



Fumo in sei quadri (Smoke in six pictures) 2000. Oil on canvas, 13-4/5 x 19-3/4 inches (35 x 50 cm)

The 2007 Venice Biennale, curated by Robert Storr, carried a title that served as a mantra for artists negotiating philosophical space for themselves between the Scylla and Charybdis of formalism and conceptualism: “Think with the Senses, Feel with the Mind”. Lino Mannocci has seldom seemed an artist overtly connected with the contemporary current. Without his necessarily courting anachronism as an end in itself, as certain “cultivated” postmodernists in his native Italy have been known to do, his aesthetic often seems out of joint with the times. Think of him as a Mozart born two centuries late, an oblivious tuner in an era of atonalism. And yet, Storr’s injunction feels so right for Mannocci in its blending of idea and form as to encourage the view that his time has come.

Actually, this musical analogy is both apt and not quite right. There is, for sure, a melodious aspect to Mannocci, an unabashed sweetness, and a lightness of touch. His work, in whatever medium, does indeed, in Walter Pater’s phrase, ‘aspire to the condition of music’, in its fusion of the cerebral and the sensual. But the historical side of the composer analogy, to think of him somehow pitted against the prevailing “isms” of his day, does not gel. While he eschews extremes, he is able nonetheless to tap what is best from some radical tendencies — with the

obvious proviso that imagery and association remain crucial to his art.. His muted, almost pared-down palette, exposure of bare canvas, affection for the grid and for repetition, all recall aspects of minimal art, and in particular its Italian counterpart/forebear, *arte povera*.

The dreamlike element in Mannocci, his predilection towards the uncanny and chance encounters, directly recalls *La Pittura Metafisica* as pursued by artists like Giorgio de Chirico and Carlo Carrà. Mannocci had been a charter member of the 1980s artists' association, *Metacosa*, a stylistic late descendant of *Pittura Metafisica*. In that phase of his career, Mannocci painted perceptually and with pearly classical finesse. But Mannocci's investment in surface texture, which has come to be a defining formal feature of his work, aligns him with *Metaphysical painting's* most illustrious dissident, Giorgio Morandi. Although Mannocci's motifs are now invented rather than observed, his touch imparts a sense that what he depicts has palpable presence—even when he paints deities in the sky. It is as if he rebuts Courbet's objection to painting angels because he had never seen one, by painting them as if he were seeing them. Or, at least, grounding his angels in the *facture*, the *matière*, of the painterly plane.

Mannocci is a texturalist. This is not simply to say that he is a materialist who revels in the smear of oil on canvas, of ink in burr, slowing the eye to savor the contingencies of surface. Rather, it is to signal that the sensation of material applied to support crucially determines how an image will work. He is an artist acutely sensitive to medium specificity. What is most telling, in this respect, is that he has generated autonomous oeuvres according to the medium in which he works—for instance in the three mediums represented here: oil on canvas, monotype, and the treated postcard. While, obviously, there are leitmotifs that recur across medium boundaries, the kind of composition, imagery, sense of space, mood, and humor are markedly distinct from one medium to the next.

Mannocci's willingness to be guided by his materials in this way goes beyond the pioneer modernist notion of "truth to materials," to recall instead Surrealist ideas of automatism: the way, for instance, that for Max Ernst or Man Ray various technical discoveries (*frottage*, *solorization*) triggered medium-specific imagery. Mannocci's treated postcard, a genre of his own devising in which isolated features – figures usually – are preserved in found postcards which serve as the support for miniature paintings, spawns absurdist situations of low-octane Surrealism (Surrealism without a punchline) absent in the paintings and prints. The photographic details

posit within these quirky little pictures a slickness contrasting with the paint in which they are embedded, and an iconographic contemporaneity that are unique to his postcard idiom. (Contemporaneity is relative: the postcards tend to date back to the 1960s, the time the artist left Italy for London, or are vintage turn of the 20th-century specimens).

While each medium generates its own message, this does not prevent discoveries from one medium migrating to the next. Ironically, autonomy actually triggers interdependency in Mannocci's case. The stranded figures of the postcards, for instance, find their equivalents in the introduction of red stenciled "found" figurines – the little Apollos di Belvedere or Venuses Pudica – that are the dramatis personæ of his paintings of the last several years. The experience of monotype, in which the ghost of a previously pulled image serves as the palimpsest anticipating the next to come, informs painting, both in the echo of one composition to the next, and also in the fey sense of the image barely breathed onto the canvas that comes across in some of these works. Mannocci's artistic temperament is one in which imagery progresses through gradual, subtle modifications, rather than abrupt breakthrough discoveries of new motifs or themes. The mottled, almost distressed texture of his canvases is somewhat akin to the way ink adheres in a transfer process. Besides monotype, the sole print activity presented here, Mannocci is a prolific etcher, and the sense of the inner and outer frames within his painted compositions directly recall plate indentation—although, obviously, there are other rich connotations too, of the multiple panels of a fresco cycle, or of changing scenes within cinema.

As surely as physical stuff has texture – paint, canvas, paper, printers' plates – so, Mannocci's work insists, memory has texture, too. That the scenes in Mannocci are mythic, oneiric, associational and diffused, all point to the play of memory, as opposed to observation or invention. There is a strong sense of narrative, but the thread is lost. Occasionally, titles will reference known myths: Ganymede is seen floating in the clouds, the archangel Gabriel is kneeling in a pose familiar from the Annunciation. But the absence, respectively, of the father of the gods or the mother of Jesus removes the protagonists that give these stories their thrust, making what we see appear lost scenes from a known drama. More typically, what we get with Mannocci's celestial fête champêtres is the other way around, a scene from a lost drama. He imbues his compositions with the mystique of narrative, but removes what is actually being narrated.

But this does not make him a formalist, concerned exclusively with structures and sensations. Mood matters to Mannocci, who evokes distinct emotions within each picture while maintaining a consistently wistful – though never sombre – quietude. There is often the sense that places are disappearing from view as we watch; the sea, as a motif in Mannocci, serves to suggest erosion, which can be mental as surely as geological. Often, the sea takes on a mountain-like aspect, as do clouds, in a psychologically-charged blurring of elements. His treated postcards, as has been observed, often related to his sense of distance from his native Italy. But beyond autobiography, the distressed or decayed quality of his surfaces impart a feeling not just of damage to individual pictures (actual or projective) but to picture making per se: there is a sense of longing for, and alienation from, the very activity of painting.

The muses, who were the daughters of Mnemosyne (Memory) each served a distinct art form—tragedy, comedy, music, history etc. It seems appropriate, therefore, that Mannocci should respond so specifically to each of his chosen mediums while placing all his work at the service of memory. The acuteness of his touch, the linkage of this touch to the materials in which he works, and also, as Merlin James has observed in relation to the muses, to the memories inherent within a given medium of its past practitioners, makes Mannocci not only an exploiter of mediums, but – in the spiritualist sense – a medium himself. Linking his early affinity with metaphysical painting to his thoughtful investment in the material plane, Mannocci is surely a meta-sensualist, anchored in the sensorium, but voyaging beyond.