

Essere - Color is change.
Ulrich Erben new paintings.

When I visited Ulrich Erben in his atelier in Düsseldorf, in November 2019, to my great surprise and satisfaction he showed me some of his most recent paintings, matching them without spending too many words describing his works dating back to past times. "When you look at them, it happens that you don't stop thinking about them, and yet something happens. The eye is constantly on the move, it does not rest", he said then almost *en passant*, but at the same time in a very precise manner.

With his concise, almost laconic words, he did not only focus on a distinctive trait of his current pictorial production, but he also summarized what his paintings, for the past half century, have been able to awaken in the observer: a dynamic look, which continually regenerates itself without ever stopping, from time to time, reviewing and questioning itself.

This is why I would like to dedicate this essay not to explaining what these paintings represent, to what they may correspond to outside themselves and to what extra-artistic meaning they imply as a whole, but expressly to dedicate it to that way of seeing evoked in the atelier that these paintings are able to nurture: a dynamic view that constantly changes direction. Such a phenomenological - in the broadest sense of the term - way of proceeding, therefore, suggests not only to give an account of the words of the artist mentioned above, but also to describe the particular perceptive way that these pictures stimulate, that is to say, getting closer to what "happens when you look at them".

But let's go back to them, the paintings: at first glance Erben's works show a high pictorial culture, and this while lacking the proverbial object, although not referring to a (re-) knowable motif. They continue to recognize their intrinsic subject, their foundation and purpose in evanescent chromatic shades, in elementary forms that unite and contrast and in methodically conceived fields of color, each of which refers to the other. This kind of painting knows how to recreate the complex union and juxtaposition of its elements into an internal tension of the image which, generally, manages to overcome at the same time. And it does so by amazing the observer, simply "starting from itself". A painting of architectural conception, from which it draws its own stability, but which also appears always light and transparent, full of lively contrasts as well as of slight nuances, barely perceptible.

Despite their surprising harmony and constituent coherence, these image-organisms are not hermetic, self-referential systems, based solely on themselves. On the contrary: they open to the observer by activating a perceptive mode in which the eye does not want to calm down and becomes an ally of the intellect in asking questions and giving space to doubt. This happens, as described, "by itself" and has to do with both the particular workmanship of the paintings, and with the particular type of perception that these works are able to inspire.

If we observe without prejudice, then what the painter was talking about in his atelier does actually begin: the eye sets in motion, does not linger apathetically, complacent on barely perceptible chromatic gradations; it does not dwell on the impalpable profiles of longer edges as if they were single phenomena of pictorial virtuosity to be enjoyed as such. It also perceives the context and the environment inside the image, different colours that meet along an edge, for example, together with the disorienting nuances and chromatic gradations that are created between them. Here colours and shapes do not stand side by side as isolated elements, but they reveal themselves as dependent on each other and thus inseparably linked within the image.

The perception of these paintings does not result in the admired acknowledgement of the pictorial virtuosity that produced them - it is at most a means to achieve the goal -; the perceptual act implies an active link between seeing and thinking, a contest of intuition and systematic in order to make possible those visual experiences that are the theme of the present essay. In these paintings, there are continuous surprising spatialisations generated solely by chromatic values; optical effects of advancing and withdrawing two-dimensional elements that are static in themselves. Sometimes there are spaces inside the image in which geometric surfaces, which seem to hover before a continuum of different colours, suddenly lead us to perceive them in the same way as iridescent images, susceptible of multiple interpretations.

The fact that the eye, when observing this kind of phenomena, is constantly in motion could depend on its physiological motility; here, however, we are not dealing with the so-called "Rapid Eye Movement", but rather with a more or less intentional wandering of the glance, an involuntary slipping from one point to the other, mostly intuitively, induced by the image itself; a continuous pondering, comparing and doubting the contrasts and the pictorial modulations which occasionally vibrate before the eye. But we must always ask ourselves seriously (through the intellect) if some of these tenuous gradations do not represent phenomena of irradiation of a physical nature (of a dominant colour towards a more delicate one) and if this particular form of "Interaction of Color" is not inherent to the image already departing and pictorially anticipated by Erben. Precisely because both alternatives can not only be considered and weighed, but are generally actually present in the paintings, the act of looking tends to appear as an endless fathom of the image and its chromatic and formal elements interacting with each other.

In this regard, we could say it is a "critical look", a perception that rejoices and in equal measure doubts what it has in front of itself at a given moment. And since after a brief moment of disorientation and initial surprise, this looking allies with the intellect, with reasoning, we can ponder, doubt, question it, and in the end what comes out can be considered specific in Erben's art: thinking and looking take the form of a dynamic aesthetic experience.

It is a reasoning view and a seeing thinking at the same time, an awareness of the role we take when we observe these works of art. At the same time, however, it is a matter of understanding our possibilities and our limits, of verifying the image we have of ourselves and thoroughly examining our ability to react by relating to something that lies before us and, therefore, outside of us. If we put ourselves in the position not only to make the range of visual impressions act on our senses, but also and above all to meditate on it based on the experiences we have just had, then a particular form of perception begins, which can be called "aesthetics" or can be defined in terms of aesthetic reasoning.

Under these conditions, I do not perceive pictorial phenomena only as such, or as given and independent from myself, in order to marvel and enjoy them; in this perceptive act I also reflect myself, along with all my observations, impressions and feelings. I no longer see the images in front of me solely from a "neutral" or apathetic, indifferent point of view, but at the same time I see and consider myself as a sighted and sentient subject. I am thus able not only to register and get a feeling of pleasure from what I have in front of me and what I perceive with the senses, but I can also feel my seeing and thinking, my cognitive work and I can, if I wish, evaluate and put it in discussion.

When, by virtue of my senses and my intellect, I prepare myself for this, I naturally also feel the changes in my person, in my feeling, possibly even in my way of behaving and thinking; changes that have become possible only because of the fact to have dealt with these works. As I move around the exhibition space in front of the paintings, making my observations and collecting impressions, I meditate (in a Kantian sense), if we can say so, on the conditions of my experience, on the possibilities it paves ahead of me.

Perception, therefore, becomes in-depth questioning not only of images, but also of one's ability to discern, understand and judge. I begin to reflect on what I see there in front of me, on how I see it, as well as on my position and my role, and I examine everything more carefully. In this way, I am able to differentiate and even to review newly made observations. Questioning and doubt are, since the beginning, constitutive elements of this act of perception, as well as the experience that the same work of art can stimulate in different individuals different visual and cognitive modes and that these individuals can, at any time, modify their own point of view.

A central perception of this mode of observing the image and seeing it connected to it consists in the fact that, during the visual act itself, the latter changes and the observer is aware of this change. The experience

lived in front of the image becomes, however, when I share it with others, an ethical analogy: I am consciously interested in a different way of seeing, in a different point of view, and this is also a sign of an opportunity for change of my person, in relation to another individual, which perhaps for the moment still places itself out of my reach and my understanding. After all, the act of being is not static, but dynamic.

Galleria Studio G7, Via Val D'Aposa 4A, 40123, Bologna

Contatti: 051 2960371 | info@galleriastudiog7.it | www.galleriastudiog7.it

Orari: dal martedì al sabato 15.30 - 19.30. Mattina, lunedì e festivi per appuntamento.