**TEXTS FROM THE CATALOGUE “ERCOLE MONTI. RECENT WORKS**”

curated by Elena Cárdenas Malagodi

ELENA CÁRDENAS MALAGODI

In 1998, I wrote:

Thanks to Ercole Monti

The singularity of Ercole Monti’s work?

The raptured, grateful gaze he sets upon nature. The sharp memory of this retinal emotion, and his prodigious ability to translate it into shapes and colors.

It seems to me that Monti has fixed himself a restricted but at the same time immense objective in painting these emotions, this memory. In order to do this, he stands at an equal distance from the figurative and the abstract, and works with strength and certainty. He has gained this certainty through fifty years of constant, solitary work.

I wrote these lines above about the completely unknown work of Ercole Monti, at the time of his

first solo exhibition at the *Galleria delle Stelline* in Milan.

After many years and many exhibitions of Monti’s organized by myself and other curators enthusiastic about his remarkable work, I read, along with him, my original introduction again.We told ourselves that there was nothing to add or subtract, except, maybe, that his work has remained constant; but it is no longer the work of a solitary man, because by now many of us know and love these paintings, there is more and more freedom, more and more light.

The Roman painter Ercole Monti’s exhibition in Rome, hosted by the *Biblioteca Angelica* in June 2014, covers his work over the past three years. Faithful unto himself: big square paintings, fields, seas, vaporetti and working tables. Green, yellow, white, black, red, blue.

Because what Ercole Monti wants, is not to tell a story. He loves to dive into color. And to inhabit a space in total freedom.

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LEA MATTARELLA

On 13 August 1925 Henri Matisse wrotesent a postcard to Pierre Bonnard that contained only three words: “Long live painting!” I have chosen them as the title of this presentation partly because Ercole Monti reveres the person who wrote this succinct and apt declaration of aesthetics. “Tell everyone loudly and clearly how much I admire Bonnard!” he whispered in my ear while we were at table a few days before I began to write this piece. Therefore, I make this known right from the start. Yet I think that at bottom there is really no need to do so, because all Monti’s works are exercises in admiration of the French painter. Like Bonnard, Monti has succeeded in preserving that childlike gift of being able to transform “the small facts before one’s eyes into marvellous episodes”1. Both artists have made the astonishment provoked by everyday things the starting point of their art, the point where everything begins.

Bonnard is the ‘tutelary deity’ of this exhibition. His function is similar to the role that nature, landscape and the surroundings play in Monti’s art. He generates a light that, in front of the canvas, illuminates what will then become a world. His works are made up of an incandescent and irradiating substance that is light, matter and form, but above all

the pure expression of the joy of painting. Monti immerses and envelops himself in this; for him it is like an outfit he wears to pass through everyday existence.

But all this is by no means an escape from reality; quite the contrary. Ercole Monti sets out to recover the emotion he has experienced almost by chance. It is an act of love towards something that has almost placed itself in front of him, as it were. The outside world is the source of inspiration, it is a book that speaks to him, which he continuously draws upon. Whatever has seduced him – whether it be “the very ancient breath of the sea” or “pieces of the old sky,” as Rilke says, or again a meadow or a sun-drenched, ploughed wheat field, a Venetian mansion or the flow of the Seine – is transformed into an essence that becomes colour. And he is willing, almost instinctively, to sacrifice the form to

this latter because, being both a ‘habitué’ of Venice and a connoisseur of painting of all ages, he knows all about the magic of colour that constructs, weaves, lends rhythm and breath, articulates, separates, unites, embraces, caresses, at times rests and other times explodes. He has been at grips with colour for many years, a good number of which

have been spent in an intense and secluded dialogue with his paintings. Then he was discovered by Elena Cárdenas Malagodi, for whom a mere glance is enough to open a door and a few lines suffice to allow others to enter where she has already been.

There is no drama in Monti’s works: even when he uses greys and blacks on a large canvas, he is able to make them bright and heart-warming; never gloomy, if anything luxurious. *Black Sea* is illuminated with gold, while *Grey Sky* is traversed by pink: welcome to Monti’s universe, whose predominant feature is harmony.

While I was in his beautiful atelier, a poem by Franco Marcoaldi that I am quite fond of came to mind. It begins as follows: “When you are present, be present / truly present. When you walk, / take a good look around you: despite / everything, the spectacle of the world / is always overwhelming”2. In fact I think this is the way Monti moves about among

things and experiences his magnificent adventure of the everyday. He sees a shirt hanging on a door, a rust-coloured curtain at a window of the Procuratie in St. Mark’s Square in Venice, the interior of a café, a landscape while driving, a divan – and he finds them ‘astonishing’ in their ‘ordinary life’. And for him this sensation is immediately translated into pictorial expression. He fixes these images with a few sketches, which he might jot down while immersed in water or while stopping in his car at the edge of a road. There is always a moment in which he moves off by himself and draws, as his wife Renata states.

He then lets the reality move away in order to work on the *absence* of things rather than their presence, on what *was* and is no longer. Standing in front of the canvas, Monti picks up the threads of a discussion between himself and the world that began who knows when, in an act of focalization that now concerns the heart rather than the eyes. These

large canvases preserve the time of both the apparition and disappearance of the image. They live in the very instant in which these two moments converge. At the halfway point there is the work that Monti executes and offers, revealing what he likes to call “the scent of the things I have seen.” Everything is deposited in the memory, which is not only the

memory of his life experience, but is also – on a wider, more vague and heroic level – that of the art of painting itself.

The painting is something that sprouts from a seed planted in his gaze and is no longer seen but, after a period of rest, blossoms. The pictorial layer suspends and accomplishes, is at once explicit and mysterious, always revealing that the visible contains hidden secrets. The application of these coats of colour begins by questioning appearances and then transfiguring them into unexpected energy. Can the world be contained in a blaze of light? Take a look at *Red Table* and then answer this question.

Monti knows that details obstruct an understanding of authenticity and truth, and this is why he utilizes colour that arrives from the inner space of the painting, which is the sole, indomitable subject of his painting procedure.

Mark Rothko, another artist that Monti knows is by his side while he paints (along with Tàpies, Burri, Afro and Ensor) wrote the following in 1947: “I do not believe that there was ever a question of being abstract or representational. It is really a matter of ending this silence and solitude, of breathing and stretching one’s arms again.” The breath in these

works is the beauty of the whole as well as of the individual harmonious colour combinations; it is painting filled with power that is transmitted and resists – sensual, precious, passionate. Monti paints without emphasis, yet the result is always sumptuous.

While Bergotte, the author in Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time*, is standing in front of the “little patch of yellow wall” of Vermeer’s *View of Delft* a moment before dying, he thinks: “This is how I should have written.” While viewing the enclosed space of Monti’s works one imagines that this is how life should be lived, drowning one’s senses in the calm of a hypnotic harmony of tones and pulsations.

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HENRY CARTIER BRESSON

Quelle joie de la forme et de la couleur!

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JEAN LEYMARIE

A letter to Ercole Monti

Dear Ercole Monti,

it hasn’t been possible to see you again in Rome as I had hoped, in the beautiful atelier whose windows open on that which has been dearest to me, Villa Medici, nor has it been possible to discover your atelier in Venice. Nevertheless I wish to express my admiration for your work, accomplished in secrecy, for your example of wise harmony in times of trouble and worry. In your conversation with our friend Elena, you have so well disclosed the nature and sense of the way you proceed that there is nothing to add.

You have acknowledged quite early painting to be your vocation, yet you joyously work as an architect, preserving your autonomy, and you play music with jubilation.

The three arts in you are interwoven. Your painting, more than any other, has its own architectural structure and its musical resonance.

I understand, having acquainted myself with them, your enchantment with Ensor, your absolute love for Bonnard, your precious friendship with two of the purest Italian artists, Scarpa and Afro. They were both bewitched by venetian landscapes, the lagoon and the hills of Asolo. You rightly remind that modern painting - breaking the contours, built on colour and feeling - sees its birth in Venice under the supreme mastery of Tiziano.

You begin by painting portraits and still life, a discipline of realism. When your painting finds its shape around 1970 after a slow and necessary maturation, and never ceases to flourish, you turn to landscapes, beaches, dunes, mountains, meadows, façades of Venice, urban landscapes, as well as interiors where you live, that you create. The formats are amplified, with a predilection for the square shape, its fullness. What really counts, is the wonder of the eye in front of the pattern, but what is embodied on the canvas through a profound alchemy, between naturalism and abstraction, is the felt emotion, the inner vision, more mysterious and true than the direct vision.

You know ancient painting, always contemporary, and you have assimilated, with the enthusiasm that moves you, the best of contemporary painting, its free open breath, the modulation of its colour, the poetry of matter. On your large keyboard where many echoes resonate, your tone remains unique, in its perfect rightness.

I send you greetings and best wishes for your young exposition.

 Paris, February the 18th 1998

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PIERRE RESTANY

Ercole Monti: the emotive time of the years 1950-70

The sequence of painting shown by Ercole Monti at the Credito Valtellinese Gallery in Milan’s Stelline Center embraces the 25 years from 1974 to 1998 and is of exemplary significance. The style which he has brought to maturity is the perfect expression of an exact point in the European modernity of our postwar time: that of the meeting between informal action and the post-impressionist tradition of an effusionistic spatiality. The action spreads the colour on the surface of the canvas and sets its point of reference. The figurative signs immersed in the fluidity of space are often carried to the limits of semantic legibility. They do not vanish, they transit. His painting reminds one irresistibly of the glissandi that affect the characters and their actions, in the novels of Alain Robbe-Grillet, a writer hardly remembered today. Michel Ragon has rightly spoken of an abstract naturalism apropos this painting which looks at surrounding space in the osmotic diffusion dear to the later Bonnard and to the early De Staël. There is nothing more Parisian than this journey of the eye, motivated by the inner logic of references that consolidate the pictorial statute of the work and save it from useless questionings. Monti, the most organically French of the abstract naturalists of his generation presents a whole panoramic stretch of French sensitivity, issuing onto structuralism after having flirted with the nouveau roman.

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FABRIZIO CRISAFULLI

Monti’s shapes are never born out of a free spontaneous act, as in action painting, they obey more mindful rules of composition, as in abstract-concrete painting…

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MARIA TERESA BENEDETTI

…His vision proposes a universe with no borders, yet familiar, in which coexists an abstract musical capacity to punctuate space and a need, always alert, to relate with what exists…

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JOSE' PIERRE

…This painting, as personal it may be, ignores nothing of the modern adventure, from Klimt to Bonnard and even Rothko…

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TITO AMODEI

…This painted surface…full of echoes, full of resonances between nature and culture; a painting made of odours and memory, but also of eyes and touch…

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FABRIZIO D'AMICO

Monti’s contemporary way stems from an antique and unavoidable aporia of painting: moving from a brief cultivated annotation on nature, and transposing that impression of the eye, in a different more relaxed time of the studio and in the vast physicality of the canvas placed on the easel. But even in exercising this eternal duality, Monti brings his special talent: that is to see, know, forget, chose, love.

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STEFANO CECCHETTO

 …In the most recent pieces the brushes are even freer, more detached; colour is diluted but remains pure energy and the force of the pictorial act is there, always present in its constant metamorphosis…

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ENZO DI MARTINO

…For Monti the observation of the reality that surrounds him has to do with the passing of time, that which modifies things in the change of light, and that of inner knowledge…