

**“I am a humble servant in the vineyard of art”
Conversation between Giorgio Bonomi
and Pino Pinelli**

curated by LARA CACCIA

G. B. – Now that you are considered a Milanese artist since you have conducted all of your career in Milan and (as they say) *nemo propheta in patria*, over your long career you have never done much in southern Italy where now seems that they are presently rediscovering your work there. For example, recently, two important exhibitions were staged in Sicily, Agrigento and Catania (your hometown); along with this important display at the MARCA, one of the most important public museums (together with the MADRE in Naples) in southern Italy and certainly the most important one in Calabria. What do you think is the reason behind it, behind this “homecoming”?

P. P. – There’s no exact explanation. Both the exhibition in Agrigento and the proposal I received from the director of MARCA, had been requested of me well in advance. To tell the truth, in Calabria, apart from the display you curated a few years ago in Vibo Valentia, there haven’t been many important events, there haven’t been other opportunities. I am very pleased about this invitation by the MARCA and I’m happy about returning to Calabria also because it’s the land of my maternal grandmother and so, in some way, it’s a tribute that I’m mentally making to my grandmother Lucrezia.

G. B. – Well, let’s speak for a while about your figure as an artist. You haven’t created very many paintings on canvas, namely “traditional” paintings, except for a few works when you were very young; but you have especially conducted three-dimensional work. After “breaking” painting, your works seem more like wall sculptures, I mean the fragmentation is “disseminated” on the wall; but you continue to define yourself as a “painter”, but even “analytical”. What is the reason for this? Don’t you consider it to

be somewhat of a contradiction?

P. P. – It's a matter of attitude. My attitude is that of a painter, I've never considered myself a sculptor – and that's even because I've never done sculpture. I made some ceramic objects once, but I don't think of sculpture, I always think in terms of painting. My form of painting has “body”, it has thickness: because I'm the one who determines the paintings I make, I create them, so the fragment also has consistency. But there was a time in which this painting was nearly a sort of “skin” of the painting itself, you must remember it well, it was very thin...

G. B. – Of course, you used buckskin, flannel...

P. P. – Yes, I used buckskin for its tactile properties. And then even flannel, once it was treated with colour applied with an airbrush that stimulated its surface, in a certain sense transmitted a need to touch it, an invitation to be touched. But there's even a series of works that I made in the 1990s where painting did not have a body, it only had a skin: the skin of painting was very thin. But, as you can see, it always remains painting: what every artist is looking for is a sort of third way. This third way is a kind of painting that in this case, over the past few years, also has a body.

G. B. – “Body”: a very appropriate term, one we owe to the critic and scholar Claudio Cerritelli, who has entitled his book (one that is fundamental for Analytical Painting) *Il corpo della pittura*² (The Body of Painting).

P. P. – Yes, *Il corpo della pittura* (The Body of Painting) is the title of his book; whereas I have always spoken of *pittura con corpo* (painting with body).

G. B. – I speak rather of *concretizzazione del colore* (embodiment of colour) as if colour, which is something abstract, could become palpable matter.

P. P. – Exactly. And this is also the title of an exhibition I staged at the Plurima Gallery in Udine, presented by Giovanni Maria Accame, who said: “Tu non dipingi più ma fai pittura, nel senso che la fabbrichi, nel senso che la determini”³ (you no longer paint, but make painting; in

the sense that you manufacture it, in the sense that you determine it).

G. B. – Now tell us something about the material you use.

P. P. – My materials are of industrial use and origin: powders that I transform, blend, knead and use in an improper way. In other words, material that is born for a reason and, through my transformation, becomes something else. It is a resistant kind of material, rather strong, hence guaranteeing a good durability of the work. Coloured pigments are attached to the surface through a process that has various phases.

G. B. – By doing so you create surfaces that are sensual and velvet-like to the touch, whereas you find them rather prickly, rugged.

So, after having described the material, let's speak about colour. It is another one of your characteristics, together with dissemination that has been your original contribution to the history of art, the new "statement" in the language of art that, as being original and non-repetitive, must always find new words. Colour: as you are a very coherent artist, you have always used only six colours during the transition and development of your research, as commanded by the great Mondrian suggestion: the three primary colours, black and white, and shades of the colour/non-colour grey. You have lately enriched your palette, so to say, in a very fascinating manner by adding new "mixed" colours.

P. P. – They aren't mixed, but complementary colours.

Yes, I have generally always worked with primary colours – namely yellow, red and blue, in addition to white, black and grey. At a later stage I sometimes use complementary colours such as green, purple and orange. They are like musical notes that always come back. My red, it isn't a red taken and applied with an airbrush. There can be up to five shades of red that I choose and blend until I reach the tone I was looking for.

But there's more: in order to give colour a sound extension, I work towards changing the range, giving and extending

notes – like John Cage could do by placing a rock in his piano; so I work on the data to transform it, enriching colour to get an extension of colour.

Clearly painters have always done this: we shouldn't forget that in the past they used to grind lapis lazuli, or others used crushed glass to give brilliance to their colours.

Artists tried, and still try, to leave a mark that is unforgettable and unique: not for being a novelty, but for its need to capture light in some way, and in different ways. The problem of art is one alone: it is the art of capturing light.

G. B. – You were speaking of John Cage and I would like to ask you something to this effect: artists often have (at least figurative and visual artists) a relation with other types of art that might be poetry, literature or music.

In your case I think it is music. This bond with music is already visible, from a formal point-of-view, in the pace assumed by your wall disseminations in which sense and what kind of relationship you have with music?

P. P. – Yes, it's true. Music is a founding element of my work: I always listen to music, it always accompanies me; I've got a sort of natural need to listen to music. There's naturally music I'm passionate about: Johann Sebastian Bach is one of my favourites, perhaps because there's a binary construction in his music which, symmetrically, can be felt and found when observing some of my works from the 1970s: there's an internal construction in its severity, a rhythm. So music is an element that follows me and it also helps me when I'm staging my exhibitions. Thinking of an exhibition for me is like writing a quartet, a quintet, an octet. I think about how I can create syntony through rhythms on the walls, because I naturally observe and study plans of the places where I stage my exhibitions and try to compose the works as if they were violins, brass instruments, creating a unique harmonious rhythm...

G. B. – It is not by coincidence that you mentioned Bach, who was the master of the counterpoint.

P. P. – In fact, I do not stage exhibitions by taking some pieces and then placing them a priori: there's a precise

reasoning that leads me into arranging the elements in such a way that some return, one answers and the other returns, one closes and the other flees...

G. B. – For a moment let's go back to the question I asked earlier: "Why do you define yourself an analytical artist?" Certainly the analytical aspect binds well with music because we know that music is closely related with mathematics and analysis is also a field of study, namely mathematical analysis. But beyond all correlations with branches of learning, why have you always claimed your belonging to the analytical trend, when some of your street colleagues who are more "analytical" than yourself say: "I have never been analytical"?

P. P. – To be a painter was something to be ashamed of during the 1970s. There was snobbery in the field of photography, the death of art, the death of painting. Argan himself, who has always been attributed with the thesis of the "death of art", actually supported the idea that nothing ever dies, so far as there is man... In art somebody suddenly overturned the argument and find out a way. Art is innate to the human being, it has certainly always been practiced over the centuries and expressing oneself is a human need. It's true, in the history of art there has been a whole series of standards that have been worn out a little, they've become mannerism; but I believe there's a question of analysis, especially during the 1970s, regarding the gradient of colour itself: namely, if you performed ten glazes, then you had resonance; if instead the glazes of colour were fifteen, then the resonance changed; when there were thirty, it changed further. So you see that the data, namely the knowledge, the element you were acquainted with, was actually re-discussed. So for our generation of young artists during the 1970s, who were still trying to give some sense to the act of painting, naturally distancing ourselves from experiences that had already become somewhat academic, slightly rhetorical – all of this needed a reason, which was the reason for doing. The extension of the arm, the timing of perception, the material

that received colour all varied; namely spreading some colour on masonite has a certain result, whereas when it is spread over a prepared canvas it has another, and yet another when spread over an unprepared one; should the grain of the canvas vary, then we'd have another variation of the extension. Therefore all of this has a reason for analysis: you analyse the method, the elements that constitute the foundation itself of painting. In my case I sensed that the question of monochrome had been debated enough. There had been research and discussions, there had been masters who produced immense results, so I sensed that I was on a path that in some way had been sufficiently experimented; I was desperately in search of my own path, similarly to all the other young artists who were searching for their own way.

Luckily by working, searching and experimenting I managed to create a work that breaks painting itself: if you come before a painting without a dimension because you can enlarge it or make it smaller, then you're breaking a rule. That's the moment in which I felt that my work entailed the possibility of digging, of going beyond. I was immediately supported by Filiberto Menna upon seeing my works, he said: "Pino, this is a possibility. There's a possibility of suggesting a new aspect in the act of painting because you break painting. The wall, from being a passive consignee and one that has always received the nail, in your work becomes the leading player along with painting". For me, this means analysis.

G. B. – Certainly. And which Masters inspired you most?

P. P. – Piero della Francesca, Matisse, Mondrian and Fontana.

G. B. – Perfect. But in what sense are you their successor?

P. P. – Successor... considering oneself their successor is quite a presumption! I've loved these artists and hope I have absorbed their lesson. I am a humble servant in the vineyard of art.

G. B. – That's nice because when facing the transformations that the system of art has been subjected to during the last few years, where more than being research and

culture art has become a business, you still (and not because you're a traditionalist) capture the true essence of creating art. Because true art is eternal, it lasts through time and space; whereas there will no longer be any talk of that form of art as a business in a few years' time. Do you feel "out-of-date" under this aspect?

P. P. – We have already gone through a long period of outdatedness. During the 1970s we were young and "updated" and were a part of what was defined as "the last avant-garde possible". Working on zero is the highest process of avant-gardism, you cannot go beyond zero, but I have attempted to go below zero by "breaking" everything. Therefore we then suffered all of the outdatedness over the thirty years of the Transavantgarde movement, and previously for Arte Povera, contemporary to our times. We were a power, an art proposal whose appeal was weaker compared to Merz's Igloo or Kounellis's living horses within the gallery space. They entirely had an aspect of power and spectacularity, and even a sort of internal thread that was bound to the historical-political period. Whereas our research was still the only way possible to search for the sublime in art, therefore it was entirely detached from every device of a political or critical nature inherent to consumer society. Suddenly everything changed with Transavantgarde. So we were outdated for thirty years or more.

G. B. – You know, the first time I heard the sentence "true art is always outdated" was when our common friend, Italo Mussa (who passed away too soon), said it. I also add that art is always outdated because otherwise it would be a fashion, and fashion goes out of style with the new season.

P. P. – Art has that certain something inside, something that overcomes time itself: it doesn't challenge time, art doesn't challenge anyone, but it proceeds along its own path and overcomes time. So we cannot say that it is outdated. Let's take Piero della Francesca's Flagellation of Christ, for example: that's where Metaphysics was born, in that little panel

– there’s everything in that span and a half. So can we call it outdated? No, it’s very up-to-date. So, you see, art overcomes every aspect of time; it’s like listening to Chopin. Can Chopin ever be considered outdated? Is Mozart outdated? Is Johann Sebastian Bach outdated? Each and every time I listen to one of their notes, I realize that their music is eternal.

G. B. – They are actually also the ones who most inspired so-called pop music...

P. P. – Sure, it feeds on that music.

G. B. – You’ve always been an artist present in the world of art, but how do you experience this period of your unequivocal success?

P. P. – I’m a soldier in the trenches, I’ve always been in the trenches and continue to be in the trenches. “I’m in my studio every day”, as Guttuso said.

G. B. – Going back to the topic of your success, is there any young artist who is following your work? Anyone who might be referred to as your pupil in the future? Once young artists used to attend the workshops of the masters...

P. P. – Young artists no longer come to the “workshop” because they begin displaying their works in a few exhibitions as soon as they graduate from the Academy, immediately. And should their works meet with the slightest approval, then the young artist will travel along the tracks of illusory success. This is a dangerous aspect because it’s not enough. I was on the front cover of an issue of “Arte moderna”⁴ when I was a “young man” aged 37, thanks Filiberto Menna, but that didn’t go to my head in the least. I was aware of the fact that this type of work involves a lifetime. It is important for a young artist to understand that a certain attitude must be maintained while preparing to spend one’s life for art: we have received “a calling”. Again, I come to my studio every day, even on holidays; I don’t have to clock in, but it’s a physiological need that I feel. But there’s one important thing that must be said to young people: when an artist has this thirst, this sacred fire within, then perhaps there’s something there. Otherwise, as you were saying, it would be closer to fashion and the

only concern would be creating things that might “work”.
G. B. – You actually say this, which is very true, even out of modesty. In fact, I have witnessed the fact that you are of great help to young artists, helping them out in staging exhibitions and sometimes buying their works. Similarly to the teachings of another great artist such as Lucio Fontana, who always bought one of the works of young artists on show.

In closing, according to the fact that “you always go to your studio”, might we say that as employees in the public sector were once considered servants of the State and therefore went to the office every morning, you go to your studio every day because you’re the servant of something called Art? And this time with a capital “A”?

P. P. – Thanks, that’s true. In fact, as I said beforehand: “I am a humble servant in the vineyard of art”.

¹ Pittura Analitica, Limen Arte International Award, 4th edition, Vibo Valentia, 20 December 2014 – 1 February 2015.

² Claudio Cerritelli, Il corpo della pittura, Critici e nuovi pittori in Italia 1972–1976, Martano Editore, Turin 1985.

³ Giovanni Maria Accame, Non dipingi più ma fai pittura, Udine, Plurima Gallery, 1993.

⁴ AA. VV.; L’arte moderna, 15 vols., Fratelli Fabbri Editori, Milan 1975, originally released in weekly instalments.