

Tales of the threshold
by valentina tanni

Our reason enlightens the world only to the point that is essential.

All that is paradoxical takes root in the uncertain glow which reigns at its boundaries

(Friedrich Dürrenmatt – *The Pledge*, 1958)

It happens sometimes. Soft as wax, reality bends under the fingers of destiny without rules. Leaving men without logic or morality, defenseless, holding blunted, useless weapons. The escape route, in these cases, is a journey on a one-seater, in the company of solitude. With the specter of madness left behind. But it also happens, sometimes, that as the vehicle draws away from the land of rationality it crosses landscapes and cities, rivers and forests and stops now and then to leave man time to live there.

Man has taken thousands of journeys in every era and in much literature to find himself and reconquer weakened reason and a lost sense. Immersed in an ideal river of swimming pools (*Caravan of Swimmers*), alone in front of a sun-drenched prison wall (*Folsom Prison's Wall*), swallowed by the jungle's dark heart (*Sotto gli Alberi*) or locked into the protective, paranoid womb is his own room (*La via del Latte*). The title of each painting in this exhibition makes a reference to a piece of literature (Conrad, Dürrenmatt, De Lillo, Poe, Dostoyevsky), a film (Kurosawa, Perry, Lynch) and in one case – Johnny Cash – music. Thus the painting reveals a small part of its genesis and declares itself to be the fruit of an evocative mechanism. Far from being a mere illustration the artwork becomes the receptor of a multitude of suggestions in a fascinating attempt to recompose the mental images and emotional atmospheres that each of us seeks as we listen to a story. And we mix them with other ideas, places, stories and dreams within our memory. Rafael Pareja does it by patiently redesigning their shapes and carefully choosing the colors trying to tune in on the deep beats of the experiences that are his reference.

The plot is always different, but it is always the same story: the eternal struggle of reason against the incomprehensible, the monstrous, the irrational. That conflict that Aby Warburg – who throughout his life tried to give order to signs and symbols of human feelings to, albeit temporarily – called “*the tragic tension between the magic instinctive thought and discursive logic.*” People have abandoned the scene, - or simply it is we who don't look – letting the places speak for them. The landscapes, the rooms, the things become the narrators and interpreters of feelings and atmospheres, they vibrate in unison with the emotions they host, scenarios that play their part, sets that cannot remain indifferent. Here the artist reveals a romantic attitude with a Nordic imprint showing us nature that is both hostile and an

accomplice, that is capable of soaking up human feelings like a sponge and also just as capable of being threatening, hostile and heedless of the destinies of the creatures who inhabit her.

But art, we know, is mainly a question of gaze, perspectives, viewpoints. A game in which it is often sufficient to shift the focus to generate new worlds. Even a garden, cultivated and tended with care and dedication can become a huge work of art. So big that it can be viewed from afar, from up in the sky. Perhaps even from the moon. That is the mission of Ellison, hero of Edgar Allan Poe's story *The Domain of Arnheim*, who inherits an immense fortune and decides to invest it in the construction of the supreme artwork, modeling nature itself in his quest for a new earthly paradise. And if for the person who passes through it seems to be a pleasant sequence of meadows and woods, streams and fields, seen from the moon it may take on the appearance of a huge abstract painting. In *L'Arte Vista dalla Luna* Rafael Pareja re-evokes the pullulation of a living organism, the harmonic and balanced irregularity of natural elements, the ambiguous beauty of a carnivorous plant. And once again the landscape is transformed with the breakdown of the whole, the isolation of the details that leads to yet another shift of the gaze. Another focusing that does not make the shapes more recognizable, but pushes the view to dive into the liquid color that comprises it.

All of Pareja's works are terse and essential, a few lines drawn with calculated, merely apparent negligence. He uses a computer to construct his visions, bending the machine into a drawing and coloristic tool, exploiting the precision and transparency of the digital image without yielding to an already too widespread esthetic – that of the artificial, futuristic, mechanic – nor does he worry about astound with perfection and verisimilitude. His language is constructed entirely of the dialectical relationship between splotches of color – a splotch that becomes an aura, a luminous emanation – and the sign. A sign that recalls childhood or primitive language, but takes on the tone of an elegant handwriting and is capable of transforming itself into an incandescent wire, the tungsten filament of a light bulb, always on the verge of breaking to leave us in total darkness. Thus, along with the stories the paintings themselves portray a threshold, a limit. Like the yellow strip of *Folsom Prison's Wall*, that separates the prison from freedom, the past from the future, life from death.