

THE DI FABIO VORTEX

Alan Jones

*The human will possesses
something of the marvelous.*

Henri Bergson

*I don't want to shock,
I want to astonish.*

Terry Southern

The trajectory of Alberto Di Fabio's painterly research has been conducted in specific place in time, the bridge between two centuries, and in the unique urban context of Rome. The Eternal City represents undoubtedly the last post-war avant-garde art capital yet to be fully explored by academia and market alike. Throughout the decade of the Fifties, Rome was perhaps the most vibrant epicenter of creativity anywhere in Europe. By the time the parentheses of the Second World War were closed, only to reopen under the new management of the Cold War, the party had already migrated south from the Rive Gauche to the Piazza del Popolo, from the banks of the Seine to those of the Tiber: without knowing it as yet, Paris had become a mere stopover on the trip from New York to Rome.

Alberto Di Fabio, from the very beginning, has lived in one of the most vibrant arenas for art, which Rome has represented throughout the past fifty years, a city where now-mythic galleries such as La Tartaruga became a catchword everywhere in Europe as the home-away-from-home which offered refuge to the likes of Willem de Kooning, Mark Rothko, Franz Kline and many more; newcomers such as Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg, who quickly intermingled with indigenous Roman artists from Mario Schifano, Tano Festa, Jannis Kounellis or Enrico Castellani. The "Years of Felicity" had begun, and were to be followed by new permutations with the advent of De Fabio's generation.

Abruzzo is a region of Italy caught between precipitous mountains that spring up out of nowhere and drop straight down into the sea. It is the birthplace of Alberto Di Fabio, class of 1966. the natural splendor of Abruzzo and the urbanity of Rome: such were the ingredients of Alberto Di Fabio's formative adolescence, between mountains and monuments, the subversive conspiracy of the new, set against the most venerable backdrop of the old.

One day in the Campo de' Fiori, in the heart of the popular quarter of Rome, I found myself waiting in the shadow of the statue dedicated to Giordano Bruno and erected at the very site upon which he was burnt at the stake, the visionary whose sojourn at the Tudor Court in England was to enrich Elizabethan poetry with new phantasmagorical systems of grasping the world in thought and memory. Amongst the motorscooters and a knife-fight between flower vendors, Alberto Di Fabio rounded the corner accompanied by a gentleman who could easily have been mistaken for an illegal arms smuggler following in the footsteps of Arthur Rimbaud. We were in dangerous company.

"Guarda quant'è bella Roma!" said Alberto Di Fabio. And he was right: Rome was very beautiful that spring day. His companion turned out to be the artist Alighiero Boetti.

Dangerous company indeed, and none more stimulating. Since that time Boetti has over the years come to join his rightful place among the ranks of the mythic figures who populate the pantheon of contemporary art. In a pre-global world, Boetti by his direct example was among the first to lead the West out of its Eurocentricity, opening the way to the East to a generation of artists from Francesco Clemente to Luigi Ontani and beyond.

“Art lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of intent.” Henry James could have been referring to the lessons which Alberto Di Fabio absorbed from Boetti when he wrote those words.

One of the best things to be said about the Italian art scene is that is far less of a youth-ghetto. Twenty year-old artists hang out easily with the old-timers, proving once again that the only recipe for renewal is contact between generations.

“I was fortunate to encounter Alighiero Boetti. He bought the first painting I ever sold, in 1989, before I ever met him.”

Profession: agent provocateur. That would have been the best description of Alighiero Boetti's métier. Generous by instinct, endlessly stimulating to his cohorts young and old, his provocations were a catalyst to Alberto Di Fabio from the outset. “You have to go away from Rome. Open your mind. Get out of the house...”

Alberto Di Fabio arrived at a particularly difficult moment for young artists in Italy, when the protagonists of what a short time before had come to be termed the “Transavantgardia” – a movement led by Achille Bonito Oliva and epitomized by painters such as Sandro Chia, Enzo Cucchi, Francesco Clemente-- had overcome the national boundaries of the Italian art world and had assumed a place on the international stage, in very real sense reaffirming the central role of Italian creativity for the first time since the generation of the Futurists, with rare exceptions such as Fontana and Burri. But the younger artists who came after the Transavantgarde found themselves all but leaderless and left to their own devices. Instead of contenting himself with the stalemate of the sterile and claustrophobic world of post-Transavantgarde Italy, Alberto Di Fabio resolved to set out on his own. The year 1991 found him in New York City.

Discussion, experiment, curiosity, variety of intent: Maybe the prime lesson Alberto Di Fabio gained from his time spent in New York was that of the importance of the painting-as-object, the rigorous approach to the physicality of the canvas itself: a tenet which is still tenaciously held to in Manhattan. Alberto Di Fabio often cites the impact which standing before the thirty-foot expanse of an Ellsworth Kelly monochrome had upon him. Patrimony of the Fifties, appreciation expressed for a well-stretched canvas remains a high compliment in New York.

What Alberto Di Fabio encountered in Manhattan was the deceptively refined bluntness of the matter-of-fact paintings of Donald Baechler, who eliminates all trace of the conceptualist underpinnings of his artistic enterprise; the effortlessly orchestrated abstract mandalas which Philip Taaffe applies to the immaculate surface of his intensely crafted canvases; the courage of the lyrical in the world of James Brown, whose paintings are a response those who still uphold the dogma that beauty is bourgeois. Yet like many before him other lessons came to Alberto Di Fabio by way of the great midden-heap of modernism which is New York, from Mondrian to Pollock, from Motherwell to Marden.

The way forward, wrote the poet Holderlin, is the way inward: during the span of a decade Alberto Di Fabio's paintings shifted from landscapes featuring crystalline mountains in strong primary hues, rendered like the background of a Quattrocento saint's martyrdom, to a microcosmos in which the mineral and the organic seem to merge into one. Since the Nineties, he has employed imagery from the frontier of biological research, as the sequence of genetic codes becomes the equivalent of a vine pattern wearing itself through the intricacies of both Romanesque and Islamic architecture. In Di Fabio's installations, grids of as many as twenty canvases seem to give off heat, to radiate energy from their intense tones of gold, yellow and orange. Functioning as formalist abstract paintings, organic life is demonstrated to owe something of its transparency to the immutable realm of the mineral.

It may well be that Alberto de Fabio is one of the few artists in Italy to have postcards of British Vorticists pushpinned to the wall of his studio: Wyndham Lewis, David Bomberg, C.R.W. Nevinson. Perhaps the unrelenting rigor of the Vorticists struck a chord with his own Italian Futurist origins. Like the work of the Vorticists, Alberto Di Fabio's paintings seem to mirror the process of the dynamic expansiveness of forms organizing themselves in space, in that tight harmony which confirms the unity between the laws of science and the harp of Orpheus.

Through this point-to-point navigation Alberto Di Fabio charted a course which eventually brought him to his own Ithaca, the eternal arrival and departure of self-discovery. And this odyssey has not shunned the open seas of the turbulent technological and geo-political upheaval through which he has passed. In human history, artistic innovation has always kept pace with technological advances. Artists

are particularly open to the innovations of their contemporaries, and the reverse is often true as well. Perspective arrives in painting as a result of the mathematics behind artillery bombardment in warfare and is later swept away by Einstein; the Baroque embarks on its voyage to Cythera only after the discovery of the Americas, as celebrated by Tiepolo, and Jeff Koons achieves its restoration in the cybernetic age; Impressionism embraces photography, Futurism adulates the machine, Surrealism plunges into the “science of the mind,” Abstract Expressionism confronts the obscenity of the atomic bomb.

No one chooses his own epoch; that would take the fun out of everything.

Alberto Di Fabio has from the outset dug down into the humus of his era in order to arrive at the essential interpenetration of the informatic and the organic, which remains perhaps the central question facing visual artists of his generation.

Each day in Milan thousands of visitors await their entry to stand before the Last Supper for a few moments, while across town another room decorated by Leonardo da Vinci remains all but empty: the “Sala delle Asse,” at the Sforza Castle. The ceiling, perhaps the biggest “abstract” painting of the Renaissance, consists of an intricate overhead evocation of a leafy bower of infinitely intertwining branches and tendrils, which Paul Valéry singled out as the one work which exemplifies Leonardo rejoicing in the mind at work. Jackson Pollock would have felt at home in this chamber.

As in the ceiling fresco of Leonardo, Alberto Di Fabio’s paintings revel in nature first and foremost, not as background but as prime protagonist, explored in an infinitely extended intricacy, where organic forms rendered visible by science quickly enter the realm of abstraction.

Science, in art, all too often turns out to be nothing more than science fiction, the cargo-cult of dark forebodings and masochistic yearnings, or apocalyptic wishful thinking of the politically disillusioned. In Alberto Di Fabio’s work, however, the scientific sphere serves as a springboard for human will, a dominant metaphor. In this, Alberto Di Fabio’s approach may be said to be closer to Giordano Bruno himself than to that of the contemporary research scientist. For while science announces itself in the headlines to be always on the brink of the final mysteries of the origins of all life, the artist seeks out the mystery of the lyrical, perhaps an even more daunting endeavor.

One must agree with the art critic Gianluca Marziani when he wrote, regarding the work of Alberto Di Fabio, that it is all too easy to fall into the temptation of “skimming through books on ecology, the environment and ecosystems” –all subjects close to Di Fabio’s heart which show up everywhere in his art. Acquaintance with working scientists should dissuade the uninitiated from straining this metaphor. Yet the intuitions of artists come with a sort of immunity, and often their guesses are as revelatory as the theorems of the laboratory. Writing of Alberto Di Fabio’s work, Brooks Adams has astutely linked his paintings to those of another visionary: “It was a series of Pavel Tchelitchew’s mind-bending anatomical drawings from the Forties; including diagrammatic watercolors of ‘transparent’ heads and torsos (several of them entitled Interior Landscape) that made me think of Di Fabio. Tchelitchew, too, was fixated on the body’s map of neutrons.”

In Di Fabio’s work one may see the holy candelabra of the Old Testament where another sees a genealogical chart or family tree, and yet another an illustration from a botanical manual. But just at the moment when science announces that it is on the brink of discovering the secret to all life, the artist comes along out of the lyrical blue and introduces a salubrious note of hilarity and doubt: but who can really say for sure to what extent Ad Reinhardt was addressing Hindu cosmology in his monolithic meditations of canvas?

Over one hundred years ago in the course of a lecture Henri Bergson address the question of antiquity and modernity regarding the human will, more precisely, regarding the rapport between action and contemplation:

“The human will possesses something of the marvelous, something which, in certain ways, by certain aspects at least, participates in the miraculous. Human will is a force capable of increasing on its own indefinitely. A natural force, it is in some way a given, a given not only in terms of quality but also in terms of grandeur...”

The mystery of human will represents the primordial impulse from which springs all art and all human deeds. Perhaps Blaise Cendrars had it right when he said that what counts is to live to the fullest, and still remain in love with the world. Two kinds of artist approach the great table at the feast of art: those who come to take, and those who come to give. The cornucopia transforms itself into the Taoist

sign of yin and yang, the empty and the full. Shunning the easy option of ironic banality, instead fiercely lyrical, fast on their feet and unashamedly in love with the world, these last are the artists who make the whole journey worthwhile and that is why we keep coming back for more.

The radical rigor, the expansive optimism of Alberto Di Fabio's work places him as a prime inheritor of the systematically poetic spirit of Alighiero Boetti: painters who know how to read between the lines of William Blake. It is not difficult to imagine Di Fabio working out of some backstreet paleochristian workshop in Byzantium, while the veneration of Hercules, Mitras and Orpheus is giving way to new formulations. I think of a small chapel in which I once stood, under a dome of gold mosaic at Ravenna, and the gold gathered the light around it again on another occasion, in a small room full of Alberto Di Fabio's paintings in Trastevere. The paintings of Alberto Di Fabio are among our present-day consolations of philosophy in the confirmation of cosmic enigmas.