

## Jupiter on canvas

*The movement of my eye towards what it's about to stare at is not the movement of an object in relation to another object, but the pathway towards what is real'*

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Sometimes it's best to be transported by apparently irrational impressions and incongruous deductions. I recently encountered the above in the works by Marta Mancini selected for her solo exhibition. The more I looked at them, the more apparent and clear an image in my head became: the image of planet Jupiter. Without an immediate and decipherable reason. And I know nothing about astronomy! I therefore spent an evening on youtube watching videos about Jupiter. Finding enjoyment in doing so, and having learned a few fundamentals in the process, I would like to place these findings in relation to Marta Mancini's work. Firstly: Jupiter is larger than Earth - not six or seven times larger as I originally thought - but rather three hundred and eighteen times larger (!), we are therefore presented with a remarkable difference in mass.

Secondly, Jupiter is practically made entirely of gas. Its core, if present (the nucleus might not even exist!) is minuscule, therefore according to a Manichean reality (the vision of reality), it's almost as if this colossal planet does not even exist; as if we were dealing with an object – so to say - that is not an object. Lastly, despite its immeasurable tonnage, Jupiter is extremely fast, rotating on itself in less than ten hours, faster than any other planet in our solar system.

I furthered this premise because Marta Mancini's latest works have many of the characteristics - and the paradoxes - with which Jupiter enchants experts and simple tourists of sidereal things such as myself. They are made with the same oxymoronic substance. The first quality that I would like to elaborate on is in relation to the dimensions of the paintings. They are quite large works, more or less the side of a bed: let's say that a human body would fit comfortably. It may be that these are the most natural dimensions required by the human gaze to embrace a quadrangular surface. In approaching them, the body and the eye start moving backwards and forward, zooming in and out. Let it be clear, It's not because of some form of evocation: in this case we are discussing a form of painting that is completely self-reflecting, intent on thinking about itself. No, it's only that the registers of the "large" and the infinitesimal are active simultaneously; this occurs because the works are made of wide brushstrokes, achieved through the fatty movements of the flat brush, yet constructed on syntactic shifts that can be appreciated in their results starting from the details. American painter Barnett Newman had numerous images taken of him scrutinising - his - huge canvases, provocatively, from just a few centimeters away. Marta Mancini could do the same. After all, this is art sometimes: it gives a sense of disproportion; it diverts you, like when we try to make a precise idea of the size of Planet Jupiter.

Another extremely interesting aspect is that, although radically aniconic, it's hard to define these works as 'abstract'. In this case too, Jupiter is urged as a poignant parameter for comparison. The planet is the only one in our solar system not to appear as a 'celestial body', and therefore not having the mute and smooth appearance of a sphere. The so-called 'abstract' art, at least in the case of geometric abstraction, appears as axiomatic, pacified, translating therefore - almost by definition – a both intact

and exact imaginary. These paintings are not like this. Ok, they are indeed made of the purest form of pictorial facts. However, they compare directly with the most solid element that characterises the pictorial *mimesis*: the relationship between figure and background. They are therefore on a sort of edge where our common Euclidian categories appear and disappear; where the planes of vision can seem at times still hierarchical. Furthermore: they impact in the immanent manner of the *tableau vivant*. When I've asked unknowing and external people - therefore gifted with the so-called *fresh eye* - to provide feedback regarding these works, the most frequent impression I received has been that one is unable to take the eyes off them; because the 'things' that 'inhabit' the canvases (large worms, springs and toothpaste portions - every attempt to find a relation to known objects, even if unavoidable, falls short) could in the meantime emerge out of the pictorial surface, merge - or eat each other. These are not banal readings, based on unfounded impressions. The term 'thing' - that oscillates between Heidegger and the folksy - reignites an animism of the vision, a pulsing of forces that Marta Mancini is intent on picking up.

(After all, abstraction is an arduous theme. In the past century, artists and critics never stopped reflecting upon it. Great examples such as Marcel Duchamp and Francis Bacon have highlighted two emblematically paradoxical takes on the subject, from opposing fronts. With his Rotoreliefs, the first seems to deride in good time the Greenberghian idea of pure, disembodied opticality. The second, on the opposite end of the spectrum, produces figural visions so centred on concepts of force and pure energy that end up seeming not human, ultimately abstract).

The other element on which to dwell on is the apparent vibration that characterises these works, making them magnetic. (Another mystery that surrounds Jupiter is its extremely quick movement despite its colossal size). An effect comparable to the mechanical movement of old cartoons, or the so-called motion-blur in photography; or furthermore, the vibrating of vision typical of *d'antan* film projections, in particular silent films.

This reveals a secret excitement, all within the linguistic structure of the painting, due to two subversions. Let's analyse them. Starting from a premise. The coloured pictorial structures that characterise these works are parts of 'blobs' derived from gestural painting whose visibility is the result of a process of subtraction. They have been therefore demarcated from the outside, the other way round, through monochrome strokes. With this action, they preserve the fluent character of the blob, but take on sharp and vibrant contours, syntactically incongruous in certain instances, therefore becoming (this being the first subversion) *also representational* - furthermore: besieged, so that they are frequently subject to unexpected truncations. This grants the works a storming, syncopated tenor. The second subversion - possibly the most flamboyant element in the painting, that directs their backbeat in a constant fashion - is born from the bicolored dichotomic layout of the pictorial structures; from the fact that these structures, again, in virtue of the 'cut-out' through which they are formalised, see the fault that chromatically distinguishes the blobs, transformed into something opposite: within their - paradoxical - dorsal.

I've formed quite a bizarre idea regarding these works. The one that, if an algorithm - able enough to pick up on (and visualise) a diagram of both the formal and psychic aspects of the painting - were to exist, and we were to apply it to the masterpieces of fifteenth century Mannerism, we would get back very similar reports to the ones produced for Marta Mancini's canvases. Because of the nervous and slithering forms typical of the times, alongside the predilection by the masters for a disturbing yet enticing acid and saturated color palette - we would define it psychedelic nowadays - that makes an evident comeback in these works.

There is a further reason that drives me to talk about Mannerism. One less exterior, inherent to a more general aspect. As follows: the term Contemporary - one that now has its own legs and is written with a capital C - seems to have arrived to a ripe and mature phase, easily defined as *Manneristic* (I wrote about this very aspect on Artribune in an article titled '*In praise of contemporary mannerism*'). A phase that isn't necessarily a regression, but rather one that presents enriching potential. One where the best artists are demonstrating that recalling instances and paradigms of historical contemporary art is entirely possible, by not limiting themselves to a revisitation but rather remodelling, or by 'stressing' the assumptions of such instances and paradigms. The paintings within this exhibition constitute a tangible example of the good that can be offered by such climate. On a theoretical plane I would be tempted to define them as meta-paradigmatic. Because they perform a continuous coming and going, that constitutes their real field of action between polar opposites of what is premeditated and intuitive: this occurs because they are structured through processual standards but, as in a sort of stress-test, they are brought back to the Expressionist paradox, placed face to face with the laws of composition.

(One wonders: what does process-art have to do with pictorial practice? Yet it's a question that arises from the media-driven prejudice, therefore a formalist one, that has polluted the debate on visual art in the past few years. A prejudice that is easily demolished by reflecting on the fact that the most accredited reading of Jackson Pollock's practice, a painter then, assigns to the hero of action painting and dripping with a strong license in process art. This happens also in the case of another big name such as Robert Ryman. So, no, there is no incompatibility between aptitude in process and painting.)

Of course, accompanying the Contemporary towards new developments requires a strong dose of awareness, as well as - obviously - talent. And even more so if you use the most ancient means of expression (a road one can take in the current artistic panorama, less at the mercy than in the past of media sectarianism). These are rare qualities and Marta Mancini isn't lacking. I am more convinced of this now, after this exhibition and after having followed the recent developments of her research.