

Powder and Light

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Powder and Light presents a comparison between diverse artistic practices employed by artists working in Italy that share certain common denominators: “powders” of various kinds, the idea of the trick or illusion, a reflection on time and history (personal, quotidian or artistic). In all these strands of research, “light” is a fundamental element.

Artists with heterogeneous backgrounds, born in the 1970s and '80s who manage to find points of communion.

Andrea Francolino (Bari, 1979) has reflected for years on the precariousness and vulnerability of the existential and operational human condition. The “crack” – the laceration, the fracture, the break, the fragment – has become *sfraghis*, a seal, a mark characterising Francolino’s recent output. One group of works, for example, features powder and cracks; the cement powder is used to create casts of cracks in the urban surface, thus creating wholly reconstructable and traceable “paths” between different cities: each work in fact possesses the GPS coordinates of each individual crack enabling an attentive and interested observer to both reconstruct the artist’s journey and verify the state of every single (real) crack over the years. Further “variations” have slowly developed out of these works. For *Powder and Light* the artist is presenting a recent series of cracks, realised in glass and brought together under the title, ***Chance × chaos × infinite variables (2017-2019)***. Great intuitions are frequently simple and quotidian. On the 12th of April 2017, while roaming Milan, the artist “encountered” a framed picture with broken glass abandoned alongside a rubbish skip. He had a similar experience in a shopping centre a few days later; Francolino bought those fragments – to the sincere perplexity of the shop staff – in order to change the destiny of what was otherwise waste. In essence, on the basis of a casually broken sheet of glass, the artist reproduces manually on other unbroken sheets the cracks visible in the fragmented material. Stratifying and orientating these sheets of glass, working by opposites, the result is a stunning symmetry. “I see the universe in every crack”, Francolino has declared. The stratification of the glass transforms each individual work into a constellation, a spider’s web or other infinite “visions” both recognisable and enigmatic. And these fractures in pure glass, enlivened by light, offer themselves in a more direct, more neutral manner, almost with a crystalline purity. In this series too economy and ecology (and not only in the etymological sense of the terms) are complementary elements. A primary attitude in Andrea Francolino’s creative approach lies in the giving of meaning, the giving of value to or “embellishing” – with nothing of the Baroque – the cast-off, the fragment and destruction. “Embellishing” what is important, either deliberately or incidentally, is the ability to recognise what is “precious” in existence. From a pile of concrete fragments, waste products from his work destined to be discarded, began to grow a small spontaneous plant of which Francolino recognised the “preciousness”, the sense of life and nature; all this became what is now a well-known work: *Performance of a plant (2013-2015)*. This example acts as a counterbalance to other interventions presented in the group show *Powder and Light*: the artist creates a wound on a wall of the gallery entitled (tautological? objective? straightforward?) ***Crack (2019)*** almost as if he intends to take the place of time and history, of chance and of chaos, imagining however a positive future: filling this incision with powder and gold leaf. He fills (or perhaps intensifies) the void with the purity of light, that is to say with gold. In parallel, in works such as ***45.470364 9.176937 from 1893 to 14 May 2017 (2017)***, fragments, stones or rubble from buildings destroyed in war, catastrophic events or simply by time the “mighty sculptor” are partially covered with gold leaf. The references to the oriental “philosophy” of kintsugi are evident, but Francolino is not repairing everyday objects to reconstruct them. Each individual fragment is accompanied by comprehensive

documentation. Francolino has perhaps ontologically internalized the idea of the crack, of the wound, of violence: he attempts to express it, recognise it and render it concrete. Does he try, utopistically, to be both Alpha and Omega? Does he wish to care for or sooth the traumas of reality and history? Perhaps he really does see the entire universe in a crack.

“Cracks” also appear in the research of **Sophie Ko (Tbilisi, 1981)** but in different forms. The Georgian artist principally uses powders of pure pigments amassed “under glass”. Individual works or large choral compositions, like contemporary polyptychs, exist in an (unstable) internal equilibrium. Thanks to the force of gravity, the powders, in fact, rearrange themselves and constantly transform each work, creating ever-new solids and voids. One might think of an hourglass and its “sand” that “marks” and “testifies” to time and gravity; but in the work of Sophie Ko time does not run in a straight line, it is absolute, cyclical, expanded; the work is perpetual metamorphosis. Perhaps a very slow cascade or landslide could evoke something similar. Each work self-destructs and regenerates, looking into the eyes of eternity. In this case too, time is the “mighty sculptor” but its action is wholly internal to the work. The destruction is charged with value. In other series, the artist has produced works with burnt images and ashes. In her *Temporal Geographies* the pure pigments – which are of course of mineral origin – principally allude to time, but also to space given that the internal spatiality of the composition is always important. Time and space are, obviously, at the basis of all existence. And for Sophie Ko, existence is resistance. Each grain of powder in fact resists gravitational force before giving way and being reborn in a new position. Her research is “classical” in what it evokes, in what it transmits, in its underlying thinking. Classicism – of ideas, materials and colours – which can hardly not recall the grandeur of the Renaissance, the tonal and material elements of the great masterpieces of painting. **Deposition (2019)** presented for *Powder and Light* is a perfect *exemplum* of her research. Three vertical, paratactic pieces in which three tones of colour – from white to pink with a reddish base – stratify and amalgamate. Light reveals surprising meanders and shadings. It appears to be a body with epidermis, dermis and subcutaneous layers through to blood. The “sacred” evocation is primary, but the sacredness of Sophie Ko is not to be understood in the strictly Christian sense, it is a sacredness (secular and philosophical) that references courage, sacrifice, martyrdom, the strength of “heroic” acts and thoughts. The term “deposition” also has other semantic shadings: it may reference the physical process of the powders that are deposited or it may be the declaration of the artist (or the work) made to the public and to history.

Light is the protagonist in the works of **Goldschmied & Chiari (Sara Goldschmied, Arzignano 1975; Eleonora Chiari, Rome 1971)** because the artists work with reflecting surfaces. The process involved in the realisation of **Untitled Views (2018)** brings together performance, painting, photography (with the capital initials referencing UV rays). The artists let off coloured smoke bombs in the studio, attempting “manage” the “smoky” substance; at the same time they take a series of photographs, a number of which, selected on the basis of harmony, colour and structure, are then printed on mirror surfaces with a secret, almost alchemical, technique discovered in a French laboratory. Luminous works making clear reference to the etymological value of the term “photograph”. The final result is a symphony of coloured clouds that, thanks to the reflecting surface, invade the space and the observer. The observer is in fact an active part of the work, both because they are reflected and because by changing position and point of view, they discover ever new effects intrinsic to the work. If observed from certain angles the surfaces lose the mirror effect and transform almost into pastel works, dense and corporeal; in other cases, the reflecting material is clear and direct, as strong as a ray of sunlight in the eyes. “Untitled visions/views” that are open to multiple interpretations. While the means and materials may be “contemporary”, the inspirations, the metaphors and the references have a much broader temporal span. Out of polychromy and polysemy emerge direct and

indirect allusions – from 19th century view painting to certain examples of 20th century abstract-informal painting; then there are of course the centuries-old metaphors for the mirror in the history of western art (starting out with the myth of Narcissus), concretized, moreover, in recent decades, in the material-objectual use of mirror surfaces. In certain cultures, moreover, the mirror is a magical, ritual object. The series *Untitled Views* (begun in 2014) is a recent path that follows the main strand of research traced by the artists for many years. Smoke, illusoriness, nebulosity and mirrors also feature in works from previous years. The artists have realised numerous projects looking at the techniques of the “illusionists” and “conjurers”, equating them, in many cases, to the techniques and strategies of the organs of power that confuse, deceive and trick people.

The idea of the “trick” is in fact fundamental to the series of works by **Serena Vestrucci (Milan, 1986)** entitled ***Trucco (2014-on going)***. In this case too, there is a simple but extraordinary intuition. The artist uses cosmetic products, eyeshadows to be precise, to produce “made up” canvases evoking skies, sunsets, natural panoramas. There is a new short-circuit of the idea of *mimesis*. In nature too, the sky is a visual trick, an extraordinary and complex alchemy of gaseous, visual and perceptive elements. The artist therefore plays on the word “*trucco*”, both “trick” and “make-up” in Italian. Actors for example use make-up before their performances. Moreover, skilled card players, the cheats among them, use apparently inexplicable tricks like the aforementioned illusionists. Painters and therefore artists in general are great masters of tricks. The artist-magician, the artist-wizard. Trick, deceit, illusion. Gorgia defines Greek tragedy as “a deceit [...] and those who are deceived are wiser than those who do not allow themselves to be deceived”. Citations, references and analyses could go on ad infinitum (to take just one example, the classical definition and the painterly tradition of the *trompe-l’oeil*). It is no coincidence that the works Serena Vestrucci produces with cosmetics for the eyes and brows are “visual tricks”. In substance, much of culture from Antiquity to the present day could be classified as a trick, a “*trucco*”. The lyricism and the irony in the work of Serena Vestrucci lies in the fact that she has (tautologically?) entitled this series *Trucco*. Behind the irony, however, as is often the case, like behind a mask, is a different substance. Analysing carefully the captions to the works, we note the temporal references, for example: “*Trucco, 2018, 50 × 35 cm, eyeshadows on canvas, three days*”.

The duration of the laying and the stratification of the material on the canvas is reported almost as an integral part of the title. The time of these sunsets and these dawns, the time of nature is treated with the lights and shadows of make-up.

Time is therefore another determinant factor in the research exhibited in *Powder and Light*. Time as a protagonist in the work, but also the present time that these artists live and investigate, a time (atmospheric, historic, quotidian) with all its violence and falsities, poetry and regeneration, *otium* and *negotium*. Among these polarities emerges the idea of “corporeity”: new skin on wound, works conceived as living organisms, epidermic surfaces in which the image is reflected, manipulated or made-up.