

Una pietra sopra

di Andrea Cortellessa

«I have a disease, I see language». This sentence, repeated numerous times by Roland Barthes and can be read in various ways. One immediately thinks of his passion for the ductus, the bodily trace, for what he calls “writerly”. That is, how much of writing emphasizes the, primarily visual, materiality: The Japanese ideogram, Twombly’s sign, the alphabets of Erté. In the context of such an unclassifiable book which is “Barthes” by Roland Barthes, this experience – associated with a state of alteration, a pathology – is compared to the vision of a well-known passage by Cicero that was popularly known in the Middle Ages as *Somnium Scipionis* (later versified by Metastasio as well as made into music by a young Mozart), in particular, to the image of «world musical spheres». Therefore, according to Barthes, being able to see language is a quintessential case of synaesthesia, but also a hallucinatory condition.

Literature first of all, then cinema and music, are the dreams of Scipio according to Giulia Marchi, who the registry office lazily and hastily labels as “visual artist”. It would be more cautious to just note down the materials she elects to use from time to time (there really is a destiny in the names, if the gallery hosting her works is called *Matèria*): calculator ribbons, sound-absorbing surfaces, Carrara marble, mirrors, soaps, and horse hair. But there is no doubt that her favorite material is paper.

In the art world, paper boasts at least a dual identity. On one side, it is where, most of the time and still today, the artist jots down the very first form of the work to surface, their primary idea. Sometimes, it is the final media on which the finished work remains: drawing, watercolor, or artist’s book. On the other hand, paper – mostly, but not always, as a book – is a rich iconographic motif: from Bronzino’s *Dames Vermeer’s Geographer* to Arcimboldo’s *Librarian*. Summoned in the form of a book, it alludes to the inspirations of the figure: to its backdrop of readings, quotations, perhaps interminable ruminations.

In Giulia Marchi’s work, paper is vested in all of these purposes. To evoke the exhibition you are now visiting, she began by showing me a notebook with glimpses of drawings, names of materials, words isolated or in sequence. For her too, of course, the archive of the readings guiding her imagination is on paper. And she too excels in packaging artist’s books, which are as magnetic as they are elusive. Other artists from previous generations – I am thinking of Giulio Paolini, Claudio Parmiggiani or Stefano Arienti – would also use paper with this triplicate logistical, iconic, and material value. And in all these cases, its primary value, as a support for writing, is both presumed and denied, or rather preterite: one cannot read the books that Parmiggiani piles up under his bells.

Therefore, the use of paper as material evokes the word and at the same time delays its reading, when it does not completely abolish it. We end up agreeing with Barthes’ paradoxical conclusion, according to which the actual «vocation» of writing would be above all «cryptography». It actually often happens, with Giulia Marchi, that, in her works, the word is there as a trace, a sinopia, a figurative trigger that is then canceled, subtracted, physically foreclosed: the guiding image that immediately struck me, among those she envisaged on paper, is that of a high ream of sheets pressed by an iron vise. Its dimension is not one of mystery; on the contrary, it is one of secret: a transcendent and therefore unattainable origin, but at the same time perfectly immanent, within reach. Her real letter will always remain stolen: shown in full light, we will never be able to read it.