ALMINE RECH

Brian Calvin
Still

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Deception is the image more than anything else.

The women moved easily around the patio and spacious backyard, holding drinks mildly amused at the oval stomachs draped in flowered cotton fabric. Their wedding rings reflected the pink twilight, their golden bracelets caught the light of the mustard hills. But outside the afternoon was lethal: No sunglasses could cut the glare, and even your pores shrank back against the light.[1]

There is no landscape, neither natural nor urban, in Brian Calvin's painting and yet we instinctively grasp the lukewarm heat of the Californian sun with diffused light that dazzles the eye and flattens the mass. Faces of women, of an indefinable age, close-ups that cancel out the surrounding environment, portrayed poised between realism and comics in a constant polarization of humor and tragedy. Painting is always a mental thing, wrote Leonardo and, as history teaches us, the image—and above all painting—can never grasp the truth (Derrida): representation will always remain an unattainable ambition just like Balzac's Frenhofer.

It is in this ineluctable truth that the ancestral question between abstraction and figuration stagnates, a binomial in which Calvin's art of the present does not want to be imprisoned. In fact, if the preponderant presence of the body marked by clear lines and large fields of color is undeniable, the paradoxical and grotesque vein of the expressions, deliberately caricatural, together with the excess of decoratorism transport these paintings into an unreal dimension, into a cartoonish animated meta-language. It is certainly not the verisimilitude that interests the artist today, but rather the interpretation, with the mind's eye and the exasperation of the imagination, of the stimuli that society gives us back.

Futile, bewildered, vaguely bored, the humanity Calvin presents us with is that of the TikTok generation approved by mirror-like glossy lips, clearly dominated by the excessive power of social media, the imperative of the selfie and the dictatorship of filters. Noses like trunks on flat skin tones, hallucinating pupils set in colored eye sockets with colorful make-up in geometric patterns and transversal gazes that betray a rampant schizophrenia are the distinctive features of the female models that populate his surreal anthropological panorama. Calvin chooses the noble and ancient genre of the portrait as the plot of the path which, as Enrico Castelnuovo writes in his famous essay on portraiture, *concentrates the maximum attention on the eyes, abnormally wide open*. It is no coincidence that the "punctum" of Calvin's painting, to quote Roland Barthes, is the eye, mirror of the soul and threshold of knowledge. A surreal and surrealist eye, an aesthetic and cognitive device that doubles, breaks down and superimposes (following cubist tradition) in an attempt to frame movement, to understand the three dimensions by escaping the static nature of the canvas and the reality of representation.

Yet there is no psychological introspection in Calvin's portraits, or rather the attempt to investigate the personality of the subjects is exhausted in the face by the flatness, superficiality, and indifference of his "fauna" from poolside cocktails and shopping malls.

With sarcastic lightheartedness, the artist mixes the upper floors of art history and the "lower" ones of pop culture, the compositional grammar of Picasso — *Moonlight Mile, Telemachus* — with the vernacular traits of advertising — *Transatlantic*. Although it is a ruined, tragicomic, violated, and pierced representation, Calvin does not destroy the tradition of painting, founded on centuries of efforts to master the codes of perspective, but rather engulfs it, metabolizes and finally reworks it as a projection of the mystery of human desire.

On the one hand, the extreme simplification of the physiognomic features of the faces that can be broken down into geometric shapes declares the artist's fascination for metaphysical abstraction—from Piero della Francesca to Cézanne. On the other hand, the naïve style and a taste for primitivism give a playful touch to his painting recalling that dreamlike and fantastic dimension of the Douanier Rousseau, mistreated by his contemporaries and yet praised by Ardengo Soffici who wrote about him in the columns of the magazine La Voce: *"I adore a painting that smart people think is stupid. I call it ingenuous, virginal, candid... it has something divine that, if you approach it tired of your own intelligence, consoles and comforts you."*

On closer inspection, in fact, the recognizability, albeit caricatured, of some classic canons of art is comforting in his paintings: from the iconography of the Renaissance portrait, with the attributes of the client's power, the half-length shot and the background on the outside, in his flat and indefinite case (*Sitting Still*), to the recent use of the arched shape of the Italian altarpieces of the 1300s and 1400s (*High Noon*), up to the illusionistic divertissements of reflective surfaces, no longer mirrors, metal armor, or the transparent crockery of refined Flemish oils, but nails with colored enamels whose lucidity restores the dawn of the West Coast (*Sunshine at the End of the Day*).

The short circuit between the courtly matrix of the medium and Calvin's minimal and playful style ultimately generates a *joie de vivre* in the viewer. These are images imprinted on the retina—*images that look at us, Bredekamp would say*—that settle in the memory and unconsciously resurface with a series of unsuspected parallels with the clear and soft atmospheres of Hopper's America but also with the biting satire of Guston who, transgressing the diktat of abstraction in painting, considered the elements of American popular culture—advertising signs, garages, diners, sandwich shops, junk shops, garages—an imaginative reservoir of aesthetic possibilities. Almost an alchemy of the contemporary imagination, and the words of Guston come to mind: "Picasso the builder, re-opened the earth—inventing new beings. We believe his will. Marvelous artists are made of elements which cannot be identified. The alchemy is complete. Their work is strange and will never become familiar".

The only two plastic works in the exhibition (*Sitter I and II*) fit into this furrow of apparent contradiction between pop and minimalism. Mindful of the conceptual lesson of Artschwager, whose "painted sculptures" aimed at *a representation in which the represented subject disappeared in the process of representation*,[2] and loaded with his very personal iconographic baggage, Calvin's comic women leave the two-dimensional limits of the painting to enter the physical space, and only apparently become objects of common use, functional, neutralizing the banality of everyday life. Works suspended between sculpture and painting, figuration, and abstraction, between play and reality, which stimulate the viewer's perception and its different perspectives.

The playful aspect of the artist is captured in many small details, not least in the semantic game of language. The title of this exhibition, 'Still', whether used in conjunction with a noun, a pronoun, an adverb or a verb, holds a grammatical function linked to the concept of time. Just like the ideas of a still or a freeze frame, the exhibition titles 'Days' and 'More Days' allude to the present, to the hic et nunc in which they appear. The concept of space within visual representation is deliberately absent because, as the artist himself states, his painting does not intend to tell stories, the concept of time instead returns, entrusted again to language in the choice of descriptive titles such as *High Noon, Eclipse, Midnight, Moonlight, Twilight*, and above all, an iconic and metaphorical presence: a small sphere, almost an apotropaic symbol of the sun or the moon.

The explosive charge of Calvin's visual alphabet hides behind a carefree bourgeois parade, but it feeds on the culture and subculture of his land, on the literature of Bret Easton Ellis and J.T. Leroy, on the ephemeral and cynical scenarios of the cinema of Sofia Coppola and Tom Ford, ingredients that he chooses to casually represent through the anti-realistic lexicon of Bad Paintings and cartoons. The latter is an anything but a low-fi reference: it's certainly a pop device and also a medium that contains the deepest archetypal stories of humanity starting with Peter Pan who, translated into the contemporary world of a sick West, risks passing from the whim of the boy who does not "want" to grow up to the dystopia of the boy who "cannot" grow up![3]

In Los Angeles, one laughs to survive, enjoys oneself not to enhance life but in order to live at all. That society is so vaporous and tenuous that the only alternative to a spiral of loneliness and fear is a self-contained, steady, pleasurably focused attitude. The L.A. cogito: I laugh, therefore I am. The laughter is ramified and refined. Only with time and effort does a visitor learn its language. It is the absolute form of civility in a civilization that enables nobody to mature beyond adolescence. It can be erotic and quite beautiful, when one hears its undertone of sadness. It can be disturbing, when one catches its overtone of hostility. It is the sound of grown-up children determined not to be afraid.[4]

— Mario Codognato

1. Eva Babitz, *Slow Days, Fast Company*
2. Dieter Schwarz
3. A.Tagliapietra, *La filosofia dei cartoni animati,* 2019
4. Peter Schjeldahl, *Edward Ruscha Stains*, 1971 to 1975