

Autobiographical texture

by Anna Caser

1 . A very important imprint was left by my American uncle, Ettore Caser (my father's uncle actually) disciple of Ettore Tito and De Maria at the Academy of Fine Arts in Venice, who, after a successful career in Italy exhibiting at the XIII Biennial Art Fair in Venice and at the Brera and Albertina art galleries in Milan, emigrated to the United States in 1909, stopping first in New York and then in Boston only to return to Italy as a volunteer at the outbreak of the first world war and be awarded with the cross of war. In 1920 he returned to New York and set up his art studio in Broadway. He would never again set foot in Italy because of the fascist regime until his death in 1944. He was a real myth, I remember a house full of his pictures, the oldest ones completed in Italy and those that were to be returned to us, miraculously as a result of the auction held after his death. Several paintings in the manner of the Florentine impressionists, others more symbolical, many water colors, somberly atmospherical and draped in mystery. Many echoes of Venetian atmospheres.

I remotely remember my great grandfather's brother, the Venetian sculptor Pietro Caser. At home we all knew that it was he who fashioned the golden angel on top of the tower of San Marco cathedral. Old photos of him still remain , some of his woodwork and carved frames.

And then our Veronese cousins Trentini, a family of artists. Nurdio always used to come to our house in Valpolicella where we transferred from Genova to spend the September wine harvest stomping grapes right in the courtyard. Nurdio used to decorate our old vintage closets

and sketch caricatures of us at dinnertime. He prepared huge cartoons for the "Grapefest". The house was filled with jars, paintbrushes, solvents, and there were spots all over the floors. We spoke about his father Attilio Trentini, a relevant Art Nouveau painter and decorator. I was fascinated by a painting of roses, hung in the hall next to the kitchen with its dark wooden frame. We spoke of Guido's success (the other Trentini cousin) at the Biennial Art Show in Venice. We told stories about Angelo Barabino from Tortona, disciple of the important Italian painter Pellizza da Volpedo, also a parent though I can't quite follow him down the blood line.

Rocco Borella used to come to my house in Genova and sometimes Emilio Scanavino came too. Once I also met Fiorenzo Tomea, a friend of my father's who sketched his crooked candles on the family album. I discovered ceramics at Albisola together with Rocco Borella; the freedom of letting color drip amply, of not having to portray reality, of letting color spread out by chance. The emotion of cooked ceramics where colors vary and the crystalline coating starts to shine.

I can recall my art school, where I began my long standing friendship with Natasha Pulitzer, now living and working in Vicenza as an architect. At that time she lived in Genova, daughter of the naval architect Gustavo Pulitzer. I spent more time at her house than mine. She came from a family of intellectuals so that there were often fascinating people there such as Lele Luzzati, who worked for them for many years. Besides decorating ships he frescoed the walls and furniture of their home. He made beautiful tapestries with a sure, whimsical hand. Many of Sironi's paintings were hung on the walls, he too an associate of the architect Pulitzer. At times I tried to imitate them: at home I painted a bed-closet in the Luzzati style.

In Rome, the spirit of adventure I felt searching for the Academy of Fine Arts at via Di Ripetta, meetings with the painters on exhibit at via

Margutta, visiting the galleries and timidly enquiring whether I might exhibit for them as well.

Encounters with Marcello Venturoli, with Rolando Monti, with Giuseppe Gatt and how many conversations! In order to attend the art lessons of Monti, I started off from the Giustiniana village on via Cassia where I lived at the time, and following an incredible traffic jam (this was in the '60's) and leaving my two small daughters Silvia and Orsola in the care of a matronly Roman nanny, Lorenza, I'd get to via Di Ripetta in about an hour. And already pregnant with my third child Zeno, I organized my first important show at the "Della Pigna" gallery in Rome, with a critical introduction by Marcello Venturoli.

2 . Then followed the years of political engagement with many open questions on the autonomy of fine arts. As a person whose nature is inward bent and day-dreamy, I certainly couldn't create political images although I too was influenced by those political times, its battles and causes. By taking part in those discussions and letting it all settle in; and then I also recall setting up the scenography for several political festivals. Giant panels that had to be invented on the spot, piles of posters and leaflets, booklets for trade unions, artisans, textile workers, mechanics, women, the 8th of March, workers in general. Sometimes my children got a kick out of seeing city walls papered with my posters.

The Brescia terrorist massacre: I had to do a printing, it was a moment in which there was much artistic confusion in my mind, I thought that I should deal with recognizable forms; the search for realism (all this seems so distant now), mortified my abstract painting. The people I depicted had to have eyes, small dots in order to be recognized. It was the time when things were done with air brushes and spray guns in order to fill vast spaces and to make reproductions in single, original copies. Images were fashioned with cardboard stencils; in order to follow "Benjamin's way" and the art of the masses. I exhibit with Luca

Lischetti, Silvio Monti, Ambrosini, Ambrosetti, Tavernari at Castello di Masnago in Varese, with Giorgio Seveso introducing, Renato Guttuso also drops by and later writes an article in the local papers making fun of how spray guns have replaced paint brushes. Thereafter I'm to be elected town counsellor. In brief, those were fruitful times in political thought, but difficult from an artistic and personal standpoint.

3 . In my memories the first years of my life have an important role, but the sea itself is first and foremost. My parents came from Venice and Venice was always present in their speech. Until the age of twenty I lived in Genova, another maritime city. The sea: calm, rugged, foamy always alive with brackish flavor. The sea storms, great waves breaking on the shores. Boccadasse, the little port.

Venice also signified the fascination of transparent, blown glass. I remember the Murano glass, so much of it, that my father's sister who worked at Venini glass factory in Venice used to bring home with her and give away, often they were pieces with slight imperfections that she could keep. Transparent, milky, with small bubbles, bulky and blue striped, or lined in cobalt green or gold, transparent with white spirals, murrhines, a big bunch of ultramarine colored grapes sprayed with gold, the orange giraffe. Cases and trunks to be discovered in the storage shed at our summer place: vases with convoluted handles, chandeliers bearing platelets and glass drops, crystal clear globes, sky blue, violet, yellow, glasses from tables set by Paolo Veronese. Shapes that made their way down from the 1500's, or reminiscent of Art Nouveau style and forms that were typical of the Art Deco style.

However one doesn't only discover transparencies, or soft tones in my painting. The underlying structure that transmits my message like nerve endings in the human body constantly filters through. I lose myself in my painting and whenever I seem to find my way, old memories stream forth. At this point there is a kind of certainty in my procedure which

attracts ever increasing aggregates. Nascent effects immediately start to show through like lightning and make me fly after them. At times I seek passageways that will take me from positive to negative flow, but when I think I've found governing laws, symbols regroup and the code changes. I enjoy creating forms enveloping the man-home-nature triad that are not only mysterious but ambiguous as well, in a crystalline generational continuum that is both timeless and spaceless and that projects you into distant regions in geometrical forms, the only possible means which a paper reality affords: the wrinkled foil wrappers of the candy we ate as kids. All is wispy paper, crinkled, sometimes transparent, waving like a pattern in the wind, and that collapses into tight folds, reels, clings together or hides away. Suddenly reappearing. At times it takes your breath away, or it is so sweet, a memory - yes - but you can't quite make it out. Each shape belies a solution of any kind. The potential movement rushing forward comes to a halt, countered by an equal backlog of elements. Point and counterpoint succeed one another in rarefied space composed of corroded surfaces where solitude reigns supreme. Sometimes I make use of gold traces and backgrounds. You can imagine all sorts of things on a gold base. A great sense of mystery and majesty pervades the canvas. Light changes with each new hour of the day. It's ambiguous. I use gold to elude time.

4 . My images are born from the will to give life to an organized, poetic chaos. On a computer you can study chaos, you can simulate it to some extent, but you cannot foretell its evolutionary course with any certainty. These simulations cannot substitute us because they are not made like we are due to their ambiguity. (Lewis Thomas). Irregularity and unpredictability are inherent in the process of natural generation. The irregularity of a line, its variable thickness incorporates its energy and vitality. The formal aspect of my work is secured by structures that

pull it all together, finally shaping it. I am not attempting to represent nature but to "function" like nature. Chaos, dreams, groundlessness must all be organized within a repetitive-variable network that is somewhat uncertain in a dimensionless, chaotic space. Here, valences are the same for everything. One compositive element is not necessarily more important than another. Each element is of primary interest. Nothing takes second place where emotion is concerned. Therefore nothing is located in the background or constitutes a base. Space is a flat surface that connects every element. Clouds, trees, shells, the white between each figure are to be seen as uncontaminated, representative of a verginal quest. One needn't take note of nature. What counts is the memory that simultaneously reveals what has gone through one's mind. Top, bottom, right and left, front, bottom, inside, are all deprived of meaning since renaissance perspective no longer exists, nor do the three dimensions. Everything is spread on a single plane. Everything, all emotional nuances are freely organized without regard for the laws of perspective. Perspective has no place in our unconscious.

In my more recent work I have tried to use more vivid colors, a more dramatic over-all effect. An important encounter has been Gand, Flanders, and the Cobra group. In the month of August '94 I decide to visit my daughter Orsola who is in Gand, preparing her graduation thesis. This fabulous little city left me a wealth of emotions. Besides the magic and fantasy of its medieval and renaissance nordic architecture, besides Jean van Eyck, one also breathes in the spirit of Magritte, Delvaux and the Cobra group. I notice that in Belgium they are very proud of their artists. In the museum of modern art in Brussels the entire eighth floor is dedicated to Belgian contemporary art. I am moved by the expressive force of Karel Appel, Pierre Alechinsky, Asger Jorn. I also stop over at Amsterdam, enter the Nieuwe Kerk al Dam where among Dutch chandeliers of the 17th century, an organ and huge dark wooden

benches a great exhibit is being set up of the scenography that Karel Appel had constructed for the opera "Noach" performed during the Holland Festival. There are all kinds of animals because it's the story of Noah's Ark, violet ones with red, pastel green and yellow stripes, tiny red, orange and yellow sea-horses with white stripes. And then to the Stedelijk Museum of Modern Art and therefore lots of Corneille at the Modern Art Gallery. As soon as I get back to Verona I start looking for violent colors and powerful combinations on my lined backgrounds. I begin thinking about figures again after having willfully forgotten them since the 80's. I discover several possibilities and try to insert them into wide expanses in my fractal underworld where a mute conversation takes place. I try to understand whether these sought after effects unexpectedly discovered are really that important for me.

5 . Whoever knows me well is aware of my temperamental shifts that run from intensely happy to melancholic. Gray autumn looks opaque to me. The immobile, slightly magical atmosphere also absorbs sounds. A hereafter is inconceivable, just the past and the present moment are real. I'm bound to this ancient sadness. It gives me a feeling of inconsistency. It tenderly embraces fierce passions. Pain turns it into a light-hearted game that can be placed in the attic along with old materials, forgotten laces, grandfather's letters tied in dusty rope, the time-dulled sequins of a dressing gown.

My images are the materialization of what gives me the urge to live, they are my curiosity gazing outwards always enthralled and astounded by the vital process defining all things. So many small thoughts and nostalgic hopes as to who I am. In my structures anyone can see human shapes or the shape of a material object or even a recollection, some passed event, a flash of memory, distressing, unexpressed.

In the final analysis I'm really interested in the playful aspect of painting seen as a fanciful search for a place where diverse visual codes may

meet, where new constructions may appear enmeshed with other, more insistent pulsations. Painting is like speaking or making music. Some people understand and others don't. I'm interested in communicating emotions, in the joy that comes from interpreting shapes, patterns, transparencies, lines and contrasts. My emotions always spring from images, never from words. My reality is enigmatic, fleeting; it consists of relationships between those souls intent on putting stray sentiments back into place.

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