



A Multicultural Face

Adel El Siwi's recent paintings can even be interpreted in the light of physiognomy, although the results regarding the relationship between body and soul are more accidental than deliberate. For years now this artist has been working on faces in a way quite distant from portrait painting.

In fact, a face is simply a field of action, the object of his investigations, which are at once morphological-spatial (especially) and, in some ways, psychological. His research on a formal plane is not an end in itself, even though it is inevitable and intense. In fact, it fuses with an "external" cultural commitment with the ethical basis of his paintings. Between these forms and ethical-social assumptions he establishes synergy, homophony and analogical development.

My intention in saying this is to underscore the fact that between the ideological and compositional dimensions of his work there is no subjection or instrumentalization of one with respect to the other. Paradoxically, despite the fact that El Siwi has been a psychiatrist, his ethical outlook is more of a socio-cultural than psychological character. If anything, they take on a rather metaphorical cast, as in the case of the artist's interest in mythology, a mythology to reinvent - as El Siwi quite rightly points out - but one that in any case is quite far from any subjectivistic symbology. Every work reveals a commitment to multiculturalism, to intersecting experience, to complex situations, to a socio-existential condition beyond the monolithic and monothematic tradition, even if it is the great Egyptian cultural tradition. And this, despite the fact that El Siwi loves reconnecting with the past. It is all the problem of a critical relationship with things, an attitude which probably stems from a survival (one of the few) of his previous scientific commitment. However, it is still a mobile viewpoint, the fruit of some of the artist's wanderings beyond the national borders, beginning with the long period of his visit to Italy in the eighties. Speaking of his use of gold, the artist states, "I use it to neutralize space and open it completely, but at the same time it is like a blindfold to stop any communication with Egyptian tradition". This is an example of El Siwi's tendency to kill two birds with one stone, to keep a hold on both the ideological and the aesthetic-artistic fields contextually and synergistically.

His mobility of thought and expressivity is moreover tinged with irony, a close cousin of self-criticism. It seems to me that this is a rather important point in trying to understand El Siwi's work. The critical contact that the author has with the past and with contemporary expressive needs is complicated by its ironic element and it brings about a playful and free psychological and expressive dimension fairly near the ephemeral. His paintings and installations, which are usually quite large, do not really look big or monumental, because internally they are undermined by a basically unstable spatial and narrative rhythm

and they give the impression of a temporary condition waiting for things to settle down which, you feel, is something that will never happen. But what does take over is a sort of narrative anxiety. And why not? Adel El Siwi has now begun to concern himself with his own anxiety and no longer with that of his patients, doing so in the manner most congenial to his spirit - that is, by expressing and declaring himself in a sober and solid concert of subjectivity and intellectuality. And by communicating. Transitively. Also because our artist has for some time now overtaken the period of gestural informality, a symptom of a need to give total space, albeit transitorily, to subjectivity. And in this way the problem of identity, a crucial point in any multicultural position, has shifted from the individual sphere to the social. As a consequence, the variously investigated and expressed single face gradually gives way to a plurality of faces, which in some cases have multiplied inexorably and in great quantities, especially in a few installations, such as "the Face and Beyond" of 1996-97, which measures 17X3 m. On each of the great numbers of small-size mirrors leaning against the wall next to each other, El Siwi's water colours and charcoal unravel the traces of elongated faces which, because of the "horror vacui" effect lose their identity, if they ever had one, and invite the viewer to study a sign of a metacultural kind in a setting of considerable value, the latter being due to the arrangement of the installation on three right-angled walls. It should be pointed out that installations like "The Face and Beyond" cross cultural boundaries without becoming aseptic. They share formal emotions dear to the USA or to Europe (particularly to Germany and Italy), and yet they evoke the idea of the earth, of a particular earth which you feel could be identified if examined in greater depth. They ooze with a geographically circumscribed humour which will be revealed to you on smelling it, touching it, and tasting it synaesthetically. You feel the material, the handwork, the vibrations of a "work in progress". And these feelings can even send you back to Africa and the Mediterranean

But before doing this, you go through the contemporary art of vari-

ous latitudes with the feeling of losing your identity but with the certainty that you have not lost the foundations of your identity - that is to say, the very odour of your body. The same thing can be felt when you stand before another demanding work of El Siwi's: six paintings, each 250X150 cm. hung next to each other so as to offer an intense narrative with moments of pause and rest. They go under the common name of "Every king has his little tale". And this is El Siwi's big "lay" tale.

Fused in it are contemporary and ancient mythology, emblematic narratives, and phenomenological notes of "visual remains" (to quote Andr  Breton), abstract signs which are apparently free but actually orchestrated with the narrative events and with the intention of communicating in the most objective way possible, without however abandoning the anarchic laws of art. These paintings, owing to their compositional layout and their abstract-narrative air, bring Anselm Kiefer to mind. And Adel El Siwi, beyond all the sterile disquisitions on modernism and postmodernism (although some of the latter has rubbed off on him with his multicultural faces), can be seen to be an artist of a time of complexity.

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