Reflections on Carmi's painting

Furio Colombo

A horizon, a sun, a sunset, a signal. An idea, a frivolous variation, a wound. A cold intelligence that looks, with the determination of a doctor, by gently prodding tender, delicate parts, for the essential point, the unseen thing upon which everything depends. The romantic abandonment to colours. The tight control of gradations, a mathematical formula for juxtapositions. Form, like the opening of a tunnel, but in a dream, a nightmare. Or the natural but risky passage into a dimension – plane, space or setting – which is contiguous to life yet different, made of materials and extraneous sensations. So why the confidential warmth, the sensation of memory, of nostalgia even? Shouldn't ingredients be specified behind a painting, next to a painter, as is compulsory with most delicate products? One part adolescence, one part craft, one part ancient history, one part instant happiness, one part memories, one part calculation, one part shrewdness and prudence mixed well together, one part innocence, one part reserve and one part impetus. A sharp memory. A jungle-like imagination with brakes slammed on at the last minute, contained in a dose just below risk. One part play (like balls of mercury), numerous rigid parts of hard, implacable work. One part will-power. All dissolved in a landscape that keeps changing face, partly trhough joy, partly of necessity. Wearing a mask, you enter the coloured tunnel with its ever-changing form, as if the material were flexible. It's not carnival time. The world is good but has not trust at all in the explicit reproduction of images. Other rapresentations of each thing and each existence are used here, received with other instruments. You can't say it's the essential. You can say: a non-anthropomorohic beauty (freed from traditional data) to which a physiology of its own is given or restored. The colours are colours. But they must exist in a form. What sets off the contact and determines these images is the unknown part of the formula, the final part of the journey. Which is encouraging, due to the festive invitation (adolescence, childhood) and wary promises (age comes into it, not so much the painter's physical age, but an age, an older experience, a not particularly clear but very deep root that goes down into the perfect black) but which hides nothing of the hazards and the snags. If necessary the colours grow dazzling, even hard to bear, the container-stripes stretch and no one knows if or how far they can take strain. The artist defies certain laws that certainly exist on the property of the non-things, the non-bodies and non-metals created by his formula. He does not give up the experiment even in the extreme cases. No one knows whether he is more a wizard, an artist, a great histrionic or gambler. For in every gesture, while producing he causes something else to disappear. He abolishes, for example, dizziness, passion and pain, as if the treatment were anaesthetic, which it is not. Each operation is done alive and awake, though nobody around him likes to remind him of the fact. Coming and going from hidden terminals – for the most part nerve fibres – are colours that intercept forms where others do not expect, at times producing soft, ambiguous surfaces that evoke perhaps a feeling of affection or familiarity, whereas they may be connected to the more sensual and less diurnal memory of secret passages and tissues. Human tissues, possibly? One of the most hazardous games here is the relation between inside and outside. The light-colour operated by will (call it taste) imposes or superimposes a domination from outside, as if everything were manufactured, complete with revision, guarantee and control for every product. But the inside? The unconscious inside, the inside-dream, the inside-bowels, the inside mystery, the inside-eyes shut, the inside nightmare, the inside-memory, the inside-vision, ecstasy, exaltation and loss of reason, too, the inside has its reasons. It demands to be looked for, it demands to exist at all costs. The inside is indifferent to the notion of tragedy. The only tragic part, if it really is inevitable, is a consequence, or an accident between different planes and things, like a tangled knot, a short circuit. Here a hand works to keep each thread in its space, each stream or band of fantasy or inspiration or mourning, in a relatively peaceful sphere of its own, where things can appear, show themselves, be seen, remembered and measured according to anxiety, beauty and need. And thus certain shocks become colours, certain nightmares are welded into a sharp relation, which you can observe and which seems soothing. One theory is that of the arch built of dry stones. At every point there is

stress to the point of excess. The image indicates harmony, with the determination of the perfect form, and ultimately even a frivolous smile, as after a somersault at the circus. No, it is not a world parallel to life, it is not an expanding of colours that for some reason defy control. The process recalls science fiction, or a difference degree of knowledge. Forms pass through forms and material conditions (or things) manage to meet and to stay together with the idea, the stimulus, the memory, the thought, the wonder, in a graduation from elementary to complex which is both nervous (mental), physical (the materiality of the colours) and absolutely conceptual (the forms and the way they are destined to exist). Coldness and warmth, control and imagination, surface and depth, calculation and impetus, are some of the contradictions that make life possible here in a chain of reactions similar to those of certain physiologies. Luckily there is no conclusion. The formula has not been found, work continues. The difficult relation between inside and outside is achieved every time, well masked by a childlike sense of celebration and festivity.

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Analysis of a non-Euclidean geometry

Mauro Mancia

Eugenio Carmi's work stimulates in me an analogy with dreams and the work of the unconscious. Dreams create the unconscious, as Bion says; a theatre in which to dramatize the relations that internal objects have among themselves and with the self and reality. Just as dreams create a space-time where anxieties are contained, so Eugenio, with his geometries and his rhythms, creates a fabric of containment for his own anxieties.

Just as behind the orderly and reproducible signs of biology lies the unpredictable disorder of desire, so behind the lines and colours that chase each other with chromatic precision in Eugenio's works apprehension and restlessness are hidden. The reassuring order of the lines thus offsets the disorder of his emotions.

If looked at superficially, Eugenio's painting would seem to be joyful and free of anxiety. But I don't think this is quite the case. Eugenio appears to me in fact to be an apprehensive and at times an anxious person. A pessimist who hides his feelings beneath enthusiasm and optimism. An extravert who tries to cover up his basic shyness.

So we come back to the analogy with dreams. One essential function of dreams is to neutralize the dread and the instinct of death. With his work Eugenio transforms his own anxiety and neutralizes it. Anxiety and pessimism vanish from the painting because they are neutralized and digested, or elaborated as in a dream that has fulfilled its purpose.

The "thing in themselves" of the perceptive reality of a tormented and uneasy world take on a form in his work: the form of his thought, where optimism and calm are dominant as an extreme defence.

The series of processes that structure Carmi's work is a most interesting one: first of all, the *condensation* of colours and lines and forms that contain other forms, the *displacement* connected to the other metaphorical functions of his project, the symbolic *transcription*. Eugenio's work is in fact compounded of signs that acquire symbolic meanings inasmuch as they transcribe a content referrable to his inner world. This does not mean that his works do not express joy and sunniness, indeed they certainly do; but as the result of a transformation, the distortion of a content that refers to primary anxiety. Carmi's painting cannot therefore be considered to be truly optimistic painting. It is indirectly optimistic, in a specular way, as the successful transformation of exacty the opposite internal situation.

Art as defence used in favour of creativity and love for the world. At a point in history so widely permeated with death, where art seems to have lost the magical capacities of metamorphosis and indeed takes pleasure in representing it in the most disquieting and perverse forms, at a point, then, where the actual regression of the pictorial act takes us back to the memory of a prenatal anxiety, Carmi manages to state – with the strength of simplicity and evolution – the perfect line, the limpid geometry of intersections, penetrations, overflowings and interactions of colours and forms, in an irrepressible reaffirmation of the principle of life.

Contributing to this operation is what I would call his *principle of symmetry*, a principle which governs the logic of the unconscious. Luckily the laws governing the latter are different and far removed from those of physics. One cannot help referring here to the work of Matte Blanco, who talks of bi-logic (or double, symmetrical and asymmetrical or Aristotelian logic), in an attempt to formalize the laws of human endeavour which take into account the unconscious as an infinite set. An analogy with these laws is fascinating in that the need for symmetry and asymmetry, at once and in the same space, as appears i Carmi's work, represents one aspect of the bi-logical symmetric-asymmetric structure of his own unconscious. But the unconscious, and the dynamics of its inner objects which obeys these laws, refers back to the founding process of identification.

Identification as an indispensable process in the constitution of every fragment of mental life seems to be the ideal axis supporting the whole of Eugenio's output. Just as a child splits from itself and projects on to its mother its painful parts, which have to be trasformed and deprived of their

anxiety-content in order to be re-introjected, so the infantile parts of us find in Carmi's coloured circles and in his fantastic geometric constructions the container of their anxieties.
A work born as a defence against anxiety thus becomes capable of neutralizing the world's anxiety.
Of course, the knowledge which emerges from Eugenio's signs, due precisely to their profound and defensive origin, is that of a slow, labyrinthine process. It forces us along a path which is, despite appearances, a difficult one, where the joyful and simple system of direction signs leads, in actual fact, to a problematical and complex inner world.

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Jute canvas

Ruggero Orlando

For a generation Eugenio Carmi has been redeveloping Giotto's O.
The anecdote, or legend, attributed to the father of Italian painting confirms the authority of the circle, as does the supreme vision of his contemporary and friend, the father of the Italian language, who, in the final circles of the Divine Comedy, glimpses the revelation of God.
Euclid and Apollonius tell us that a circle is the section of a cone cut from a plane perpendicular to it's axis, an extreme case of infinite ellipses: the ellipse, in short, reduced to perfect simplicity when the centre and the two focuses become the same point. Poetically, it expresses indetermination since it is equal in all directions, its boundary, the circumference, corresponding to points equidistant from a central point. The circle invites us to look serenely up, down, right and left.
It is the ideal "figure". Incidentally, a painting of circles confirms how inexact is the language of those who strive to translate visual art into words, and divide it into abstract and "figurative". Geometric figures are figures *par excellence*. Eugenio Carmi reacts to their classically static quality with colours. It is the blacks, the greens, the reds, and the light blues which, though drawn by a ruler to cross the compass radius, make each other uneasy; one colour has the property to alter the value of the one next to it, to educate the eye each time to look differently, the brain and the mind to react differently; and Carmi heavily exploits these optical and psychological problems and solutions.
This time he has brought a novelty: jute. Stiff, soft and rough, jute canvas is the most difficult for painters to master, and it takes a geometric painting, reduced to the simplicity of circles and parallel lines, not to feel the effects of its coarseness; it takes, in fact, the painting of Eugenio Carmi, who has discovered a strange, ironic kinship between the new material tackled and the acrylics which he spreads on it: a kinship like that of half-brothers and hals-sisters. With jute moreover, his works become textural as well as geometric.
The plasticity of jute would seem to extend a tactile invitation to the third dimension, and Carmi, an analyst of surfaces, watches them vibrate in space.
Painting on jute maintains the quality of a fresco, brought closer however to the spectator, so that he can study and enjoy its workmanship. Carmi introduces a backcloth into the dialogue, as for example the Neapolitan impressionists did – and I mention Dalbono – with unsized canvas. Jute is hard, like sails or beduin cloaks; which is why it suggests the effect of a bas-relief, of the cork used for bottles because it is a wood that breathes, with the mystery and the sensuality of pores, ploughed, with the mystery and the sensuality of pores, ploughed fields, haystacks and bark. Why did classical painters paint on wood, and on different woods, or on copper? Art, it has been said, is often a struggle between mind and matter; the search, Michelangelo said, for the statue which the marble hides within it. So the material, albeit as the antagonist, is always essential; and for the artist, having to do with a given material is a serious business that imposes a choice upon him. So this time Eugenio Carmi has chosen jute. A plant of ancient use, native to Bangladesh, it flourished abundantly in Brazil and its fibre is second only to cotton in yarn consumption. It was the Scots, a canny people with a keen eye for business, who were the first to adopt jute, which had previously been used only for rope-making, in their weaving. It makes fashionable wall-covering, appreciated for its rustic elegance. To get colours to adhere to it requires a certain amount of practice and involves the painter in definite decisions: but, when a particular shade does adhere to it, it acquires a more solemn strength than on normal canvases or on wood.
Maybe it is eclipses that have taught Carmi the drama of his circles and more generally of his surfaces when others intersect them; or travelling galaxies and planets, in which case his paintings and tapestries, instead of abstractions, become, in a literal sense, orbits which in nature are conceived only ideally, but now become concrete signs. If these orbits, or certain squares of the

kind created by Malevich as the brand-mark of his “suprematism”, meet and clash, produce disciplined rainbows, the extension of one figure into the body of another and reciprocally, they dictate an original prosody.

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