

Francesco Pignatelli — (In)visible

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Standing in front of *Reversed Cities* a few years ago, whoever was already familiar with Francesco Pignatelli's work would have felt a sensation of disorientation, albeit an invigorating one. With this series — and the subsequent *Reversed Renaissance* — the artist suddenly abandoned the rigour of black and white he had favoured hitherto for an almost violent series of colours, the positive suspension of reality for the printing of the view in a photographic negative, the landscape of the body for a symbolic urban and cultural body, and the contemporary world for that of the past. And, by so doing, he radically changed the relationship between photography and painting.

Then *Translations* arrived and, just as suddenly, a beacon appeared to cast light on the coherence of his artistic career, constituting the tessera that revealed the overall design and demonstrating how the paths he had followed previously represented a disruptive but continuous evolution rather than a break with the past.

This is because for almost twenty years now Pignatelli has been simply seeking a synthesis. He performs the cognitive act of light, approaching the essence of objects and concepts in a specific order. In order to reach this, he adopts the procedure of decomposition, in search of an origin, an imaginary common denominator allowing him to reconstruct the substance — of the world, the imagination or art — with new visibility. With subtle interventions, on each occasion he renews the capacity to convey meaning that has been devitalized by habit and accumulation. Even more than in its manifestations, it is in this quest that his journey into the way we see things takes place: this originates from the city's skin, asphalt, in order to pass through the creativity in human gestures — a person's private vision behind an artistic masterpiece — and arrive at the discipline of the arts and the categories of thought. This occurs through a process of methodical subtraction, according to the principle of the greatest efficiency deriving from harmony of the gesture and the mind, and which invariably makes him describe his art as 'simple'.

In the *Reversed* series, the effect is obtained through the reversal of the image's light, producing what is technically its opposite, because it involves the omission of the stage

during which the film, after it has been developed, returns to resemble the real world. This double negative is sufficient to eliminate our addiction to convention, encouraging us to take a second look: it creates an antithesis, as Kyoko Jimbo has written,¹ 'questioning the status of a painting as a true image'.

In *Translations* the artist takes his investigation of the physical dimension further. Here the light is not shown — and exalted — in a reversal, but is actually divided in the complexity of its numerical information: for the first time, in fact, Pignatelli took a break from analogue photography in order to work not in, but rather on its digital equivalent, starting from the way in which light can be represented by a code. It might be more correct to say that he took a break from photography as such — evidently he found this limiting before he began to experiment with three-dimensionality in *Fragile*, *Handle with Care* and *Homeless* — because the stress in *Translations* is placed on the process, on language in the broadest sense.

Incidentally, the photographs from which the code is extracted are not even by Pignatelli, and it does not matter at all because, in this case, they are just a starting-point. They are pixels and, as such, are neutral. Originally they portrayed the icons that the artist associates with the eighteen principles explored in the project: who these icons are and just why they embody the categories that are being investigated may of importance in order to understand the person, but it doesn't count at all for the work. In their transposition into the hexadecimal system, these images break up into the elementary particles of a language that is universal and egalitarian because everyone can understand and reconstruct it without any limits. It is, in other words, a system of signs that is both identical to and the opposite of that of hieroglyphics, so that the artist creates a visual message in writing instead of writing in a visual message.

The conversion into a code is, however, only the first step: if it finished here it would be, after all, just an exercise in style. In the past Pignatelli has used light (firstly natural, then reversed) in order to restore meaning, and here — this is where the continuity lies — takes the operation to its conclusion: from light itself, he generates a global vocabulary, a sort of digital Esperanto, and it is on this basis that he really starts his creative process. The 'translation' in the title does not refer to the splitting up of the image into the value of its

pixels — this would be like trying to translate a novel into another language simply by putting the equivalents of each word of the original text one after the other — but rather to the use that he makes of this vocabulary in order to convey a concept, while remaining faithful to it. This is because translating means saying the same thing in other words and it is with the hexadecimal words of the language of light that Pignatelli has chosen to express the concepts of *Translations*.

The digital process is the linguistic tool, not a point of arrival. In short, if knowledge is acquired by means of language, Pignatelli has assimilated a new one — belonging to the present, it has become universal — and has reinvented it in order to reveal the significance of the principles from which the titles of the works in the series are derived. The linear continuity of the code is a device that he immediately abandons, moulding it into an image again: it is another image that is terse, intimate and abstract, and it contains the memory of the original, which is latent yet unrecognizable. The most important aspect — if it is really necessary to consider *Translations* from a digital point of view — is not so much the use of the colour classification of the pixels, but rather the application of Lawrence Lessig's concept of remix² (this had, in fact, already been tried out in the *Reversed* series), which regards the intentional use of existing materials as the most outstanding language form of the digital generation.

Pignatelli allows the code itself to develop with the combination of its extremes — black and white, or, in the hexadecimal colour code, #FFFFFF and #000000 — by folding them, reversing them, superimposing them, interrupting them and turning them into basic geometrical forms. Using the alphanumeric strings, he reserves the right to poetic licence, as if he were writing verse (probably a haiku: flashes of incisive meaning, with no embellishments). Thus, for example, peace becomes the harmony of opposites and war their chaotic clashing, mystery the point where two ideas intersect, love a continuous path, hope a combination of balance and centrality, and so on.

Or perhaps we should be talking about using our imagination because the observer's subjectivity is of vital importance in these works. The artist does not impose his own truth on them, but rather his personal vision that gives urgency to a dialogue — first and foremost with oneself and one's own perceptions. In this sense, *Translations* is perhaps

the most open of the mental spaces Pignatelli has created during his career because this series grants observers the right to digress, encouraging — practically compelling — them to stop, suspend judgment, put aside concepts and listen. Thus his work that is most apparently cerebral ends up by being — once again — in the first instance visceral: the geometries that the code is adapted to and which it represents make it immediate, instinctive and extremely direct in the invisible exchange of ideas that is set up with those looking at it. It is true that reason intervenes — but a moment later, when the questions as to what love, maternity, sacrifice, justice and so on mean for each of us have crept into our minds almost imperceptibly, but insistently.

Translations is concerned with a sense of emotional orientation, steering a course through a sea of human dimensions. It is expressed in an unusual language, but, like every image, it speaks to us. Immediately after finishing this work, Pignatelli came full circle by returning to analogue photography: the skies violently rent apart by gunshots in the very recent *Osservatorio* (*Observatory*) are a reminder that the existential elements brought into play have a limit that it is better not to challenge. It gives a warning: this is the sky, this is the light — it is up to here, but no further, that the visible or what we may know extends. Beyond this there is something else and each of us must decide what this is.

Impetuous and fantastic, the skies in *Osservatorio* seem to be the ethereal response to the worldly — albeit dreamlike — expanse of woods in *Fragile*: starting another path, they complete it by impressing a personal vision on the collective unconscious that for centuries has grown up around the first dualistic system of the universe.

There are practically no languages in the world in which the word ‘sky’ does not indicate both a physical space and a spiritual phenomenon: in all cultures, both past and present, the sky is what surrounds our planet, comprising also outer space, with its myriads of stars and cosmic events, but it is, in addition, the place where the gods dwell, to which the souls ascend and where our fate is decided. Trees extend their branches towards it, while their roots seek nourishment in the earth — there is an obvious parallel with the form of the human body here. In dictionaries, various meanings are attributed to ‘earth’, ranging from the planet where we live and the material making up its surface to a metaphor for the life

cycle of every creature, including fertility, the beginning of life, transformation and decline, and bodily death.

The sky and the earth comprise and contrast the concepts of eternity and mortality: Pignatelli's language of photographic light is no exception to this ethical perspective, although it focuses, in particular, on the point of intersection with photography — the borderline of the visible. In this sense, the modalities chosen for the representation are decisive. The woods in *Fragile* are reversed: since they are worldly manifestations, in the artist's logic they belong to the sphere of what we can no longer observe in our habitual way, but, in order to be perceived again, they need to reawaken our capacity for looking. Here the technique of reversal exalts the symbolic significance of the place: as in fairy tales, the woods call out to us, and they do it in an even more powerful manner thanks to the bright paths that the negative engraves in the shadows. At the same time it is frightening because the more dense and luxuriant it is, the more it dazzles and conceals, giving it a threatening appearance. The mechanism of attraction and repulsion is based on the unknown, on what cannot be grasped or can only be sensed because, in its presence, man is blind.

The same effect of a barrier literally erected to safeguard mystery — or, at least, the mystery we think exists — emerges from the dramatic views of the sky in *Osservatorio*, which are, however, rendered in positive because the sky neither absorbs nor reflects the light: it is the light. Billowing with clouds and colours that change in a very short space of time, they are conceived — despite their infinite depth — as a dramatic screen precluding us from any hypothesis of truth. They demand to be challenged, and they react by entering into turmoil: they cry out in their fury, as if they were about to explode like a weapon in order to pierce a surface that doesn't exist, except in our imagination.

The visible, in other words, marks the vertical confines of knowledge; the sky and the earth are the boundaries of the largest possible shot, the limits of what may be probed. Above and below the mind can wander — that is, in the after-world, however this may be interpreted — but not the eye, least of all the photographic one: being reminded of this is, for Pignatelli, a note of humility. What we believe without seeing is faith, whether religious or secular; but, as far as we know, no dogma is better than another, because the ideal

cannot be perceptible. Thus these images counter human pride — the most serious of the deadly sins in the Christian tradition — with the efficacy of healthy fear: the atavistic mystery of the woods and the fiery reproach that rends the skies, giving visibility to the bonds imposed on human beings.

Allow me to draw a conclusion from all this: if one were to follow the artist in his reversal of perspective, one would be inclined to say that, with this marking out of boundaries, there is no intention of entering into the usual logic of the supposed vacuity of worldly values. These photos of the earth and the sky could not, in fact, be further from the symbolism of *Vanitas* paintings, which were conceived with this moralistic message. However, these works do not allude to transience or death; on the contrary, they are extremely vital. Pignatelli seems to be more interested in the inside of boundaries rather than the outside: the real or reverential fear of the unknown, with the corollary that one should give it a wide berth, could be turned into a principle, by virtue of which what materializes, both above and below, is, rather than an insurmountable barrier, a call to concentrate — more and better — on life, which advances in the embrace of extremes.

An almost overbearing feature of the nature portrayed, it is this vitality that leads us to the second level of interpretation. In both works, the account emerging from the images acquires an impendent voice — this distances itself from ethical dualism, stressing the energy of the elements — through the way they are treated: the handling of the photographic paper that has further transformed the woods in *+Fragile* and the creation of bullet holes in *Osservatorio*.

With the total absence of human beings — solitude that immerses itself even more in the confrontation with oneself, with the child ego projected into the fairy tale — and amidst the intricate embellishments of the scene, the folds in the paper not only multiply the lights, but they also convey the movement and vivacity that the photograph has crystallized. They animate the branches and interact with the tree, the symbol of the cycle of seasons, of death and resurrection: they twist it, burdening it with an unbearable weight that calls for liberation. At the other end of the universe, shots from the sky create other forms, small sculptures made of releases: they resemble flowers — the ‘flowers of fire’ in the film *Hana-bi*, maybe, with their moral message of rebirth³ — or stars. Crinkled paper, the irregular firmament. Sudden and direct tensions that, in Pignatelli’s design, are the spark of all creative processes: an accumulation of individual energy that, as it frees itself, leaves its

indelible mark on the substance of the universe and changes, with a minimal gesture, the course of life. Thus between the sky and the earth streaks of light are formed, fleeting and unexpected: this is the confused and surprising harmonious sum of the personalities that open up in an attempt to express themselves.

The universe, with its moral boundaries and the tireless ferment that it comprises, is the archetype of creation. According to the astrophysicist Margherita Hack, we are all composed of its matter. 'The calcium, magnesium and silicon forming our bodies have been created in huge stars that end their lives with an immense explosion.' Pignatelli is fascinated by this statement. Composing, taking photos, playing an instrument or giving birth are acts of creation, bursts of energy hurled against the unknown infinity, within the limits of the only camera shot allowed. They are, however, both individual and universal because, with the matrix of its power, human beings already have this infinity within themselves.

¹ Kyoko Jimbo, Francesco Pignatelli — *Reversed Universe* (2006)

² Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, Penguin Press, New York, 2008.

³ *Hana-bi* (released as *Fireworks* in North America), by the Japanese director Takeshi Kitano, 1997.

¹ Kyoko Jimbo, 'Francesco Pignatelli — *Reversed Universe*' in *Reversed Renaissance*, catalogue of the exhibition presented by Galleria Fotografia Italiana, Milan, on the occasion of MiArt 2005 (<http://admin.nicolettarusconi.com/reversed-renaissance/>)

² Lawrence Lessig, *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, Penguin Press, New York, 2008.

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