

LIKE IN A FABLE
Pierre Casè, Maggia, Ticino

A creative documentary by René Pandis and Thomas Radlwimmer
Switzerland/Germany 2016, 89 minutes.

In spring 2014, the Epper Museum of Ascona hosted Pierre Casè's exhibition *Ritorno alle origini* (Back to the Origins). The Ticino artist's first personal exhibition had also been presented in the same town on Lake Maggiore in 1964. And so, with his return to Ascona, the fifty-year artistic career of one of the most firmly established protagonists of contemporary Swiss painting came full circle. For a long time and giving proof of considerable foresight, Casè also held important administrative posts as, for example, President of the Swiss Painters, Sculptors and Architects Association, Artistic Director of the Pinacoteca Casa Rusca in Locarno and committee member of various foundations. Then, in 2000, a heart attack and serious stroke put a sudden end to this phase in his life and, after a long convalescence, Casè resolved to concentrate all his energy on his artistic work.

Pierre Casè's work cannot be separated from his roots. Born in Locarno, since childhood he has nonetheless had close ties with Vallemaggia, his grandparents' home. This breath-taking valley, set in the Lepontine Alps, from which the Maggia River flows down, at times placidly and at others impetuously, into the waters of Lake Maggiore, becomes his heartland, the landscape of his soul and the source of his artistic inspiration.

In a world sworn to absolute globalisation, Pierre Casè emerges as an anachronistic figure, a radical antithesis. Being an artist, he lives in symbiosis with the central theme of his work, in an apparently nostalgic bond with "his" Ticino, "his" Valmaggia, for which a sense of regret for the past often transpires. At the same time, he is the one who creates his Ticino, a meta-Ticino possessing more convergences with the dreamlines of Australian Aborigine mythology than with the highly publicized itineraries of Switzerland's "Sonnenstube" ("sunlit lounge").

Hermann Hesse certainly wasn't the first to observe that Ticino possesses a historical and cultural substance that is far more interesting than the trite image conveyed by the tourist ads. Numerous prose writers and poets have given minute descriptions of the drastic changes that have led a poor, rural, archaic Alpine region towards furious economic development. Only a few decades ago, the daily life of many inhabitants in Ticino was a struggle for survival, marked by dogged cohabitation with the often adverse forces of Nature, accompanied by the exile suffered by those who moved away to look for work far from their homes. Outside the centres of Bellinzona, Locarno and Lugano, people led a life, as Plinio Martini writes: „at the limits of human resistance“.

Casè is well aware of the fate Ticino shares with many other mountainous regions of the Old World. He himself grew up in modest circumstances and personal tragedies have weighed heavily on his life. At the age of eight, his father, a fire-fighter in Locarno, died in a forest fire. His mother was obliged to work her fingers to the bone to support the children on her own. Angelo, his elder brother, had the opportunity to study and become a teacher but there

wasn't enough money for Pierre. Since he could not enrol at the Brera Academy in Milan and there were no other art schools nearer, he was forced to become a self-taught artist and get by working as an ice-cream maker, hot-chestnut-man and window dresser. Angelo supported him as far as he could, obtaining materials and art books for him.

After his studies in pedagogy, Angelo Casè (1936-2005) gained some fame – even across the border - as a poet and prose writer and was an important point of reference for Pierre. In both men there is a vital bond with their territory and both use a language of imagination that is very down-to-earth and often imbued with suffering. Over the course of the years and at various stages of their work, the Casè brothers collaborated with one another regularly and prolifically, as is demonstrated by the publications, special editions, illustrations and themes they worked on together.

Then came the eighties. Tormented by existential doubts, Pierre Casè decided to move to Vallemaggia with the intention of reconnecting to his origins through a symbolic return to the maternal womb. He wanted to investigate and live close to the inhabitants of the valley and the mountains, exploring their living conditions in those scraps of land still untouched or already occupied by settlements, those communities that struggle with the forces of a not always benign Nature and the challenges of modern life: the great game of humankind, the environment and history. Through his images, Casè conveys both the complexity of the world and his most intimate sentiments, together with a clear-sighted analysis of reality.

In this "expedition" into the meta-history of the Vallemaggia microcosm, the distance between the human and natural universes is reduced to the point of becoming almost invisible. In 1987 Casè gathers together the main pillars of his work as a reporter, artist and native craftsman of the place into a sort of personal manifesto:

- «**The valley**, or on physical freedom »
- «**The river**, or on psychic freedom»
- «**Rural architecture**, or on the simplicity and dignity of things »
- « **The reliquiae of walls**, almost an altar of rural civilization »
- « **The marks of time**, or symbols of the "poor fellows".

Pierre Casè is a messenger of the invisible or barely visible. His eyes penetrate the obstinate yet fragile being of the mountain folk and their hard daily life, conveying them to us in the form of a symbolic alphabet, a new artistic writing. This is the raw material of a report on being that is both intimate and outside. Many of his cycles of work bear witness to Pierre Casè's approach to some of his favourite themes.

Reliquiae for ancient walls: a study of the household and ancient walls of Vallemaggia, engravings, children's drawings and inscriptions on stone and plaster, bearing witness to a daily life now long gone.

The marks of time: marks of human intelligence and popular beliefs that merge with Nature, silent witnesses for those who follow, a timeless warning in the form of man-made objects.

Blacknesses: Casè's fight against forces of darkness «*emerging from my own personal Apocalypse. Black powders, sands, graphite, soot, tar, spread and*

modelled with the help of fire, right to the extremes of an almost alchemical, as well as pictorial, language.

Archaic atmospheres: a dialectical clash with the landscape surrounding the artist, a conflagration of matter, form, intelligence and soul reaching the most subtle levels of perception, creative substance of an evocative intensity equal to that of pre-historical cave painting.

Finishing with *Whitenesses*: return to the origins and therefore the highpoint – and, we might say, retrospective interpretation – of the themes previously outlined, just as the sum of all colours yields the colour white...

Whitenesses also corresponds to the moment when our movie camera was allowed into Casè's studio, the place where this artist-craftsman-chemist transforms the matter available to him. Similarly to his cousins, the *arte povera* artists, he acts more as a builder of pictures than a painter. Rusty barbed wire, hand-forged nails, smoking tar, glue, plaster, dust coloured with sand, clay, pebbles, gneiss and granite from Vallemaggia, beeswax, fire, ash... Our thoughts can hardly fail to stray to the volcanic furnaces of Hephaestus!

...Or a variation of shamanism in Ticino. Essentially, our film about Pierre Casè deals with "transformation". The transformation of raw matter into art, and therefore with art as the transcendent expression of a parallel universe of Ticino, the vision of the artist who, like a shaman, creates channels of communication between here and now and the world beyond.

And this is how the shaman is connected to his power animal or animal guide, those that have helped, nurtured and accompanied humankind since time immemorial. Casè's latest cycle of work is dedicated to a *Bestiary* of Vallemaggia. The horse, the cow, the dog, the fox, the cat, the rabbit, the badger, the goat, the sheep, the pig... and human beings: they all take part in a macabre dance, a ritual in honour of the pact, both pragmatic and mythological, that binds them. We had the good fortune to be in the master's studio during the transition from his white phase, marking the first fifty years of his work as an artist, to his mature phase, in a certain sense picaresque, with the pseudo-medieval bestiary, where the poetic works of his brother, Angelo Casè, become a *pendant*.

One day, Pierre Casè revealed to us that if he could have a wish, it would be a palimpsest of his *opera omnia*, all the work that has accumulated over the years and the decades. By exploring layer after layer, deeper and deeper, gradually unknown, surprising or forgotten things would come up, which would contribute to composing a mirror of Casè's voyage of discovery in that *terra incognita* of his that is Vallemaggia in Ticino. Our film means to give just one glimpse of the artist's „dreamlines“ and bring to light some of the layers that make up his palimpsest. Here, too, Angelo, who died ten years previously, will make his contribution in poetry. Once again the two brothers will act together, albeit posthumously.

The signs, symbols, stories and verses we shall discover, tell of a poor and inhospitable Alpine region which, once opened up, will cease to exist. But it is precisely on this occasion that the artist's laboratory will turn these districts into a universal metaphor, because the men who have stubbornly inhabited them for generations have left us a message: I was here.

Ma sia degno quel poco

Per bere, il solito gesto. Quando si abbia
una vigna nemmeno assai vasta, la radice spaccata
è spaccata per sempre, il rimedio non c'è che ti salvi quell'uva.
C'è solo il ritorno del picchio al suo tronco –
un foro più breve ogni anno che passa, per cavarne ben poco:
ma sia degno quel poco.

Angelo Casè

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