

Rossella Pezzino de Geronimo

by Vincenzo Sanfo

Back in 1973 I had the good fortune to view a memorable exhibition evocatively titled *Combattimento per una immagine* (“Fight for an image”), concerned with the relationship between painting and photography. The curators of the exhibition were the unfortunately long-forgotten Luigi Carluccio, a critic from Puglia who lived in Turin, and a very young Daniela Palazzoli, a precursor of the study of photography in Italy.

The exhibition, immortalised in a beautiful catalogue published by Galleria d’arte Moderna di Torino, drew the attention of Marella Agnelli, who loved photography and was herself an excellent photographer.

I was then lucky enough to work with Marella, a person of uncommon kindness and goodness, on the creation of a number of books of photographs taken by her, most of which focused on her beloved gardens.

And, above all, I worked with Marella and Associazione Amici Torinesi dell’Arte, of which she was president, on an extraordinary series of photography exhibitions under the title “*La fotografia vista da*” (“Photography as seen by...”), inspired by suggestions offered by prominent figures in the world of culture, expressing a concept which then became the theme of the exhibition.

These figures included Sicilian author Leonardo Sciascia, whose theme was “*Unknown to myself*“, Alberto Arbasino, who came up with “*Lost voyages*”, and then Josif Brodskj, Furio Colombo and Gae Aulenti, to mention only a few of those who offered their ideas and with whom I had the good fortune to work.

In my career in the world of photography, I cannot help recalling the exciting exhibition of the youthful work of the great Stanley Kubrick, an absolute genius, whose work I had the opportunity to publish and exhibit with Enrico Ghezzi and the very intelligent Elisabetta Sgarbi.

I am telling you all this to show you how my career in photography was, up to a certain point, a matter of chance, or rather, was driven by the circumstances in which I happened to find myself, which allowed me to get to know, and in some cases spend time with, great masters of photography such as Henry Cartier-Bresson, Steven Meisel, Frank Horvat, Ferdinando Scianna, Irish Broch and Nigel Dickinson.

And so it was that, almost without realising it, I approached the world of photography and became a passionate fan, seeing it as a means of expression in which, like painting, drawing or sculpture, I could discover a certain creative autonomy.

This was, after all, the intent of the exhibition *Combattimento per un’immagine*, “Fight for an image”, which claimed photography’s reason for existing, a path, a value, that goes beyond documentation but is inevitably also artistic, and therefore “noble”.

This has been the case for decades, now; photography is no longer at the service of something else, but is seen as an art in its own right, independently rebelling against all constrictions and limitations attempting to define its boundaries.

It has developed its own specific *Koinè*, from which it has set off on a voyage, the result of which is undefinable and offers a wealth of new possibilities.

For, released as it is from a function of mere reproduction, and from the service of specific memorable moments in time, it is now free of constrictions and may therefore unfold all its infinite expressive wealth, of which we can as yet see no end, though we can participate in its continual rebirth.

This is also by virtue of its new technical potential, which, whether we are adverse to technological progress, or by virtue of the creative independence which, while still guided by the human eye, and by technology, still maintains its proud capacity for independence, never knowing a priori what the final result will be.

As the great Diane Arbus used to say: "I never have taken a picture I intended.

They're always better or worse." And it is precisely this that is the inescapable magic of photography.

The fascination of this mysterious, and at times perverse, game of roles that takes over anyone who approaches the camera and becomes the source of subtle little emotional thrills, in which the final image is a sort of catharsis, linked with a moment in time which will, of course, be preserved in time.

Today, I find myself before the latest photographs by Rossella Pezzino de Geronimo, unusual works which are clearly the result of a long and difficult gestation period, tormented and intimately pursued with total dedication, and, undoubtedly, the fruit of an inner struggle which shows through in her images, which are never simply decorative or appealing.

We cannot discuss Rossella's career in photography without considering a number of the aspects I have just mentioned.

First of all, the relationship between painting and photography that inspired the exhibition I mentioned, "*Combattimento per una immagine*".

Secondly, the emotional thrill the artist enlists through technology, which allows her to achieve results that are at times surprising and engaging, thrilling the viewer, perhaps in a subtly erotic way.

Her relationship with painting is clear in the way she frames her shots, the choice of locations and colours, and the lean composition of her photographs.

Images that speak of her passions, both literary and artistic, and in which the echo of the ancient philosophies inherent in the Sicilian identity that is an inseparable part of her being lead her to turn increasingly toward the Orient, giving rise to a meditative, inspired vision of life.

In her most recent photographs in particular, tied to the four elements, Earth, Air, Fire and Water, she openly states her transcendent vision of life, inspired by Anaximenes, declaring the absolute incompatibility of our modern lifestyle with the natural laws of creation.

We cannot discuss her work in photography without taking into account this statement that is a living, essential, I would say magmatically essential, part of all her

photographic work, and not only these splendid new images.

Her previous work, focused on the human body, already contained the essence of this vision, revealed in the intentional abandonment of portraiture to focus instead on the emergence of a detail, a part, which, however small, is capable of representing that which is not visible.

Conveying, in this way, the emotional sense of a distant vision of being, a mute image capable of offering a meaning, a reflection, on that which is seen and unconsciously perceived.

Another important characteristic of Rossella's approach to photography is that she presents herself without protective barriers, opening up to the world in a continual rebirth and baring all her insides, her fragility, her anguish and her thoughts.

All in an almost psychoanalytic form of advancement toward herself, in the search for interior lightness, almost a form of *jouissance* of Lacanian memory, capable of giving meaning to life and making it almost worth living.

The fact that it is something else, besides a photograph, only reinforces this sense of lightness, of defenceless participation in the great mystery of creation that it expresses through photography, which becomes a sort of mute cry out to an increasingly inhuman world.

This becomes clear in the simplicity of her landscapes, so desolate and desolating, conveying that disturbing sense of subtle melancholy that runs through our troubled times.

In her images we may see, in the distance, the echo of that solitude, that incommunicability that was Michelangelo Antonioni's hallmark, and which is to her a sentiment of the soul, perceived in the background, like a silent companion.

All this is clear in her photographs, which, in some cases, recall Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* with their cold colours, understated hues, and rarefied, abstract frames, in images which bring to mind, in addition to the great director's work, the paintings of Mark Rothko, simple as Antonioni's films, subtly disturbing in their absolute lack of any figurative reference and therefore in themselves incommunicable.

Capable nonetheless of creating emotions we would not otherwise experience.

For Rossella, as for Antonioni and Rothko, the recently undertaken voyage finds, in this abstractly evocative form, a point of departure toward artistic and emotional growth pregnant with splendid unknowns which, if she can tame them, will lead her toward a future of great importance.

Her Fight is no longer for an image, a fight that we have no put well behind us, but a struggle to achieve the absolute, a spiritual philosophic essence to be expressed using photography as the medium for communicating sensations, thoughts and emotions which would otherwise be confined to an intimistic and exclusively personal dimension.

In photography, the artist has found a way of giving herself, of making herself a participant in that dimension shared by all artists in which she offers herself through her work, because, as the great photographer Anselm Adams said, "You bring to the

act of photography all the pictures you have seen, the books you have read, the music you have heard, the people you have loved.”

All this may be seen in Rossella's photographs, the profound and humanly open sense of a generosity of thought that is the hallmark of the great masters, who fill the viewer's eyes and mind and make them feel free to vibrate in the sensations of images which are, and remain, in our memory.

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