

ALBERTO DI FABIO MICROMACROCOSMOS

by Laura Cherubini

No one enters here if you do not know the geometry

Words inscribed over the door of the school of Plato

Our class is studying the Universe. I am very interested in space. I would like to thank you for all you have done in order for us to understand

Letter from a child in primary school to Albert Einstein

It was 1989 and a young artist was waiting impatiently for the time when his first exhibition would be inaugurated. But that boy, who had always painted, was doing military service and his superior officer confined him to barracks. For this reason he was unable to go to the opening of the group exhibition where one of his paintings was being shown alongside the works of great artists of the calibre of Alighiero Betti and Sol Lewitt. Then the young, but already self-confident, gallery owner Alessandra Bonomo informed him that his painting, a red mountain, had been sold straightaway. A year later he met Alighiero Boetti, who said to him: "I was the one who bought your painting!" Alighiero, intelligent, generous, acute, very severe in his judgements, but always ready to recognise talent, attentive to the younger generations, extremely subtle in judging other people's work. Always dialoguing with the other.

We spoke several times about Alberto who, in the meantime, I had met and who I spent time with in Rome and New York. Alighiero said: "You know who the best young artist is in Rome today? Alberto Di Fabio!" For Di Fabio Boetti would always be a point of reference in life and work, that work which was taking on an increasing identity. And Rome in those years was not so easy for a young artist. "Di Fabio, born in 1966, took his first steps as an artist in the late eighties and early nineties in a Rome which, artistically, hung in a kind of limbo. The still active presence of figures destined to become historical names (Twombly, Burri, Accardi) together with others at the top of their career (Boetti, De Dominicis, Accardi) and others still who had emerged to success in the recent past (Transavanguardia, San Lorenzo) on the one hand offered the city a creative panorama which was, all in all, rich and varied but on the other hand prevented the new generations from making their mark or rather failed to give them the necessary encouragement. Unlike other Italian cities, Milan first and foremost, which was experiencing one of its most intense periods of the Twentieth century, Rome, immersed in its gilded indifference, basked in its recent glories, heedless of the risks to which this attitude exposed it. And those same realities which might have become a point of departure for the future were transformed into an insidious point of arrival, almost a quicksand of luxury it was hard to climb out of." (Pier Paolo Pancotto). It could not have been put better. So Di Fabio left Rome for Paris and a studio in Cité des Arts, in Montmartre next to Alighiero's (the nomad friend who urged him to move, to travel) and for a decade to New York. But let us take a step back.

As a boy Alberto Di Fabio, son of an artist and a science teacher (art and science were to remain his twin passions, the two communicating vessels, the two dialectical bases of his work) was always drawing. He drew the mountains of his birthplace, Abruzzo, the landscape he saw every day, Velino with its twin peaks, that familiar Himalaya of Abruzzo (but he also copied illustrations from his mother's natural sciences books). The mountain is an initiation. It is only by slowly climbing it that man can elevate himself from the ground and approach the sky. These images of his home, these sharp peaks like geometrical shapes were interiorised and were to remain inside him until the age of fourteen when he arrived in Rome to attend an Art Lyceum and then the Academy of Fine Arts. He shared this education with peers such as Betta Benassi e Paolo Canevari. At the lyceum his art history teacher was Ester Coen, who took him to see the exhibitions of Sargentini, and continued to follow him. At the Academy his teacher was the demanding Brunori.

After the Alessandra Bonomo exhibition another important group exhibition was that of Lucio Amelio, entitled *Trismegistus*, the thrice great Hermes of esoteric tradition. The texts attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were held to be extremely ancient and full of primigenial sources of knowledge containing forerunners of Platonic philosophy and Christian religion. When they were correctly dated by Isaac Casaubon their importance appeared to wane but for almost two centuries every cultural ferment germinated from there. Lorenzo the Magnificent not only commissioned the translation from Marsilio Ficino but ordered him to interrupt his translation

of Plato to do it. The Renaissance was born out of Hermeticism. Among the pillars of the system of knowledge of the hermetic tradition is alchemy, the forerunner of chemistry and physics. This blend of spirituality and science seemed to fit the young Di Fabio like a glove. His first solo exhibition was held in 1994 at the gallery of Stefania Miscetti. After some international forays in 1997 came a solo exhibition at S.A.L.E.S, the gallery of Massimo Mininni (Alighiero's secretary) and Norberto Ruggeri (who worked with Alessandro Bonomo at the time of the group exhibition in 1989). Here his work was dedicated to the Ravenna Mausoleum of Galla Placidia. During his stay in New York he developed a passion for the art of Abstract Expressionism, made friends with Philip Taaffe and Donald Baechler and made the acquaintance of Ross Bleckner and Ed Ruscha. Di Fabio also recalls the helpfulness and openness of Roy Lichtenstein. The sense of his work remained the same but in New York it acquired a greater professionalism. It was in those years that Larry Gagosian discovered his work and organised several solo exhibitions all over the world. The artist was very attached to this city and always kept a studio there but at a certain point he felt drawn back to Italy, to that Mediterranean dream that had enticed Cy Twombly, another of his Masters.

With his sister Tiziana he dreamed of creating a contemporary school of Athens on the Island of Ponza which would draw artists, writers and new philosophies of the third millennium and this was the dream that would orient his work.

A work which was now so clearly configured that it allowed exceptions. In 2003 "with the friend and gallery owner Cesare Manzo the idea of producing *Vague* was born. An 'artist's review', in which every page – highlighting the dangers and poverty man lives with – is a contemporary oxymoron, funny, irreverent, even dramatic," writes Angela Rorro in an exemplary piece. "It is an action that Di Fabio wishes to perform to show the dangers of a life led against nature. An action which ends with an exhibition that does not wish to celebrate it but to complete it, which is meant to be an occasion for reflection in the same way as the review-work printed in 100 copies, an exhibition with installations made of paintings, slides of the pages produced, drawings". The pages are small, delightful little scenes which ironically transform icons from the fashion industry. The assembly of images includes heterogeneous facts and incongruous elements, the glossy models are made to look ridiculous. "The profanation of the sophisticated advertising images on paper would have warmed the heart of Boetti (Alan Jones). In the title there is the pun "Vogue/Vague" but there is also the French word which means "wave", a word which, as well as being used to indicate the string of fashions (think of the expression "on the crest of the wave") recalls scientific phenomena such as electromagnetic waves. "Everything happens in waves" said Alighiero Botti...

The horizon to which civic-minded Di Fabio looked was that of a new ecology. It was on Ponza, the island he would like to transform into a new Athens, that he discovered an abandoned rubbish dump and refuse compactor. His Eden was besieged by toxins. In the contemporary consumer "civilisation" there can be no island of happiness, a *hortus conclusus*. He decided to recreate paradise lost and accordingly planted a huge number of trees around the fence of the dump, besieging it in turn, surrounding it until it was transformed into a garden (2004). "This is what leads to the title of this exhibition: *ri-impianto* ('regret' and 'replanting'), as the artist, regretting the damage that man has done to nature, replants nature itself so that it may recover its beauty and domain" (Luigi Giovinazzo). The record of the work (which repeats and renews Joseph Beuys' oak plantation in a different way) ended up in an exhibition in Galleria Umberto Di Marino in Naples. In the meantime some trees were stolen and scattered around the island disseminating the healthy environmental virus. This entire environmental installation almost appears to be a way of painting nature directly.

And now we come to the painting. The materials are acrylics, tempera, canvases, papers... fluid paints, limber supports, liquid and light materials, no oil, no easel. "I paint lying down. The works I do in that position are like mantras. In every work there are various levels of glazing with water, so there are about 10 layers of paint in each work... While I work I do yoga, meditation and stretching". The artist arranges his body and his mind, he removes them from the surrounding noise, from our time and our space. Painting is a *spiritual exercise* involving the artist's whole being and his *psycho-physical* dimension. The procedure is slow and begins with various colour tests (such as Brunori always made his students carry out). The use of hexagrams of Taoist poetry on rice paper as a canvas gives his work a lightness. I recall that Alighiero Boetti used rice paper in particular in one of his lesser known works which is called *Riso*. It is a collection of art jokes and Alighiero told me he

was thinking principally of the sound track of laughter that would accompany the work when it was exhibited. This work exists in various versions, one of which is actually made in rice paper. Here Alighiero packaged his personal motto wrapping laughter (in Italian *riso*, which also means rice) in the food of the same name. For Alberto on the other hand the use of rice paper may have different explanations. On the one hand there is the recognition of the deep analogy between *Taoist poetry* and *quantum physics*. "That the ideogram does not correspond to a phonetic value, but to an idea or concept, makes the graphic sign a world apart, independent of

everything represented by poetry" (Tullio Ponziani). But rice paper marked by hexagrams also further complicates the complex painting palimpsest. Indeed the glazing is a transparent element of a system of progressive strata. The glazing is the tangible sign of the length of this process. Because the real theme of painting is time and the gesture of painting establishes an "other" time.

Alberto Di Fabio's paintings draw a map of an expanding universe. "The flow of the brush on the paper or on the canvas, the wavelets of the water-based paints which dissolve layer upon layer remind me of the movement of the earth, of rivers, of neuronal synapses" (from an interview with Luciano Marucci). The painting process is analogous to the process of nature, this is Di Fabio's great discovery. It takes a long time, not just because it is a time of meditation but also because it is the time of the slow evolutions of nature. Di Fabio creates his subjects with geometrical

shapes which gyrate and vibrate. The works themselves can be rotated from a vertical position into a horizontal position and vice versa.

Brian Greene (The Fabric of the Cosmos: Space, Time, and the Texture of Reality) sees symmetry everywhere and studies its conditions in space and time: "catch a snowflake and rotate it by the same angle that lies between two successive points: the flake is always identical." But there are also theories gaining ground which call symmetry into question. "Most physicists working on string theory, or on theories connected to string theory, expected that as soon as the new CERN particle accelerator, called the LHC, the Large Hadron Collider, was activated in Geneva we would immediately see new kinds of particles predicted in string theory and never observed before: supersymmetric particles. String theory needs these particles in order to be consistent. This is why "stringists" expected to find them. On the other hand the theory of loop quantum gravity is clearly defined even in the absence of supersymmetric particles. Therefore, "loopists" suspected that these particles might not exist. No supersymmetric particles were seen to many people's huge disappointment. The great fuss which followed the revelation of the Higgs particle in 2013 also served to mask this disappointment. Supersymmetric particles are not present in energy, where many "stringists" expected them to be. It is certainly not a definitive proof of something, we are far from that, but it seems that Nature, between the two alternatives, has provided a small clue in favour of the "loopists". There are two important results of the experiment of 2013 as far as basic physics is concerned. The first is the revelation of the Higgs boson at CERN in Geneva, which occupied columns of newsprint all over the world. The second are the measurements of the Planck satellite, whose data were made public in 2013. These are the two signs which Nature has given us recently" (Carlo Rovelli, *La realtà non è come appare. La struttura elementare delle cose*). In April Di Fabio was invited to CERN so that the ideas in his works might provide inspiration to the studies and reflections of the scientists.

Everything began with Democritus and his granular theory of atoms, one of the most enduring scientific discoveries and which we actually, and this is extraordinary, know of only through the poem *De rerum natura* by Lucrezio. Di Fabio says: "As long ago as Ancient Greek times Democritus perceived the existence of anti matter through the senses". Democritus's idea was that in the universe we are nothing but atoms, inseparable elementary grains which attract one another and join together. But in fact definitive proof of the atomic hypothesis was provided long after by Albert Einstein. "As Albert Einstein said, from the Big Bang to today there has been a string of fusions in perfect harmony between the various elements of physics, but if we now have our earthly paradise we owe it exclusively to processes of indetermination" (Di Fabio).

The aim of Di Fabio's work is to make the invisible visible. But in the final analysis this is the aim of art itself since, as physics teaches, the image of things and their internal structure do not correspond. It is extremely telling that Di Fabio should return to the root of the term *Cosmo* with its double meaning of "order" and "ornament".

The image of the most ancient object we have is that of cosmic background radiation. "Cosmic background radiation has played a key role in cosmology since it was discovered in the mid Sixties. It is certainly an extraordinary phenomenon. In

the first few instants of its life the universe was full of an indistinct sea of charged particles, electrons and protons which, thanks to the electromagnetic force, bound photons to them. But just 300,000 years after the Big Bang the universe cooled sufficiently to allow electrons and photons to join to form electrically neutral atoms. From that point on photons were free to travel through space at will, and that is what they did, travelling unmolested until they reached us, a snapshot of the primordial conditions of the cosmos" (Brian Greene). This radiation allows us to have an idea of what the young universe was like.

"My aim with two dimensional painting is to produce a sort of electromagnetism, waves, to arouse emotions, in the same way as an optical painting or a sound installation" Capturing the sound inside things and enabling the spectator to see it too. "From the macro-cosmos I entered the micro-cosmos" (from a conversation with Ester

Coen). From maximum to minimum dimensions, from mountain to atoms, from synapses to electromagnetic fields to galaxies, from the infinitely small to the infinitely large. "No natural notion of the infinite is compatible with the laws of arithmetic. (Timothy Gowers, Mathematics: A very Short Introduction) The action of painting is an infinite ritual, a prayer which joins atoms "so they are in synchrony with the movement of the cosmic dance". The universe expands and moves by dancing. "There are stars whose intrinsic brightness can be measured. The most well-known are pulsating stars. The energy which reaches their surface from within causes them to expand and contract rhythmically" (Rudolph Kippenhahn, Cosmology for the Pocket)

The prologue of the exhibition is in the loggia with the small paintings opposite the windows. In this way the works are connected to the architecture, the town, the sky. The paintings themselves are the colour of the sky. Then large paintings represent the synopsis. The word synopsis comes from the Greek prefix "with" and the Greek verb that indicates the action of "touching". It therefore means connection. Synopsis is the communication of cells of nervous tissue (neurons) with each other and with other cells. Simultaneously the same forms allude to branches with fruit and roots, bronchial tubes, the outside and the inside. A diptych made up of lines of force is broken by the light source of the windows. Here begins the leitmotiv of the exhibition: in some points the organisation resembles a studio, a place which is also a mindscape. In a small room there are the early rocks and mountains, one of them transmigrating into the next room to introduce the theme of the new and wider chain of mountains. A large blue painting shows an electromagnetic discharge (along with the force of gravity and the splitting of the atom magnetism is one of the principal forces). The glow of each painting illuminates the next. After almost 25 years the artist returns to those Abruzzo landscapes which inspired his first works. As in the short about him filmed by Iranian director Esmaeel Monsef, Alberto Di Fabio goes to sleep in his landscape of Abruzzo mountains and dreams. In a sensorial kinetics he hears the heartbeat of the universe in movement within himself. And he feels the micro-cosmos and macro-cosmos are made of the same material. The same material as the painting.

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