

Francesco Pignatelli — Between the Void and Reality

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‘Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystery.’

— Ludwig Wittgenstein

The Edo-period Confucian scholar Hozumi Ikan tells us that the aesthetic theory embraced by Chikamatsu Monzaemon could be summed up in Chikamatsu’s own words as ‘the membrane between the void and reality.’ According to this theory, the truth of art lies in a mysterious liminal position between the real and unreal, a point where they intersect. Looking at Francesco Pignatelli’s *Reversed City* series, I immediately thought of these words. Here, too, we find an artist who seeks to achieve a new perspective deliberately situated between the void and the real and renders it concrete in his art. Pignatelli shows us how to cross reality’s membrane at will.

Pignatelli has lived in or travelled to photograph many cities. From his hometown, Milan, his wanderings have taken him almost everywhere, to as varied a set of destinations as London, New York, Tokyo, Paris, Berlin, Heidelberg, and even Valencia in Venezuela. He shoots these cityscapes in colour, but presents them to us reversed, as in a negative. The letters on signs and billboards may help to identify the location, but the cities all give off the same scent of the city, within the same world of complementary colours, in the reversed colour image. European, American, and Asian cities all begin to emit the same ‘urban’ scent, to be tied together by a code that signals ‘city’, regardless of where the city is found.

In an era like ours, overflowing with information, simply showing us the city as our eyes would see it is, for the photographer, a meaningless exercise. But when a photographer exploits the distinctive features of the negative and positive images with colour film, to show us, as the true image, the negative image, which any photographer (especially before the age of digital photography) has unconsciously passed by, then we have come into possession of a new, an unknown image.

When images are reversed, scenes embedded in everyday memory take on a new and different aspect. What had been obvious, conventional images of the city are transformed;

they are brimming with glittering colours, like cool, translucent crystal. Coupled with the signs of the city, those colours generate subtle gradations of colour, sometimes more clear and stark, sometimes more complex and detailed. Streets shot in broad daylight may appear as if shot at dusk or in the quiet of the city before dawn. When they were shot becomes difficult to determine. We are drawn into a mysterious world that transcends time.

When images are reversed, neon signs, the signage on stores, graffiti on walls, road signs – all of the various forms of text ignored by retinas habituated to the positive image – are surrounded by unexpected colours, highlighting their presence and adding emphasis to the information they contain. The harmony of the landscape is completely destroyed, yet takes on a powerful symbolism. Even more than the sequence of black and white photographs used to illustrate Andre Breton's *Nadja*, bolstering the role of the image as document, along side the story, colour reversal adds a menacing quality that dominates space and adds presence to the photograph. This could be because the artist, bored with seeing landscapes in their usual light, is playing pranks on his audience. But the new landscapes created by this process open up invisible possibilities, possibilities not remotely visible from a straight perspective.

The city is full of accidental happenings, a space overflowing with anticipation. Turn any corner and an unexpected vista appears: unexpected events are waiting to happen. When a negative reversal filter is applied to the scenes that normally are projected on our retinas, the effect is to show us a new world, constructed in the gap between the real and the void. An invisible beauty that the artist takes voluptuous pleasure in is revealed, in this marginal space.

The *Reversed City* series, itself the starting point for the two subsequent series, *Reversed Renaissance* and *Fragile*, hints at an origin in the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. On that day, Pignatelli was in a forest in the south of Italy. There, realizing that something was wrong, having suddenly received several messages on his cell phone within the course of a few minutes, he immediately returned to his hotel, where his eyes were transfixed by the television images from Ground Zero in New York. When he visited New York shortly afterwards, he had the idea of producing reversed images of the city. The works themselves do no more than hint at that origin; they do not emphasize it. Among them, however, some seem filled with an unresolved tension, suggesting that an event such as the terrorist attacks might form their context. But even if that is part of the deep

motivation behind Pignatelli's works, these images transform catastrophe, suggesting an invigoration and lightness of being. This same tone runs through all of the 'Reversed' series.

Reversed Renaissance

'Reversed' suggests a paradox. The actual Renaissance was, of course, an age of paradoxes. In Western Europe, the tradition of paradox goes back to the ancient Greeks and their art of rhetoric and has continued down to the present day. Throughout the history of literature and philosophy, important figures have produced paradoxical works, but the Renaissance was conquered by a veritable epidemic of paradoxes, a *paradoxia epidemica*.ⁱ In times like those, re-presenting Renaissance paintings in reverse, in an ironic rhetorical context, is a subtle scheme that provides a powerful impetus to our vision. If we see 'Reversed' as a gesture, an act evoking paradox, we see it as generating a series of paradoxes, piling paradox upon paradox.

Consider, for example, the *Annunciation* by Sandro Botticelli. The Virgin Mary recoils as if in consternation at the Angel Gabriel's solemn announcement of her pregnancy. Her boldly twisted pose evokes the *figura serpentina* that became a hallmark of Mannerism, while adding a dynamic quality to her gesture. The dynamism of the pose expresses the fear and anxiety of the moment in which she learns that she is pregnant. Mary's powerful presence at the centre of the boldly spiralled composition makes her the primary focus of the tableau, affecting the image overall.

Now reverse the blacks and whites, transform the brilliant colours into their complementary hues, converting light into shadow. The colours disappear in the shadows, while what had been the denser, darker shades are transformed into light, increasing their transparency and leading us into a time and space that transcends imagination. Gravity is overturned, our sense of light and shadow disordered, our consciousness becomes chaotic. Confusion produces vertigo, but also offers new perspectives on the painting, accompanied by a variety of profound pleasure. The regions rendered transparent by reversal take on a greater clarity. The image seen in this way no longer has the colour gradations to which Academism has accustomed our eyes. What now dances in our field of vision is an unprecedented and uncanny image with a clarity and colouring never seen before.

By drawing the shadows into the light, reversal brings hidden details of this famous painting into the light of day. Conversely, the haloes, whose sacred light is a symbol of holiness, are transformed into shadows that suggest darker depths in the image. The layers of colour and brushwork characteristic of oil painting and fresco are dissected, transformed into eerily vivid shades. From this classical masterpiece, to the surface of which layers have been added over time, emerges a new time and space, enveloped in new and contemporary colours.

When another painting is painted over an existing painting, memories of the past are painted over as well – the layered pigments are filled with memories. The earlier lines and colours are now sealed beneath the painting's surface. When the painting created earlier reappears, for some reason, on the surface, the phenomenon is called *pentimento*. In it we see relics of the painter's hesitations and headaches. In an image converted into a negative, a reversal of itself, we experience the illusion of being able to see through even those traces of the past, as through the eyes of a restorer who is using ultraviolet light to examine the image. The translucency of film allows it to act like x-rays. We can see into the interior and appear to be seeing the traces of the earlier painting. That is, however, only the recreation of the reflected light from the surface of the film, among the converted superflat layers. Here we sense an apt symbol of the facile and lucid quality of modern technology.

Through the power of the centrifugal force derived from the process of rotating the axis to reverse the negative and positive, an unknown force is generated and discharged in a radiating manner, to be amplified as an added value. Can a human being be totally free in front of a painting with a historically established reputation? A group of works like these, purified by the filter of the age sheds the armour of knowledge, strips away the fixed evaluation of them, the preconceived views, and resets our perceptions through a colour scheme that ensures parity. It presents a setting for a new opportunity to stand face to face with a painting.

Forests and Fragility

In the Old Testament, the memory of forests begins with the forest as the paradise from which Adam and Eve are driven when they gain knowledge of good and evil. This Garden of Eden, with its clear, gushing streams, bird song, and blooming flowers, remains a symbol of human happiness. In its depths, shaded by gigantic trees, we find a beguiling space where live a fantastic array of living things. But there, too, lurks the cunning serpent

that will tempt Eve. The forest is a dangerous place; if we wander into its depths and lose our way, our lives may be lost.

In eighteenth-century Britain, mountains covered by forests came to be seen as objects of fear and awe, mysterious magnetic fields that engaged the idea of the sublime. The forest was the threshold at which urban-living humanity encountered nature. While a place where the awe-inspiring power of nature could be found, it was also a place to wrap oneself in nature's gentle embrace, a place of consolation and a place to learn how to cope with life's trials. As it became customary for children of good families in Europe to take the Grand Tour, a practice that vividly recalls Goethe's interpretation of *The Divine Comedy*, the forest also became a place where young people still lacking good sense learned life's lessons. Plunging deeper and deeper into the forest held out the promise of encounters with the unknown. In the age of Romanticism, the forest seen in this way became a powerful stimulus to artists' imaginations.

What gives the forests painted by Max Ernst their peculiarly eerie presence is the way in which the forests are constructed of heavy blocks of paint that seem at first glance to be packed with the surprising traces of a multitude of living creatures in the gaps between trees and flowers that themselves have a rocklike, inorganic quality. The petrified quality of the Ernst's forests, the way in which their darkness seems filled with ghosts and demons, creates images of fearful, prohibited places we dare not enter.

In Pignatelli's photographs, reversal transforms these forest scenes. The dark areas that weigh on us in Ernst's paintings become bursts of light disrupting the forests' gloom. Conversely, the branches, filled with translucent detail, and the shadows of trees begin to be filled with a dread that arouses terror. Here the image once associated with the forest as a special space echoes anew. The forest as the paradise in which Adam and Eve wandered, the forest as a place to discover the sublime, the forest as a place where many terrifying and dangerous things lurk, a place in which to learn life's lessons — Pignatelli has chosen the title *Fragile* for this series on the theme of a cosmos in which all these different shades of meaning are united.

If the forest is taken as a symbol of fragility, it can also be interpreted as an aphorism, a play on the phrase *memento mori*. The act of reversal, inverting negative and positive, reveals the relationships by which surface and depth become a unified whole. It reminds us of de Saussure's discussion of the relationship between the signified and the signifier. If the signified is, for example, the image or concept of a tree, the signifier is the letters or

sounds by which we refer to it. Signifiers are only meaningful as signs whose significance is understood by those who speak the same language but suffice to designate the objects to which they point, to evoke a certain abstract image. Coincidentally, the Japanese word for forest is *mori*, which reminds us of the Latin *memento mori*, a reminder that all things die.

This photographer seems to be trying to create symbols of that relationship. To further transform the world created by reversing colours and captured on photographic printing paper, he crumples them, shrinking them into three-dimensional images, and then spreads them out again. All now seem to be a performance, part of the same story. (That is true of the *Handle with Care* flower series.) Forest and flowers are transformed into objets. By treating them as 'fragile', he seems to bind them to a particular role. But here again, we sense the dynamics of the paradox being applied. Through the decay and destruction of fragile objets he shows us a new world, an ongoing cycle of birth and rebirth.

The menacing presence of the forest suggests an obsession, a premonition of its destruction by some rapidly approaching catastrophe. But this is no imaginary world removed from reality. The destructive power of nature that threatens to obliterate our hopes attacks us at times with a reality more removed from reality than in painting. The forest as a setting in which nature's fury is displayed makes it an object of fear and awe. The forest is also the wilderness, the home of wild things, from which humanity has carved out civilization. But as more and more land is developed and cities and villages spread, nature is being destroyed. While a source of awe, the forest itself is filled with fear, as it too is in the position of being subject to destruction.

The forest, which is both a source of being and creation and the embodiment of our fear of destruction, must regain the gravitas that befits that fear. By adding the word 'fragile' to these images, the photographer reveals the fragility of the existence of nature itself, nature that had been marvellous and menacing. Can we, however, say that this weakness, this fragility, is a weakness and nothing more?

Gianni Vattimo has criticized the 'strong thought' that seeks an absolute source or foundation, proposing instead 'weak thought' (*il pensiero debole*) that sees diversity and difference in a positive light. In the English-speaking world, weak thought has become an influential concept in the world of architecture. Becker has constructed an ontology of art by extracting transience as the object of aesthetics. Transience exists in the background intrinsic to art, and the essence of transience (German: *Fragilität*), whose own defining feature is being easily broken (German: *Zerbrechlichkeit*). Weakness is not simply the

absence of strength. Within one type of weakness he discovers a supple flexibility and diversity and beauty that cannot be generated from constructed strength.

Japanese aesthetics are characterized by their veneration of transience. Nothing symbolizes that aesthetic more than the cherry blossoms. In the spring, the cherry blossoms no sooner burst forth in clouds of pale pink than they are scattered and disappear. Their very transience gives them more presence than any other flower, their blooming announces the start of a new season, and they are seen as having a special purity. The forming and swelling of the buds that point to their blooming are part of a cycle that ends in their disappearance, life advancing toward its end, seen as an image that captures the essential fragility of human life. The ground beneath the cherry trees is a burial ground filled with corpses; there is no way to explain how beautiful the cherry blossoms are. Their beauty lies in the paradox that sheds fresh light on the existence of contradictions, the contradictions they embody. They are a living/dying demonstration of the power of life inherent in fragility.

‘Things may be fragile and easily broken; but, besides that inherent fragility, the fact that they can be broken or destroyed by external forces, there is something solid in them that is never completely destroyed.’ⁱⁱ There is a flexibility concealed within them, a suppleness inherently linked to life itself. This is the fragility to which Pignatelli points us. While darkly hinting at the end of the world as we know it, his works employ an ironical strength, shedding light on our hopes for the future. They are permeated throughout by this ambiguity.

This ambiguous impression of fragility dominates Pignatelli’s *Translation* series, the first of his series in which he has integrated the skilful use of digital technologies throughout. Here the vocabulary is fully analyzed, the letters themselves as signs combined in ranks to assert their individual existence. The letters are shrunk like molecules to compose images, and begin to display the aspect of granules clustered together in a silver halide photograph. Band-like rectangular spaces drawn by strings of monotonic signs, randomly knit together, call to mind the stitches of quilting or tie-dyeing used in traditional Japanese textiles. The letters lose meaning, are turned into objects, like codes. The strings of letters spun together into collages lose collective meaning; the individual letters project their own meanings, reducing their power to communicate. Only their visual presence remains as their rich *raison d’être*.

Letters and words cannot be shared universally in our multicultural, multiethnic world. But when they lose their meaning as language in a work of art and are turned into pure code, then they begin to be clad in a visuality that all can share, as in abstract paintings.

Letters, as analogue forms, are letterpress printed, stimulating, with the texture of the paper, our optic nerves, our fingertips' sense of touch, our brains; when that happens, the complex texture generated by the tactile quality of the paper and the unevenness of the letters printed on it is a fascinating aspect that enhances the of reading. With the spread of computers and digital technologies, however, letters as a medium are losing their physicality; only electronic data, rendered into codes, is running around in superflat strata. These are convenient tools that can link all parts of the world in an instant. But computer and electrical problems, plus the short lives of the medium on which data are stored, implies the risk of extreme transience, of data disappearing in a flash.

The final chapter concerns *Observatory*, the title of this book as well as of Pignatelli's most recent series. The skies presented in them have stars gleaming in the noonday sky, looking like little flowers blooming there, giving an almost Pop feel to the work. Those are, however, the scars left by bullets shot from a rifle. The openings of the support structure, pierced like petals, open in radial form towards the inside. The bullets were shot from the rear, in the direction facing the person who would be standing in front of the painting.

The person viewing this work sees a sky that calls to mind, at first glance, the gates of paradise, while being on the receiving end of an implicitly violent blow.

The artist senses the sky as the border that eternally divides us. The Tower of Babel was built by people who came together to try to draw closer to God, but God's anger lost them their common language and made it impossible for them to remain united. Those who try to approach heaven rouse the anger of God and are cast back down to earth. If heaven is the entrance to a world conceived of as infinite, and is absolutely prohibited to us, the artist is denied the eternal and confined to this earth: he senses constraints and limitations as destiny. Pignatelli, recognizing dazzling advances in science, reflects its afterglow in his work — while at the same time focusing his thinking on the human spirit, what is left after scientific progress has carved us down.

Pignatelli also fills his work with the dynamic effects of the ambivalence his work generates. In the front and back of his works, crosscutting to another, unknown terrain from the area visible to the eye, arriving in an unforeseeable new world from the world of the invisible — in those profundities he discovers the potential within the creative enigma.

ⁱ Rosalie Little Colie, *Paradoxia Epidemica: The Renaissance Tradition of Paradox*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966).

ⁱⁱ Matsuoka Seigo, *Furajairu yowasa kara no shuppatsu* (Fragile: Setting off from weakness). (Tokyo: Chikuma Gakugei Bunko, 2005).