

PIERRE CASÈ'S SOTOPORTEGHI

The places where you spend your life do not always leave their mark on the soul as though they were a destiny. This is a rare event, particularly these days, with time running through them in an ephemeral breath of superficiality. People tend to inhabit the house that is allotted them by choice or by fate (perhaps just eating or sleeping there) but not to live their lives fully there. Consequently the family environment contains the bare necessities that we are not willing to do without at any particular moment. No thoughts of belonging, no substantial ties.

The exact opposite has happened, and is still happening, to Pierre Casè. The fact that time passes for him at the same pace as the ancient town of Valmaggia, in the country behind Lugano, is probably a help in this respect as he is in daily contact with the history passed on by its walls, which welcome and shelter, revealing mysterious stories and returning a judgement on all those who stop to mirror their personal existence in the roughness and adversities of their truth. Treasuring this great privilege, in the 'Eighties he started out from these presences on a series of works entitled *Reliquie di vecchi muri* (Relics of ancient walls): they looked like frescoes torn from the walls to be offered up for sympathetic contemplation. And this was only the start. *Impronte del tempo* (The footprints of time) was the next chapter (the fruit of attentive and precise re-elaboration and of the consequent sedimentation of his previous experience) which occupied him from 1986 to 1990. In this case archaic images appeared on the canvas, conceived by a process of stratification of matter, which contemplated the use of tar and mineral pigments. This process, which also used incisions and marks testifying to the physical memory of time, was applied to the series *Atmosfera arcaiche* (Archaic Atmospheres) completed in 2001. The essential and recurrent element in these latter works is the arch made of tar which becomes a protective dome. It is no coincidence that this is translated into an ideal scalp in the smaller *Teste arcaiche* (Archaic Heads) which, almost as in a film sequence, suggest progressive variations in the cerebral content, as it attempts to reconstitute itself and be born again after suffering a trauma. This is the synthesis of something experienced by the artist in real life.

The same period gave rise to the *Stelae*, a sign of transition between past and present, between the marks left by history and reflections of the contemporary age. They can be seen as banners or wounds to be exhibited as a warning, to be erected as memorials and placed at the borders of the soul's territory. As the years passed, what gained space within him was a feeling of decantation which relegated the role of shadows and veils to second place. The surfaces started to release a testimony marked by lines. The series *Mnemosine*, begun in 2002, arises out of this new impulse, able to recover the importance of memory (a mark that becomes written text), which on the one hand brands the flesh (some works convey the shade of colour of a suffering body) but on the other sparks off an obstinate desire for resurrection.

The exhibition in Spring 2007, hosted by the church of San Stae, was instead entitled *Mnemosine per Venezia* (Mnemonics for Venice). On this occasion the artist from Canton Ticino presented two large panels converging in the direction of the altar on which there were 1,040 "archaic heads", accompanied on the reverse side by the photographs of Marco D'Anna and poems by the artist's brother, Angelo Casè. It was an extraordinary event from a theatrical and emotional point of view. In order to prepare it as well as possible, Casè stayed in Venice for over six months. He thus had the opportunity to visit the city and get to know it thoroughly. Day by day, he explored its most recondite aspects and was particularly fascinated by the *Sotoporteghi*, of which he examined more than two hundred. This is what

generated the idea for the present exhibition which places the seal on a further creative stage in a journey repeatedly tried, tested and perfectly honed (in all senses it must be said) over these latter years. In the structure of the Venetian *Sotoporteghi* he has taken up once again the arch made of solid material which now constitutes a basic feature of his iconography; he has also recovered those historyladen walls which suggest to him the most intimate significance of a truth to be transferred, layer after layer, onto the tormented surfaces of the works. And so twenty opportunities have come into being for reflecting on the traces of lives sheltered in the darkness of passageways where people now hurry through indifferently, with absent gazes, their thoughts dragging after other thoughts following immediately one upon the other, probably occupied by the frivolous and the superficial. Instead, there in these narrow passageways, time has left its mark together with a name (a sort of *cartouche*), alluding to a craft or a particular event. Detached from their environment, these finds achieve the status of relics or stigmata of a past to be revisited and reabsorbed so that identity may be recovered. This is why Pierre Casè's *I misteri del Sotoportego* are part of us like all the mysteries folded into the real and unfortunately often neglected fabric of existence.

On an ideal path between past and present we might, for example, approach the *Sotoportego de l'Indorador*, interpreted by our author as a huge sun rising and expanding towards the observer from the original darkness of matter, despite the barbed wire that attempts in vain to bridle its ecstasy, in other words the golden witness of a perpetual dawn to be kept safe like a precious seed of truth. This is the truth of Antonio Scalabrin who had his workshop in Campo di Santa Marina and from here, at the height of the Sixteen Hundreds, distributed ornamental delights throughout the world. The great arch conserves the sun in a sort of casket. Instead, the *Sotoportego de la Comare* regards the home of a midwife, responsible for helping women to give birth in an age in which birth and death could well come face to face, fatally, at the same instant. Perhaps it is for this reason that Casè has encircled his tabernacle with a blue band of hope to be repeated in the body of the material which levitates and brings blossoms of heartfelt testimony to the surface, almost like ex-votos for a miracle enacted thanks to skill and faith.

More, interesting allusions are to be found in the *Sotoportego del Cristo* which gathers the testimony of a confraternity devoted to recovering drowned bodies and to helping the poor, and a chapel closed by evocative iron bars; people also tell of a crucifix maker having his place of work here. The combined events called forth Casè's creativity to evoke the essential form of a cross in relief bearing a crown of thorns on it, and other explicit manifestations of suffering and devotion. Thus these stories make their way quite naturally into Casè's thoughts and gestures; and thus the walls of Venice and those of Maggia are superimposed on one another to mark times sewn together by memory.

As a contrast comes the *Sotoportego del Diavolo* which opens onto the Corte di Santa Maria Mater Domini. This is a dark little den, perfect for encounters with the devil. The artist's response, centring on rusty tones and on the recurrent arched shape of the composition is dramatically explicit in its emphasis on skulls and images of Lucifer.

In contrast, marble angels are the characteristic of the *Sotoportego de l'Anzolo*, similar in its composition to that of the Christ. In this case, however, the light blue and the smile of the cherub cause the image to conjure up thoughts of sweetness that seem to detach themselves from the recurring and contrasting background of the work. And so the dark cave of night is wedded with light. And with regard to light, there were craftsmen who incorporated it wondrously into their silks, fustians and linens for the merchant glories of the *Serenissima*: we are reminded of this in

the *Sotoportego del Tintor* who distilled shades of scarlet and crimson for the clothes of the nobility. Casè has interpreted this not only by placing the emphasis on his tools and examples of the craft process but especially by making a space at the centre of his work for the idea of a crucible from which the repeated surprise of colour may be extracted.

Curving, arabesque shapes stand out from the welcoming, arched shape of the *Sotoportego del Remer* conceived by the author to recall the work of the oar-maker, particularly valuable in an environment where boats played an essential role in the transportation of people and objects. The rhythm of the forms also gives the sense of movement partially restrained by the chains and the barbed wire which are constantly present (a memory of suffering linked to the places) in this series of stations on which to rest one's eyes and one's thoughts.

One of the most interesting compositions from a chromatic point of view is the *Sotoportego de la Laca* in San Giovanni Evangelista. Here there was once a factory with an accompanying workshop producing wax for export to Europe and the East. The most noble and precious uses of this product included the sealing of dispatches, letters and books as can be seen from the varied range of samples emerging from the all-enfolding magma of an account of contemplation and reflection. This is a prerogative of all the great works made for the occasion by Pierre Casè.

In the *Sotoportego de la Tana* there existed an emporium where hemp was processed to obtain ropes and other cables for warships and merchant vessels. It is no coincidence that a thick white rope knotted to an ancient iron ring stands out from a mesh of shapes and brownish shades, onto which pieces of metal corroded by time are fixed, giving an authentic sense of nostalgia. Still more *Sotoporteghi* are evoked by the gestures of the artist from Canton Ticino who, beneath the same arch, adds more pages that can be carried on infinitely. They regard crafts handed down through the centuries: some lost forever, others still capable of reverberating in the memory and in the waters of the *Serenissima*. In fact the *Sotoportego del Boter* leads us to the barrelmaker, summed up in the complete circle that characterises the work. Instead, to the "carbon" seller in the *Sotoportego* of the same name a white figure has been attributed, who stands out against the obvious black background, carrying with him a modest bundle of charcoal. The importance of the *capeler*, on the other hand, is conveyed by the idea of blue felt protected by the recurring tangle of barbed wire and accompanied by images of modern hats. And what about the *pireità*? This was a tin-worker who mainly produced funnels. And this is why the memory of the *Sotoportego* is evoked by an antique tool piercing the concentric heart (in shades of blue and white) of the fatigue demanded by the profession. For the sculptors of stone and marble, skilled at building interlocking pieces and harmony of shapes, there is the *Sotoportego del Tagiapiera*, to whom Casè renders homage with a play of modules meeting and meshing under the symbols of a craftsman who measures spaces. For a city surrounded by the sea, which also flows through it, the delivery of supplies for day-to-day survival was of great importance: in the *Sotoportego del Megio* in San Giacomo dall'Orio were the public warehouses where they stored the millet whose flour provided the population with bread. A little sickle emerging from the modulated and aggressive encounter of blades, gives the measure of the biting hunger and fatigue of keeping attacks at bay in times marked by repeated famines. The *Sotoportego dei Vedei* instead places bullocks at its centre, not because they offered food but because here there were the headquarters of a party that bore this name. Casè marks the work by placing a white, bovine cranium at the centre, as an allegory.

And so we come to the large, composite surface of the *Sotoportego de Castelforte*:

the symbolic and prominently placed bunch of keys evokes the idea of an ancient manor, whose decaying ruins are being celebrated. In the *Sotoportego de le Colonete*, instead, the rhythmic sequence of wooden stakes alludes to the very destiny of the city, built on pillars driven into the water. The recurrent barbed wire is particularly significant in the interpretation of the *Sotoportego de la Preson* which housed a prison shown by a sky-blue panel that transforms itself into a wall with writing and signs left by the inmates.

We have left the *Sotoportego del Pistor* to last: the workshop of the *pistor* supplied bread, in other words the people's staple need. Casè places this memory safely inside a metal frame, emphasizing the round curve of the oven with the crossed metal bread slices for checking and calibrating the baking. The bread slices are also reminiscent of oars in this city of water which seems to move like a ship in a constant attempt to affirm itself, its dream and its own survival. Yet all the *Sotoporteghi* brought to light and interpreted in this series are both history and dream, nostalgia and witnesses to a time that has never abandoned Venice and which allows a sensitive artist like Pierre Casè to effect a profound restoration of meaning, extracting from it the magic that has never faded.

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