

Alberto Di Fabio at a turning point?

The experience that Alberto Di Fabio recently had in Geneva, at the opening of his exhibition at the Gagosian Gallery, was a dream come true. He had expressed the wish for a long time to visit the Cern, the European Center for Nuclear Research, and fulfilling this desire was a big event for him.

Back in Rome, he barely held back his joy. He has always been closely following the activities of this organization, that gives theoretical endorsement to the outcomes his artistic experimentations empirically reached on themes of science and nature. His exhibition in Geneva, therefore, did anything but realize the likely dialogue that he had mentally established with this international study center.

Since the very beginning, in the late 1980s - early 1990s, just after graduating from the Academy of Fine Arts in Rome, Di Fabio realized a number of paintings inspired by the landscape of his native region, Abruzzo, rendering the surface of mountain ranges into large expanses of color, where the tonal variation takes over the graphic layout of the composition, emphasizing the rough and jagged texture of the matter, as testified by the series of "Mountains" and "Minerals", on display at Castel Sant' Elmo in Naples. The strokes of purple, ocher, emerald green, electric blue are plastically emphasized by juxtaposed chunks of black. At the same time, inspired by the influence of Alighiero Boetti and Cy Twombly, as well as by the intellectual stimulation he got from their friendship, Di Fabio left Rome to broaden his own cultural horizons. He spent the last decade of the nineties in Paris, New York and London, getting in touch with some of the most vital forces of the international creative stage. At the same time his artistic research, hitherto focused on empirical aspects of natural phenomena, gradually gave way to the physical and chemical properties that govern them, shifting the center of gravity from the optical to the intellectual perspective of the universe. This gave rise to various cycles of paintings, able, in their own way, to explain a portion of the iconographic cosmos by giving it a

physiognomy that, although fictional and generated only by the imagination of the artist, provides a humanly plausible version of a reality otherwise inscrutable to the naked eye. The titles of these series of paintings merge and overlap in a continuous encroachment of adjectives and semantic similarities, ranging from "Subatomic World" to "Neurons and Cells", "Neurons and Nebulous", "Energy", "Synapses", "Neurons", "Quantum", "Atoms", "Molecules", "Nebulous", "Landscapes of the mind", witnessing the eclectic and fanciful attitude of Di Fabio towards the world of science and allowing him to claim his own role as an artist more than as a scholar. These cycles, documented at Castel Sant' Elmo by over thirty "key" clues of the whole path, in spite of their dissimilarity, share a common approach to color, which is spread on the canvas in spots, openly or barely held up by thin contour lines that occupy the surface in parallel planes, providing unforeseen three-dimensional effects. Effects even more intense where the fabric support of the painting is replaced by Oriental cards, intended by nature to religious practice (similar as they are to actual printed prayers), that have their own graphic apparatus, interacting with the dominant pictorial one, and amplifying the sense of perspective and volume exceeding the depth limits already reached by the paintings on canvas.

At the end of the first decade of the 2000s and the start of the second one, the color gets a more compact, sometimes geometric, texture, with a dynamism which further enhances the vitality of the painted surface. That's how "Light Spaces" and "Parallel Spaces", partly on display in Naples, were born: they are the leitmotif of the exhibition trilogy that, in 2012-13, symbolically retraced places and motives of Di Fabio's apprenticeship: the National Gallery of Modern and Contemporary Art of Rome, the Estorik Collection of Modern Italian Art in London and the Mairie du 4eme, Paris. A trilogy based on past events (Bregenz -1997 being an emblematic example), but in a more organic and if possible even more monumental way, has focused on the display of works by way of installations, emphasizing an important and yet little remarked aspect of Di Fabio's work: its environmental dimension. Already detectable in various individual paintings of his, in the form of purely

intuitive and empirical perspective, the environmental dimension touches its peak when paintings are examined together, thus multiplying exponentially their three-dimensional effect. According to this principle, Di Fabio visualizes moving walls, hung to wires, suspended from the top of the ceiling, that reshape the space, profoundly affecting its visual and emotional perception. This is evidenced, for example, by the installations exhibited in Rome, London and Paris. In the first case, they occupy the passage behind the central hall of the National Gallery of Modern Art; in the second one, they cover the windows that connect the height of the venue of the Estorick. In the third case, they hide, once again, the windows of the staircase entrance to the Mairie. In all three situations, the canvases, that make you think of glass walls, (through which the light filters and becomes color), or of mosaics (where each element plays a role similar to that of a tile) or of a theatrical scenery (they serve as the backdrop to the space in front of them and redefine the next one), change the structure that houses them, notably upgrading it in terms of space and proportions. This is confirmed also by the installation Di Fabio created at the Procuratie Vecchie, Venice, in 2013, or by his last (but non least) work, realized in a chamber on the top of Castel Sant' Elmo, consisting of fifteen canvases, (2013-14), ideally able to frame the cityscape in a regular geometric grid and, at the same time, assimilate themselves to its poetic disorder. A disorder by which Di Fabio has been inspired more than once since 1993, when Lucio Amelio included his name among those of Miguel Barceló, Alighiero Boetti, Christian Boltanski, Jorg Immendorf, Bertrand Lavier, Markus Lüpertz, Robert Mapplethorpe, Luigi Ontani, AR Penck, Vettor Pisani, Gerhard Richter, Rosemarie Trockel, Cy Twombly in *Trismegisto* exhibition, relying on an aspect of his work that so far had received little attention: the power of meditation. As it happens for scientific elements, Di Fabio's approach to spiritual contents is merely empirical, under the guidance of pure instinct and intuition. He did not specifically take courses of religion or philosophy, never attended classes of theosophy or esotericism. And yet, from his paintings there emerges a tension related to these disciplines and expressed by the same elements of space and time that

connect his relationship with natural, physical, biological phenomena. This tension is the reverse side of the coin through which what you conventionally define the ontological character of Di Fabio's work, is expressed. As a palindrome, which reads the same backwards or forwards, it refers to the exploration of the being, call it universe or consciousness, spirit or cosmos, showing a life force directly proportional to its ability in becoming the witness of reality. One could say that Di Fabio's research is somehow like informal poetry, of which it becomes a personal interpreter. Think, for instance, of his latest works, as *Mirrors of the mind*, *Dual Reality*, *Magnetic Fields* or the vibrant, almost struck by a sudden electric shock, *Photon + magnetism*, lately exhibited in Geneva, a hymn to the concepts of sign / gesture / matter carefully transcribed and updated. To find proof of it, look at the easiness with which the color spills sometimes liquid and translucent on the canvas, defining tonal areas so deep to seem almost boundless; or observe, on the contrary, the persistence with which the same chromatic substance, elsewhere, thickens lumpily, as if to underline its own material facies as an alternative to the previously fluid one; or appraise the confidence of performance that always shines through, a confidence that is proof of an ever greater balance the artist is able to establish between idea and action, mental and physical worlds. Di Fabio achieved this goal by getting rid of some ideological and cultural superstructures, especially related to the confrontation with the past history and tradition, that until now have accompanied him, restraining some of his potential for expression. Once loosened these knots in the future there could also be some surprises. Consider, for example, the original photo processing that (taking a cue from a first experiment performed in 2012 for the exhibition at the National Gallery of Modern Art in Rome) he has just devised for the exhibition in Naples: views of Castel Sant ' Elmo transformed into imaginative cosmic visions. The pictorial outcome is the same as always, but quite new is its frame. A new syntax for Di Fabio? We have seen only the starting signals so far, but who knows, perhaps they'll just help us to uncover the hidden sides of an artist brand new, and still to be discovered.

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