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MAURIZIO VETRUGNO - A DEGREE OF REALITY

by Riccardo Conti

Now I must trace the peculiar events that brought me to this condition. Once I was a great beauty and attended all sorts of cocktail-drinking, prize-giving-and-taking, artistic demonstrations and other casually hazardous gatherings organised for the purpose of people wasting other people's time. I was always in demand and my beautiful face would hang suspended over fashionable garments, smiling continually. An ardent heart, however, beat under the fashionable costumes, and this very ardent heart was like an open tap pouring quantities of hot water over anybody who asked. This wasteful process soon took its toll on my beautiful smiling face. My teeth fell out. The original structure of the face became blurred, and then began to fall away from the bones in small, ever-increasing folds. I sat and watched the process with a mixture of slighted vanity and acute depression. I was, I thought, solidly installed in my lunar plexus, within clouds of sensitive vapour.

Leonora Carrington, *My Flannel Knickers*¹

The short and mysterious story by Leonora Carrington this passage is taken from seems to converge in that vast imaginary and cliché according to which the ritual of fashion coincides with the ineluctable sentiment of decadence. What in the form of fashion would represent a deadly path leading towards aesthetic consumption and degradation. On the contrary, the ultimate meaning of the British artist's splendid tale, just like all of Maurizio Vetrugno's art, lies in its transformation, thus perfectly capturing the essence of the artist in this exhibition – one absolutely out of the ordinary. Vetrugno (Turin, 1957) has pursued a path along which art, spirituality and pleasure overlap completely, expressing a single life project, in this sense not unprecedented but – in the wake of other famous masters who have understood their own human and artistic story – as a heuristic path in the making. An expert in the visual realms of art and fashion, antiques, pop and underground, Vetrugno has been able to embody and in many ways anticipate that artistic and curatorial approach to the contemporary has borrowed from the practices of the art director.

Vetrugno has always looked upon choosing as the first step towards structuring his work. This need to draw on visual and cultural sources does not just represent a sort of 'sampling' of pre-existent materials but expresses within itself the ritual of creation.

Vetrugno made his debut in the 1980s using the painting medium, which he has never completely abandoned, and which has given him the ability to 'stay' on the images, to return to them, to overcome the facile automatisms of photographic reproduction, giving each of his operations a

temporal stratification that abstracts them from the present moment and makes them continually active to the eye of the visitor. Transforming, as we were saying, is the main key to understanding the meaning of his production; after a strictly painterly parenthesis, towards the end of the 1980s Vetrugno began a series of works in which sampling is manifested as an exemplary action, producing a certain aesthetic which, if reconsidered today, appears anticipatory of various methodologies in the field of art and the world of fashion. Starting from the careful selection of objects, in some way valorised by their belonging to the dimension of the fetish, the artist began to display small symbolic ecosystems by putting together objects apparently banal yet instead endowed with signs – especially for those who can grasp their origin – capable of generating non-narrative associative flows, harbingers of discourse, soliloquies, dialogues and even oneiric drifts, starting from fragments of partial collections identified and selected by the artist. One example is the sculpture *Ethnological Forgery Series* (1989–1990), in which the artist chose prototypes of shoes, manipulating and subverting them, and associated them with the names of extreme vocalists, placing them in a museum dimension. This is a selection of shoes extrapolated from the hypothetical functional display that would have them as objects of a seasonal window-dressing fodder, and here exhibited in a transparent pyramidal structure in which every single element (odd, therefore ‘useless’) acquires an almost votive and entirely new value.

From the mid-1990s onwards, the use of textile materials of various origins became more and more intense, recognisable as products of the luxury sector, along with their brand names or iconic motifs, or fabrics that replace what was previously the painting material, and which the embroiderer transforms into maps by which to orient himself in the boundless territory of his own cultural references. Splendid examples of this are works such as *Dandyism Lineage* (1995), composed of a blue velvet mantle over which, as in an orderly constellation, the names of the personalities who have defined the metamorphic and literary figure of the dandy through their arts and styles are embroidered.

A highly cultured collector of objects, visual and literary pieces, Maurizio Vetrugno composes each of his works by endowing the pure material of which it is composed with a precise creative and – absurd as it may sound – mystical will. Everything he collects he transforms from time to time; this means that in Vetrugno’s work, we must not stop within the boundaries of the Western art interpretation of the ready-made or the *objet trouvé*, but that the moment we see a Balenciaga wedding dress juxtaposed with a Qing cup or a Noguchi lamp, we must necessarily ask ourselves what reflections of a spiritual nature have conditioned those precise choices and that interplay of apparently distant materials and cultural sediments.

If, after Warhol, we necessarily had to renegotiate and explore anew the potential of the photographic image, its multiplication and imposition in the iconosphere, Maurizio Vetrugno has not only understood this lesson perfectly – being, among other things, a profound connoisseur of the Warholian milieu – but has defined it, explored it and applied it as an autonomous instrument of investigation and a means of rendering of reality: “In photography, the value of displayability has begun to replace cultural value across the board. But the latter will not back down without a fight. It occupies a final trench: the human face. [...] In the cult of remembrance of distant or dead loved ones, the cultic value of the painting finds its last refuge. In the fleeting expression of the human face, the aura emanates for the last time from the first photographs. It is this that constitutes its

melancholy and implacable beauty.”^{II} In these words by Walter Benjamin – quoted by the artist in his monograph *Part False Part True Like Anything* – the German philosopher shortens the symbolic distances that would tend to view cultural elements as opposites between East and West. Working on the very figure of Warhol, Vetrugno meditated on the somewhat sacred role he had played in redefining the paradigms of contemporary vision: “...something must have happened, but what? To quote the preface to Gertrude Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*: ‘Alice B. Toklas did hers and now anybody will do theirs.’ How different from the simple fifteen-minutes-of-fame-formula, fed to the public like a trinket. Often such a catchphrase is nothing but the ‘exoteric’ side of something at work, something difficult to label. Like an authentic twentieth-century gnostic myth, like the dada soirées in Zurich 1915, like the Pistols on stage at the Nashville in London 1976, one constantly returns to the scene of the crime (of its epiphany) in search of a glimpse of truth which is already elsewhere. This is especially true in the Warhol scene, which axiomatically was the site of multiple, noisy projections from a silent essence which can never be dislodged because it can never be truly perceived. Other possible liturgical readings have been made over time: for Christian Boltanski, Warhol was the black angel, the antithesis of Joseph Beuys, the white angel.”^{III}

There are very many photographic portraits collected by Vetrugno throughout his career: some are part of his relationships, others are extrapolated from the world of the media, again favouring fashion images and representations of subcultures. Each of these finds contributes to the creation of an archive of faces and experiences that can be continually reworked in the artist’s creative process: as photographic juxtapositions, as prints on textiles, as the subjects of tapestries or as iridescent images that, thanks to the use of the ‘straight stitch’ technique, produce lenticular effects, generating works that go beyond the static and fixed nature of the photographic discovery.

Over time, the technique used to create Vetrugno’s textile works has taken on ever more of a fundamental role, denoting profound poetics and a firm stance.

In his short article published for the first time in Italian in 1967 for the Florentine magazine *Billi* entitled “La calza e l’idea,” drawing on a passage in the *Encyclopédie* written by Diderot himself, Roland Barthes analyses the mechanical process for the industrial creation of women’s stockings: “the stocking machine expresses very well the theme of the progressive nature of our technological civilisation, which began precisely in the eighteenth century: on the one hand, the needs of everyday life, captured from a humble memory of clothing; on the other, the power of technology, which allows man to satisfy these needs, using less time and less work than before. Thus, the new stocking machine symbolises the overturning of the old accounting law of ‘fatigue’ – the inevitable price (it was thought) of all existence.”^{IV}

This acute observation reminds us of the precise artistic will Vetrugno expresses in the creation of his works, which each time bear witness to a crossroads of techniques and post-productions (analogue and digital) that remove his works from the dichotomy between manufactured and industrial product. A sort of paradox, even more poignant if the materials and references he selects are actually fragments decontextualised and reorganised from magazines, fashion shoots, photographs of great artists, amateur shots or refined luxury products – but already the result of processes that go beyond the handmade – such as scarves or other textile creations, which he redefines through manual work by intervening on their surfaces, in the case of abstract flat

backgrounds, or on their 'skin' when the cues – as we were saying – come from figurative repertoires, with faces, bodies and anatomies reproduced on fabrics and subsequently embroidered. It is again Barthes, with regard to the signifier of the 'stocking', who specifies its symbolic meaning of epidermis, of covering: "The symbol remains and the same astonishment subsists: a woman's stocking – the finest, lightest thing that exists, smooth as the skin that it protects and exalts, the very symbol of supernatural creation because, like the tunic of the saints, it does not contain any stitching – may be the conclusion (this is Diderot's term) of a reasoning of which the complexity, akin to a surprise deriving from an intelligent idea, is inscribed in the flash of those few seconds necessary to produce it."^V

Observing Vetrugno's new works made up of a triptych, two diptychs and three single works presented for his first solo exhibition at Galleria Martina Simeti, we have the sensation of seeing the bodies appear as if from another dimension: remote, oneiric, from an *autre-monde*, but above all it is the clothes they wear: it is something that still intensely concerns that aspect of clothing that survives death and history, with time and with the wait for the image to manifest itself, the phantasmal permanence of its aura. Marilyn – captured for eternity in Warhol's two-dimensionality – was known for being perpetually late (except for her death, to which she arrived early), so much so that when on 19 May 1962 she performed singing 'Happy Birthday' for John Fitzgerald Kennedy, she was introduced to the audience by Peter Lawford as 'the late' Marilyn. Even today, digitised, that sublime fragment of performativity meanders through YouTube like an apparition where, more than her body and voice, it is the embodied dress that carries out the mystique: her ermine fur is a form of pure light that – once removed – reveals the shimmering, tight-fitting dress designed for that occasion by Jean Louis. Only three months later, her image would disappear for a brief moment: Marilyn is dead, completely naked, as if the moment of nudity and absence of clothing coincided with the disappearance of her image. Then she reappears, statuesque and extraordinarily present, her body laid out in the coffin in a bright green Emilio Pucci dress.

In this body of recent work, Maurizio Vetrugno restores the complex temporal, cultural and mythopoetic stratification of the clothed figure, its auratic emanation and ability to capture a certain degree of reality. That specific gradient that belongs to figures that appear on stage is characteristic of both fashion icons and stars on the red carpet or the divinities represented in sacred theatre. All these 'apparitions' of impalpable images produced on cinema screens, photographic paper, various forms of digital media, or on Vetrugno's canvases cannot be dissociated from the sensation of being before phantasmagorical, abstract presences. Antonin Artaud, who encountered Balinese theatre in Paris in 1931 at the Colonial Exhibition, perceived its nature as pure language, alienated from narration, from words and governed by spectral presences, by pure symbols: "Balinese theatre reveals to us the subterranean existence of a sort of true scenic language, of such effectiveness that it seems to abolish even the spiritual movements that appear to have given birth to it, and such as to render impossible and useless any translation into words [...]. There is something absolute in this sort of construction in space, a style of true psychic absolute that only Orientals can show themselves to be capable of searching for."^{VI}

In Vetrugno's intense artistic research, everything contributes to creating that 'construction in space' described in Artaud's words, and it matters little whether the diaphanous figures in the artist's works wear a vintage Balenciaga dress or a ritual sarong, whether in the icons that appear on stage

we see the mask of Divine or those of Rangda. These ephemeral visions cast a luminous ray that is invisible most of the time, one that does not belong to life or even to the afterlife except for the fact of being a manifestation of it, and yet their silent presence reveals that ‘burning heart’ described by Leonora Carrington that is the pulsating force guarded within Maurizio Vetrugno’s art.

[I] Leonora Carrington, “My Flannel Knickers,” from *Le Visionarie*, pp. 41-42 (Rome: Nero edizioni, 2018).

[II] Walter Benjamin, “Fotoritratti,” cited in *Maurizio Vetrugno, Part false part true like anything*, p. 112 (Turin: Hopefulmonster, 2001).

[III] Maurizio Vetrugno, *Andy Warhol: Finkelstein*, p. 3 (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1999).

[IV] Roland Barthes, *Il senso della moda*, pp. 122–123 (Turin: Einaudi, 2006).

[V] Roland Barthes, *ibid.*

[VI] Antonin Artaud, letter to Jean Paulhan, 5 August 1931, from *Oeuvre complete*, vol. IV, p. 302 (Paris: Gallimard, 1996).