black and white are not simply reversed but actually change meaning, playing on the "black" of African art. Others have experimented with surreal, or at least alienating and disorienting effects, such as by reversing shadows, which turn white, as in the work of Maurice Tabard (late 1920s). Yet others, like Andy Warhol, have reversed the manifest meaning of their own works: when we look at a *Marilyn Reversal* (mid 1970s), we see the whole thanatological substrate of the artist's work, with Marilyn's face appearing as a death mask.

This is because the photographic negative is not a real negative – a negation – for it is complementary and this complementary is the very matrix that is, or rather was, used to print the positive image. This can be seen more clearly in colour photography. The difference is decisive: the relationship is not one of opposition but of bonding and continuity, and of transformation. It is dynamic and, I might almost say, life-giving. These things do not oppose each other, and death does not oppose life, but rather something else. But what? We all see in our own way but, in the meantime, the colours work and create other unforeseeable sensations and atmospheres, which cannot be reduced simply to reversals and oppositions.

This is what Pignatelli intended to make manifest, by moving away from his initial source of inspiration, which was Cimabue – and, one would be tempted to say, as digital moves away from the chemistry of analog. Now Pignatelli re-creates on the negative, thanks to the new potential offered by digital images, making his own reformulation. Indeed, digital technology no longer passes through the negative. There is a command in image-processing programs, but it is not part of the creation stage but simply a voluntary, symbolic, artistic choice. In digital imaging, each colour is its own, the coloured areas consist of pixels and each pixel can be recoloured. Processing has gone back to something much closer to painting than was the case with analog technology.

After his cities, with photos that he took himself, he moved on to Renaissance paintings (*Reversed Renaissance*, from 2004). This therefore starts not from photography but from painting, not from an image he himself made but an already existing one, found by him. He “reverses” this into the negative and then changes its colours. Why the Renaissance, one might wonder. For a number of reasons, but certainly also for the name, which means a “rebirth”, which is the purpose of the reprocessing. But what rebirth?

First of all, what is the meaning of an initial image that is already there? What happens within this image, what is the transformation? What is clear is that this is neither iconography, which takes from previous figurative models, nor citation, in other words taking someone else’s image and putting it into one’s own. It is not expropriation or ready-made either, which would involve showing an object made by someone else as one’s own. Here there is another question, which seems to me to be linked to the distinction that we find between two different words, one of which is “picture”, which points to a material object – a painting or a photograph that bear an image that is intrinsically part of them. The other is “image”, which is the reproduction of what is represented. This is quite independent from the support, which is like saying that the “image” of the *Mona Lisa* is reproduced on paper or fabric, or something else. In actual fact, it is the photograph of the *Mona Lisa*, in which we see another pivotal position of photography.

Pignatelli had actually already worked on this, in his *Fragile* (from 2005) and *Handle with Care* (from 2007) series, when he crumpled up the photographs – in this case, by no coincidence, of natural subjects, such as woods and flowers – he crumpled the support of the image. So what is the image, now, in this series? Another wood, another flower – and the fragility, as the titles point out, is not just that of the subject, which is nature, and which we are invited to protect, but also that of the relationship between “picture” and “image”. The distinction is subtle and the consequences fragile. Pignatelli then also used “rejects”, thus adding another element to his ecological pointer – to create what, as an extension of the crumpled series, is hard to define as sculptures, since they are made of paper, or installations. The former, from 2010, are significantly titled *Homeless*, which is as though suggesting that the image is in search of a home.

In each case, we have a transformation of the image through the reformulation of the picture – which is to say, of the support. This is also true of the present series, even though the support is no longer paper but digital. Right from the outset, the transition to digital evidently plays an important role in this distinction and a recurrent question has been: to what extent is the electronic vision a “picture”, or is it simply an “image” that goes from one support to another? Well, says Pignatelli, also the digital display, in its own peculiar way, makes it possible to reprocess the image, and indeed in a way that is different and “purer”, since it is less material. The digital display is the most immaterial form and, considering the new subject, one might even go so far as to say the most “spiritual” of all. Then, after reprocessing, the file is printed and once again finds a material support. But what is it now? A photograph? In many ways it is, but on the other hand it is also something else: without being crumpled up, in other words, it is somehow different from a photograph. Technically, it is a C-print, but more than anything it is a very singular image.

These do not appear to be mere formalisms or intellectualisms, especially when the subject of the work is none other than man. But what man? “The most representative in the history of Western art”, says Pignatelli, but also a very special man, whether or not one believes, precisely for the reason for which he has been portrayed so often: a man-god, a man with a dual nature, just like the image itself. With his title, Pignatelli may be saying that we all have a dual nature and that we need to be well aware of this fact. To make best use of it and to look after it properly, we need to pass through the negative, through a form of reprocessing and transfiguration (trans/figuration: beyond figuration alone).

Isn't this the effect that these images have? It seems to me that Pignatelli has formulated his colours not so much to emphasise the human nature of Christ as to bring out his “other” nature. Here the colours veer towards dematerialisation and, I might venture to say, a poetic, or at any rate aesthetic interpretation of the original image. By accentuating the relationships, others are created that are

not those of the paintings. These shift the accents and centres of the actions and of our vision, transfiguring space both in the interiors and in the landscapes. I have the impression that particular attention is given to the clothes, which have great visual impact in almost all the scenes, partly because the bodies, which are now blue or dark grey, are harder to see and set against backgrounds of similar colours. Might this too be a metaphor for colour, for the reformulation itself? It seems to me that this is done mainly to pick out every human presence – and thus not just the special presence of the protagonist, Christ, but of everyone in the scene – suggesting that this twofold nature is to be considered intrinsic in all people. In other words, in classical terms, we might say that spirituality is shown here as the third element, between body and spirit, between human and divine nature. These should not be seen as opposites, as we have seen, for they are made complementary by spirituality. This is the essence of aesthetics, as it is of art.