

DI SEMPLICITÀ E DI BRIVIDO

in collaboration
with Davide Ferri

09.04 – 11.06.2022

FILIPPO DE PISIS

in dialogue with

Richard Aldrich
Michael Berryhill
Luca Bertolo
Paul Housley
Merlin James
Mairead O'hEocha
Maaïke Schoorel

Di semplicità e di brivido consists of a dialogue, suggested in a non-dogmatic and non-philological way, between 25 works by one of the most important painters of the 20th century in Italy, Filippo de Pisis (Ferrara, 1896 – Milan, 1956), and the works of seven international painters – Richard Aldrich (Hampton, 1975), Michael Berryhill (El Paso, 1972), Luca Bertolo (Milan, 1968), Paul Housley (Stalybridge, 1964), Merlin James (Cardiff, 1960), Mairead O'hEocha (Dublin, 1962), Maaïke Schoorel (Santpoort, 1973) – invited to establish an interaction with the works of de Pisis, in order to bring out certain aspects of timeliness in a less well-known portion of his oeuvre, belonging to the period from the 1940s to his death in 1956.

The pieces by de Pisis are presented along two lines of research. On the one hand, the drawings and works on paper, mostly depicting human figures, whose subjects are the bodies of the young men desired and loved by the artist, recorded with immediacy and loose contours, seeming to fade into the surface ("legs, arms, feet, hands, eyes, throbbing," de Pisis himself writes in one of his many poems). On the other, a series of paintings all made in the final phase of his career, from his return to Italy from Paris and his hospitalization at Villa Fiorita. This "later style" (as Edward Said called it) is marked by a leaning towards mixed media (oils, inks, pastels and pencils), the accentuation of an expressionistic and at the same time syncopated character; by the emergence of more liquid lines, marks and signs, assertive and fragmentary; by the tendency to reformulate his language, also by means of gaps, omissions and subtractions, and an immediacy in relation to the subjects; by an apparent naïveté and a certain agitation or quality of outburst; by a lacerated and depleted form, with an even more vivid disjunction between the planes of the image and its proportions, which had always been one of his characteristics. This is the period in which that "bleeding sense of humanity" described in 1947 by Giovanni Comisso, a close friend of the artist, emerges most clearly, "a bleeding sense of humanity with respect to all the collapses of life, to all fragile beauties and tender hopes."

Di semplicità e di brivido – de Pisis himself used these words ("of simplicity and thrill") in 1949 to define the essential constituents of his own recent style of painting – sets out to avoid any theoretical rigidity, instead becoming a sort of score in which de Pisis offsets the invited artists, and vice versa. The dialogue can of course unfold in faint recurrences of subject, but it develops above all from an idea of impulsive, automatic and at the same time apparently unresolved, contrasted and "provisional" figuration, aspects that were always at the center of de Pisis' later style, and of some of the most significant research conducted on his painting in the present.

Di semplicità e di brivido is organized by P420 in collaboration with Davide Ferri and the Associazione per Filippo de Pisis of Milan.

P420

Via Azzo Gardino 9, 40122 Bologna (IT)
info@p420.it / www.p420.it

DI SEMPLICITÀ E DI BRIVIDO

by Davide Ferri

The exhibition *Di semplicità e di brivido* features a series of paintings by Filippo De Pisis, alternating with the works of a number of artists active today, and it has a long story behind it. In recent years, Alessandro Pasotti and Fabrizio Padovani have selected and gathered various pieces by De Pisis, driven by a shared passion that has lasted for many years. They have done this by following precise guidelines, mostly in relation to the production of the final phase of the artist's career, after his return to Italy from Paris. The title of the exhibition borrows words (meaning simplicity and excitement, ed.) used by De Pisis himself in 1949 to describe the essential content of his most recent style of painting.

The later De Pisis, then. It is hard to say what happens to artists in the final phase of their careers, especially when they have previously reached an apex, the vigor of mature work, as in the case of De Pisis. Thinking of this, I realize that the later novels of certain authors I love – *Ravelstein* by Saul Bellow, *Nemesis* by Philip Roth, *Dubin's Lives* by Bernard Malamud – which I feel are masterpieces, are seen by others as minor works, liquidated at best with the adjective "moving" to underline the "extreme" effort of the writer in the last portion of his life. Plenty of literature exists on the final periods of artists and writers, and among the most beautiful examples known to me there are the thoughts of John Updike (published in Italy in the anthology *Armoniose bugie. Saggi 1959 – 2007*, Big Sur, 2020): "Yet, at least for this aging reader, works written late in a writer's life retain a fascination. They exist, as do last words, where life edges into death, and perhaps have something uncanny to tell us."

If the mature phase of De Pisis coincides with his years in Paris, the impression is that what happens after his definitive return to Italy is a sort of "hangover," a premonition of a subsequent, thrilling phase, with a zigzag, winding character, at least if we are to judge by the quantity of cities and places he experienced or spent time in for short periods: Milan, Venice, Rimini, Cortina, and finally Brugherio, in the rest home Villa Fiorita. Yet in spite of this apparent restlessness, the last years of De Pisis seem to be marked by a sort of overflowing voracity. In a very beautiful book by Giovanni Comisso, *Mio sodalizio con De Pisis*, in which the great Venetian writer narrates his long friendship with De Pisis, we find letters written by the artist after 1940, where a phrase returns, shot through with disquiet but pronounced when faced by different things and places: "Here too there is something beautiful."

And the painting? What happens to the painting? For an artist of our time, what can make De Pisis' final phase so fascinating? According to Luca Bertolo, one of the artists invited to take part in this exhibition (he will forgive me if I mention him without calling on him, and in an inexact way), the painting loses its conceptual basis and veers in an almost uncontrolled way towards a feverish desire to take possession of things and reality. And while it is true that De Pisis seems to have never operated outside his outbursts of feverish ardor – in 1935, for example, there is the famous fish episode, reported by Comisso, in which De Pisis pounces on a bundle of rotting fish glimpsed next to a trash can, takes it home and immediately paints it after setting it on the windowsill – the things he paints in that later period, though depicted in their moment of maximum vigor, seem to contain a premonition of perishability, under the threat of heavy, leaden skies.

Furthermore, a breakdown and weakening of the structural syntax that was the basis of the painting of the 1920s and 1930s seem to correspond to the heightening of this feverish state, with new qualities in the work: a less controlled relationship (in terms of contrasts) between the planes of the image; a simplification of the background that shifts towards a spreading monochrome; the progressive disappearance of refractions inside the image (characterized in many works from the past by the presence of paintings in the painting, mirrors, windows, etc.); the preference for mixed media (oil, ink, pastels, pencils); the accentuation of an expressionist and at the same time synco-pated character of the painting; the appearance of marks, signs

and features that are more liquid, assertive and fragmentary at the same time; the tendency to reformulate his language, also by means of gaps and subtractions. The title of the exhibition speaks of simplicity and excitement, alluding precisely to the immediacy in relation to the subjects, the apparent naïveté, a certain agitation and release, a lacerated and depleted form.

Di semplicità e di brivido, in substance, identifies the possibility of two threads that intertwine through dialogue – a free dialogue that develops in a way that is not dogmatic, not philosophical – with the seven artists invited to act in counterpoint with the works of De Pisis on display: on the one hand, the drawings and works mostly on paper whose subject is the figure, bodies of young men desired and loved by the artist, recorded with immediacy and faint contours, which seem to recede into the surface ("legs, arms, feet, hands, mouths, eyes, pulse," De Pisis writes in one of his poems); on the other, a series of paintings that embody the "later style" of the artist.

There are clearly a number of inevitably recurring subjects, and it could not be otherwise, though they are carefully measured. The small marks and brushstrokes that Maaïke Schoorel places on a dense, vibrant monochrome background, like outbursts of a diaphanous, deep landscape, can be associated with flowers. And the flowers of Mairead O'hEocha, freely inspired by the 19th-century imagery of tulips depicted by Philip Reinagle, stand out in the very foreground (a trait of De Pisis) against a leaden sky of volatile, thick and multidirectional brushstrokes (another characteristic of De Pisis).

The idea of a straightforward frontal approach corresponding to a desire to make the experience of the base tactile and gripping also underpins the work of Paul Housley, perhaps the most DePisian artist in the show: not so much due to the recurring subject (but why not think of his jar of brushes as a flower vase?), as due to a veiled naïveté and the rugged surfaces that are one of the typical features of his work. Michael Berryhill's oeuvre is also marked by a very close foreground, where the main figures seem to expand, stretch and adapt to the surface to occupy all the available space, at the center of an incongruous landscape – of forms only vaguely traceable to reality, with incoherent and sudden ignitions – which always seems to take on the guise of a sort of theatrical proscenium.

The work by Richard Aldrich is the least figurative of those on view, with paintings in which the figure seems to be an incidental presence, a freeze-frame of free brushstrokes and marks, not premeditated, of a movement that incessantly combines full and empty portions. In this sense, it is precisely the ability to entrust the image to gaps and to suspend it in a provisional state that can establish a dialogue with the later De Pisis. Stylistic variety, on the other hand, is one of the aspects of the poetics of Merlin James. His erratic shifts, as in the paintings exhibited, can touch on various genres of painting: a classic seascape; a nude, whose brash presence implies conflicting forces because the body of the depicted youth disarms the observer while at the same time seeming to obey the compositional logic of the painting, its arrangement of vertical and horizontal lines; a small landscape that triggers a lyrical dialogue between more forceful touches in the foreground (especially the treelike spot that gives the work its title) and fainter ones on the horizon, which seem to fade into the background, becoming breathless like certain brushstrokes of De Pisis.

The painting by Luca Bertolo, finally, is a self-portrait where the painter depicts himself in the nude, supporting his head with one hand (perhaps separating himself from the thoughts in his head, while a hand-to-hand combat ensues with the painting). The scene takes place in a deeply fragmented pictorial space (a painted frame, the hint of an open curtain, and again the frame of the mirror in front of the painter as he works). The figures, without contours, seem to be defined by brushstrokes that wander on the surface like dust, condensing in the body at the center of the image, and then swarming into the landscape through the open window of the studio.

FILIPPO DE PISIS

by Merlin James

A few artists scattered across the globe seem to have found a similar language in the 1920s and '30s – de Pisis in Italy, Jules Pascin in France, John Marin in America and Armando Reverón in Valenzuela. And others tapped into that same magic at one moment or another (David Jones, Maurice Utrillo...). Of course they are all coming from Impressionism, but losing its optical objectivity in an emotive poetry. For them, visual apprehension of the world involves not just just sense but sentiment. One might even want to say, spirit.

De Pisis paintings can seem slight, but often the longer you look the stronger they get. Or the more unapologetic their slightness becomes. The thinness and frailty is of the essence. The empty space between the fleeting or scrubby marks and dabs lets in lightness and air. Everything's tremulous, but there's a roughness too. The work is not precious. There is something sour and acrid that qualifies sweetness, a stormy light and a refusal of elegant calligraphy (compare the decorative style of the Dufy brothers, for example). De Pisis mixes pain and profundity into the pleasure and poignancy of ordinary things, of clichés. Clouds, petals, butterflies, shells, perfume bottles, sails on the sea, scaly fishes, liquid and light in a glass, figures in the distance... His objects are generic, but have an edge. His black is usually thin and inky; his white is thick impasto. Colours are few and often pale, losely flooding into voids, but always leaving some vacuum. The distant horizon is simultaneous with the foreground, and everything is at once on the surface and hanging in space, a matter of meager flecks and scumbles and fragments. One does not get a strong sense of real, specific things being observed and recorded. Rather they are suggested or summoned up through notion and notation. Yet there is the feeling that reality has somehow impressed itself directly onto the picture plane, leaving an imprint that is all the more believable for being imperfect. Or, indeed, there is some compression together, some compounding, of mind and matter.

WITH GRACELESS GRACE (DE PISIS)

by Luca Bertolo

"I have found a universal rule - writes Baldassare Castiglione – and that is to avoid any kind of affectation; and (to coin a new word, perhaps), to practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura* (nonchalance), so as to conceal all art and make whatever one does or says seem effortless and almost unpremeditated [...] From this, I believe, grace derives."¹

Filippo de Pisis was the most extreme among the Italian painters of his generation that explored the characteristic of "gracelessness." We can imagine positioning his work somewhere between El Greco and Bad Painting. In this quick history of *sprezzatura* (totally idiosyncratic and lacking in any scientific basis), after Van Gogh we can at least indicate Munch, the German Expressionists, the Fauves and many of the Futurists and Cubists: they all had to coarsen their approach in order to meet their needs of expression. While in the aftermath of history's biggest bloodbath a great yearning for neoclassicism, a return to order and metaphysics was making the rounds, as is understandable, there were others who did not shun more brutal things: but while Grosz or Dix depicted the miserable, the mutilated, the murderous capitalists who cashed in on catastrophe, De Pisis was painting flowers, books, seashells. He painted fish. The harshness of his painting lies entirely in the tracing of thick black strokes to which the marks of color cling. Over the years the touch becomes increasingly rapid, terse and harsh, a inimitable graphic effect that reflects a "condition of simultaneous despair and happiness."²

I observe the petals of a flower, the edges of buildings, the features of a face: beyond or prior to these things I see (sense) a brush discharging paint. Like a rifle. The third dimension, already parodied in the paradoxical close-ups of the seascapes, deflates and flattens. Everything happens on the surface: intellectual borderland³, space of sensuality. I see the smudging of oil paint. Signs and marks have an ambiguous nature: they cover the canvas, and at the same time they bring out its pattern (the skin). The word *dirty* won't stop swirling in my head: "said of an object (or the surface of an object) whose purity has been visibly altered by foreign substances; of a place or a setting that is covered by or scattered with refuse, trash, objects or materials that soil or deface." For our painter, color – *that given color* – is of little interest, except as a way of triggering an extra-tonal device. The color fields draw back, intimidated by the contours, or they even evaporate, leaving behind grisaille hints of a glimpsed world. Everything quivers. The (many) masterpieces of De Pisis are incomparably "casual" by virtue of this structure-drawing, which gracelessly captures the world in a moment of grace.

De Pisis count, De Pisis gay, De Pisis with parrot. De Pisis Saint Sebastian, contemporary De Pisis. De Pisis mussels, De Pisis bouquet. De Pisis twisted, De Pisis straight. De Pisis wizard. De Pisis lad. De Pisis Mon Dieu.⁴

1 *Il Cortegiano* (The Book of the Courtier), first edition 1528.

2 Francesco Arcangeli

3 Between the *there* of the representation and the *here* of the object-painting.

4 Mon Dieu, mon Dieu, / Mon Dieu! Laissez-le moi / Encore un peu, mon amoureux... / Un jour, deux jours, / Huit jours! Laissez-le moi / Encore un peu à moi! / Le temps de s'adorer / De se le dir'... Le temps / De s'fabriquer des souvenirs... From the song *Mon Dieu* sung by Edith Piaf and written by Charles Dumont.