

LIGHT MATTER

di Salvatore Natoli

What does the 'faculty of seeing' – and, in this case, the visual arts – contribute to 'thought' and what thought is immanent in vision? The arts in general – and, in this case, the visual ones – are always located on the threshold between the visible and the invisible: they live on this tension and, for this reason, they always make the world appear to be out of the ordinary and bring to light, albeit indistinctly, some of its hidden features.

However, there is a clear difference between 'sight' as one of the five senses and 'looking' as a conscious act, as 'carefully focusing one's attention on things', which is, after all, the attitude of those who view the world with open eyes. It is, in other words, the approach of the interested observer, not the passive spectator; this is the gaze of those still capable of marvelling at what they see, but it is even more attracted by the 'world's invisible dimension', which even the arts can never wholly reveal. If that were ever to happen, all the arts would become redundant. This gives rise to various remarkable conjunctions, such as the accord between those who habitually observe things carefully and the power of a 'sign' – that is, the work of art – that arouses this interest. But even stranger is the conjunction between those who look around themselves – with a greater or lesser degree of curiosity – and suddenly they come across a 'sign' that attracts their attention. Why? This is probably because it reveals something that, in that particular situation, is not evident. And it is quite possible that this will encourage them to take a fresh look at what surrounds them. Each art form functions primarily in the sphere of the sensible – precisely because it is aesthesis, that is, perception of the external world – and through the senses stimulates the mind. Thus the degree of originality of the 'sign' modifies our perception of it and activates its latent condition. And since, if we are to accept Spinoza's proposition that mind and body are one and the same, the enjoyment of art gives rise to different thoughts. Art reveals because it establishes a special – and strong – relationship between 'perception' and 'expression'. This occurs because a work of art has its own unique features that make it immediately recognizable.

This may be said of any work of art – but what is the feature that characterizes Pignatelli’s work? It is the special way he handles light and shade. Certainly, all the visual arts involve the use of light and shade and this is hardly a novelty, but Pignatelli uses light as if it were matter: this is the light contained in the photographic negative. He exploits the reversed image and its semantic potential. Light reveals things, but we do not see it: we are in the light. In this respect, the Bible is extremely eloquent: ‘And God said, Let there be light’ (Gen. 1:3 Revised Version). It was the first thing to be created, preceding the greater sources of light: the sun and the moon. We are aware of it on the surface of things and, paradoxically, we see it in when shadows are cast by an obstacle that reveals its presence. However, when Pignatelli uses the negative, he certainly is also making use of light, but not of the type that allows us to see things and colours surfaces, but rather the light that ‘animates them from within’. It seems that the artist wishes to create an image of the ‘power of existence’ immanent in beings, of the inner energy that allows them to exist and preserves them since – again in Spinoza’s words (*Ethics* I, prop. 11) – *posse non existere impotentia est, et contra posse existere potentia est* (inability to exist is impotence; on the contrary, ability to exist is power).

It seems that, by using the negative, Pignatelli wants to make the *matrix* of what appears visible, so that the observer will understand the *meaning* of the image by ‘deconstructing’ it, to use a fashionable term. He shows the image by starting from its reverse, making it identifiable on the threshold, at the very point where it is formed. It is, therefore, up to those looking at it to allow it to mature within themselves – in other words, to *develop* it.

All observers are, in their own way, creators: they take possession of what they see – or hear, or read, or whatever – and regenerate it. It could be said that, by working on and with the negative, Pignatelli creates tension between matrices and surfaces: by making the images negative, he releases their semantic potential – in other words, their implicit meaning. All artists have their own ‘sign’ – Lucio Fontana, the slashed canvas; Emilio Isgrò, the erased text; David Simpson, monochrome painting – and, in Pignatelli’s case, this is the negative. Now, if Pignatelli’s aesthetic characteristic is this, if this is his artistic language – and it is also present in other works of his – the distinctive feature of this exhibition is the material that he employs: painting in the humanist (or Renaissance) period and, above all, (the theme of this show) the life of Christ. And this is the criterion he uses to select the paintings, which could well be compared to the composition of a text

that has been prepared for the addition of notes. At this point, one might wonder why, from the immense pictorial output of the period, Pignatelli has chosen these particular images: certainly for their remarkable expressive power and perhaps because they have frequently been reproduced and are well known. Or possibly for both of these reasons, but I shall not dwell on this point: as a visitor, I shall limit myself to stressing that the interplay between matrices and surfaces that I have already mentioned may be more easily recognized and appreciated if the observer is familiar with the positive image of the work that has been subjected to the artist's intervention. The fact that the image is well known is, in this case, an advantage because it allows the logic behind the composition of what I have called a 'text' to be deciphered more easily. A text it certainly is, and Pignatelli annotates it. Notes that, in his case, coincide with the way with which he manipulates the negative and which, as a whole, seem to be an exegesis of the story of Christ: what it was, what it is for us, what people said about him and, above all, if they still talk about it.

The series recounts a life that, at least in the history of the West, marked a caesura: it divided time — before Christ and after Christ — but, above all, it has given it meaning and an aim. This objective, for some, corresponds to the *vita venturi saeculi* — the life to come — and the end of this, for others, in a more lay fashion, to the teaching on how to reside in this world in order to live well. In my opinion, the latter is the way Pignatelli interprets the life of Christ. There are thirty-three paintings, corresponding to the number of years that, according to tradition, Christ lived. What is most striking about this artist's work is the way in which he intervenes on the negative, treating it with colour so that the scene and faces are reformulated. People are their faces, but, the moment they reveal themselves, they avoid us. No one, in fact, can be possessed by those who look at them: they exist for themselves, in the absoluteness of their individuality. Every person is entirely his or her face, yet they cannot reduce themselves to being a mere presence. Looking at a face means being engulfed by its mystery and experiencing the other person within their inexhaustibility. This is why a person can never be a thing. I do not know whether it is instinct or choice that has caused Pignatelli to almost always leave faces in the negative: perhaps he is seeking to indicate its inexhaustibility — and, even more so, of Christ's face, the visible image of an invisible God. And what does he draw on that face? What is he trying to tell us? Perhaps he wants to make people aware of the meaning and value of their forgotten humanity: it is a sin not to recognize this and to violate it in others and

oneself. Christ's face makes us conscious of the fact that we are sinners, which means quite simply that we are incapable of loving.

Pignatelli's elaboration of the negatives may be interpreted as a sort of gloss on the painting, a means of drawing attention to something that is particularly worth seeing, but is almost concealed in the positive version – in other words, he uses the dark side in order to allow us to see. To make this concept clear, I shall give a few examples, starting from the first negative: Fra Angelico's *Annunciation*. Radiating a faint light, the figure of the archangel Gabriel is coloured green in the darkness of the nocturnal negative, while that of the Virgin is restrained and almost obscured by blue. Indeed, she is disturbed by the angel's words – she is in an ancillary position, as described in the Gospels: 'Behold the hand-maid of the Lord' (Luke 1:38 RV). Far from dazzling, the angel's light has been made intimate by Pignatelli's manipulation; and the Virgin welcomes it and it transforms her.

If we then consider how Pignatelli has elaborated Piero della Francesca's *Madonna del Parto*, we are stirred by the orange-yellow colouring, focusing our attention on Mary and, above all, on her belly emphasized in black, almost as if the artist wished to meditate on what is happening, according to Luke, within her: 'For he that is mighty hath done to me great things' (Luke 1:49 RV). Another interesting work is his version of Lorenzo Lotto's *Christ and the Adulteress*: here Pignatelli dilutes the colours, softening those of Christ's robes in order to give prominence, in blue, to his hand – the one that stops the stone-throwers. Rather than attempting to prohibit – this would be authoritarian and, furthermore, it would be misunderstood – this gesture is not only an invitation to reflect, but also a warning: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her' (John 8:11 RV). Moreover, in Juan de Flandes' *Jesus and the Samaritan Woman*, Christ, who is conversing with the countrywoman, is wearing robes that are pale pink mixed with white. While Christ is able to listen and does not hesitate to judge, he can be understanding and, above all, demonstrates that it is possible to change: also in a disquieting manner, which the artist hints at with the dark blood-red of the background.

I could continue by interpreting all the other photographs that Pignatelli has elaborated, but this is something that anyone observing them can do. Of course, I do not know whether, when he elaborated these negatives, Pignatelli was fully aware of what I believe to have seen in them, but it is well known that artists intuitively deduce what the observer

arrives at through reflection. On the other hand, the artist is never master of his work, which, once finished, goes out alone into the world, as Petrarch would have put it. Through his marginal notes – in other words, his underlining certain features – Pignatelli takes a fresh look at humanistic (or Renaissance) painting, stressing its significant silences: above all, he seeks through his technique to take possession of Christ's life and make it his own. And, as a consequence, he allows observers to possess this life themselves. I could say that, with his work, Pignatelli seeks, in his own way, to answer Christ's question: 'But who say ye that I am?' (Matt. 16:15 RV). He responds by selecting paintings and elaborating negatives, and all this confirms that, in art, form and content are inseparable and are always one and the same thing.

But who is Pignatelli's Jesus – or rather, which of Christ's faces does he offer us? In the first place, in eight images out of thirty-three, it is that of a man 'born of a woman' ('But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law,' Gal. 4:4 RV). Pignatelli dwells on the Gospel accounts of Christ's childhood, almost as if he wished to stress his human nature, starting from his frailty as a child that needed to be looked after and protected, just like the others. However, he ran away from his parents to go to the temple so he could be among the doctors, because he already had something to announce that people either did not know or had forgotten. And from here, there is a selection, a pictorial composition having a specific aim: Christ is depicted as one who lives among the people, mixes with them, and takes responsibility for their needs, multiplies the loaves and shares his life with everyone. This is what may be described as 'Christian specificity'.

Finally, there is Christ who dies, in the full sense of the word. Pignatelli's elaboration of Mantegna's *Dead Christ* colours his chest blue and, under this, reveals, making use of the negative, his skeleton. At the same time he whitens the face, leaving his eyes in the negative, so they almost seem to be open. After his death, Christ speaks to mankind in order to say that his sacrifice for everybody has not been in vain and this continues to live. For this reason, I find the image Pignatelli has chosen for the Resurrection particularly striking: above is the figure of the risen Christ and, below him, the empty tomb (Giovanni Bellini's *Resurrection of Christ*). Has he truly risen? Or is the risen Christ, there above, simply a plea to humankind to follow his example and conduct a life like his? I believe that, rather than God who has become man, Pignatelli sees in Christ a man who has

become God on the strength of his capacity for love. But this requires a sort of Crucifixion of the ego, the sacrifice of his self without which no Resurrection is possible. An empty tomb: leaving aside banal pietism, it is hard to be a Christian, but the fact remains that Christianity is a means of setting free the divine power dwelling within us and, in Spinoza's words (*homo homini deus*) allows everyone to be a God for others. This means recognizing and respecting the humanity in every individual.

I do not know whether Pignatelli, in his work, wants to say this or something more or something quite different. What is quite certain is that every work of art remains open to different readings, inviting observers to continue it and find its true meaning within themselves, thus becoming – in their own way – its interpreters.