

A conversation between Lorenzo Puglisi and Bruno Corà

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Bruno Corà: Let's give immediately an orientation to our readers, how did your painting experience start?

Lorenzo Puglisi: It all started from drawing, at a young age and until the age of twenty I drew in pencil and I had this desire to capture what was around me; then it took quite a bit of time to have the courage to try to paint.

B.C: What was drawing for you, a simple technique to outline things or a system of thought?

L.P: It allowed me to enjoy the moment, I enjoyed this moment when the pen or the pencil slides across the paper, captures a face, or catches a space, as if it was a way to possess things better... I remember clearly this desire; but then I've abandoned drawing, painting has started slowly, first with a base, then, after a while, with a manipulation beginning from nothing, directly on the background of the canvas.

B.C: What is your idea of painting, it has always to be something that takes place on the canvas or it may be a logic, a system of thought that can use other means than the brush and the canvas to be developed? What idea do you have of painting in general ?

L.P: In my most practical experience there is the surface of the canvas, but that's because I am very cautious as I said before; but I think that what counts is to succeed in some, I would say mysterious way, at least unknown to me, in capturing on the canvas some particles of life, and this can be done on the canvas or by a myriad of other means; let's say that my element is the canvas, I consider it as the ring where to face myself, I would say, because since the difficulty is so extreme, in general, to capture the existence, to propose a vision of reality that has its own meaning, I try to limit the possibilities, because otherwise I would disperse completely ... that's how I feel about it at the moment.

B.C: You have defined the canvas as a ring where to look for yourself, but obviously there is a real fight on this ring: what kind of individual target have you identified in the battle in search of yourself ? What do you want to achieve?

L.P: I must say that at first and for a long time, everything that happened was not very conscious... it is a kind of unconsciousness in which the action takes place and I assist, follow, try to govern, to let go of it... a kind of mix to be explored during the moment when this occurs, so at the beginning there was not really a direction, and then slowly I started to recognize, as I try to depict portraits, faces, heads, figures, I began to recognize a series of inner impulses, thoughts flowing, emotions that are stirred... all this happened while the painting was fixed on the canvas or I have to say more honestly that I recognized this in retrospect, not instantly; and looking back at the works after a certain time, I recognized a sort of snapshot of me - and then also of the other human beings, because, deeply, I believe that we all are equal... and you know, the more sincere this attempt is, and the more it is likely to capture something... I stop when I see that there is a bit of life, even a small spark... if looking back at the picture there is something that touches me, then the goal is reached.

B.C: So you are now introducing the aspect of the figure, because you talked about the face, you spoke of presence... is painting for you almost exclusively evocative of the anthropological dimension, or can it also be the vehicle of something that it is not only about man?

L.P: Absolutely - yes; it is something very ambitious and also sounding presumptuous but if one is touched by... there is something that can be reached... if one can make a bit of inner space, leaving oneself on a side for a moment and look for something that... it is an ambition, a direction, it is a point of arrival, it is not what I believe to get today, but the purpose would be to make the observer

feel that presence that one can feel naturally looking at trees, at animals, at human beings... sometimes we are given, at least is given to me, to feel... the presence of some force, an energy... that raises a big question about the mystery of why we are here... the light, in the darkness, is something that begins to appear shyly - out of nothing - this nothing that is my condition.

B.C: Getting more into your way of expression through painting, I ask you: a presence, an identity at first seem to emerge from the dark background: it could also be a self-portrait or an ideal portrait, a portrait made as freely as possible and therefore you place human identity, anthropology, at the center of the meditation about space-time; which was the artist who, in some way, accompanied you before you came to your code?

L.P: There have been many... I was very touched by the matter of darkness in the seventeenth century painting, in some Rembrandt's portraits and self-portraits, these figures so alive, so real, shrouded in the darkness as in the portrait of Jan Six; I recognized a certain kind of strong feeling towards some painters in history, among these there is Goya, then the work of Cezanne with its great life, perceptible, palpable, and also the work of the Impressionists, Monet... Picasso's expressive force, these gestures so simple, so basic, that brought painting to a simplicity too often misunderstood where actually hides a shocking amount of truth and life... then Francis Bacon, the last great painter in Art history in my opinion, whose works are full of elements of historicity and by whom I am seduced; I appreciate his remarkable ability to merge all the painting knowledge in a force of the moment, as all the great painters of the past did, managing to make live in the present what was their attempt; above them all, however, I would not forget what I consider the greatest painter of all times, Leonardo da Vinci; although he has created very few works, he has left something... there is a deep message of a higher nature... if I think of his St. John the Baptist... sure what I say is very superficial, but these are the references for me, and they are mainly visual; it is difficult to put into words all this incredible world that was synthesized by the great art of the past... I feel I am very far from all this.

B.C: Among the painters you have mentioned, those who have made much use of chiaroscuro as Rembrandt and Leonardo, Goya and Bacon certainly seem to be evident, to persist in your current lexicon; however, you very often reduce your modality to the problem of the face rather than the body, while the other painters have also done a lot of work about the body; why do you operate only on the face and not on the body?

L.P: I would say at the moment, mainly because the face is the most expressive part of the interiority and of the deepest motion of human nature; the hands also express a lot, in fact in some works I try to portray, to paint the hands, with their motility, their life... but the face is the part that strikes me most in a human being, this whole expression and strength... the body, well, maybe I feel I am very distant from it, maybe I feel I am a very cerebral person.

B.C: Painting as we know however, was not only figuration in the twentieth century, it was also abstraction, it was thought, it was carried out with other patterns, other conceptions, while you basically prefer the figural one. Which are the reasons for this choice?

L.P: I really appreciate, for example, a certain kind of work that has been done... Mondrian's work immediately comes to my mind, he slowly reduced an image until it became extremely essential and geometric... I appreciate all of this, however, my thought... sometimes I see a stain on a wall, something that nature has built up, and yet if that spot has the shape of a head, I do not know why but I'm more interested, it touches me, it moves me... as if I could recognize myself more easily in this whole that surrounds us; for example I am much more distressed in dealing with human beings than I am with animals or a children, which are closer to nature... I think that recognizing myself is important, has always fascinated me, even in the stones, when something accidentally reminds me of myself, reminds me of my existence.

B.C: It is clear. Now, however, there is one point we have to ponder, that is, painting, which you talked about from the point of view of your interests, has provided a range of outcomes such as Rembrandt's, such as Cezanne's or Monet's, Goya's, Bacon's and so on until today; now the problem is how do you think to bring in your contribution to this language transformation more clearly, because those models have already been recognized, how will you act?

L.P: I find myself today at this crucial point and I think that there are many possible directions; what I have done so far has reduced everything to an extreme essentiality and I feel I am at a turning point; I am trying, after a very interesting conversation with you, to overlap a darkness to a darkness, exploiting in an outmost way this mysterious tool, that fascinates me so much, also on the structure of the face; this is in today's practice... in general, the best thing I can do is to start all over again, closing a period... and this will happen, it will not be an instant decision, through a path of work, through a long process; I think that I will be able, with a little luck, a little stubbornness, to come to something else... surely it is necessary.

B.C: The darkness you speak of is a very searched dimension nowadays, we are facing an era in which quantum physics tells us about black holes, about the dark substance, the black energy and then about the fact that there is a large part of the universe that we do not know; paradoxically, this can be useful for a meditation about the space in painting, in your case a painting coming out of the darkness, out of the gloom... it would be interesting to ponder the relationship with science, the dark dimension related to the pictorial space...

L.P: Surely, because painting, I don't know if this is my case, could be used as a tool to learn, to know better about reality; I have read something, there are many philosophies that speak of the fact that man go to search the immensity of outer space when the great truths of the cosmos, the great mysteries of existence are enclosed in him... science then, in the meaning of an attempt to know... I return to Leonardo, whose work I do not understand fully but I can only sense at times, feel... with him, we return to this unknown energy, to this link between science and art, because great art, I think of the pyramids, or of creations that have been made in the past and which suggest a different quality of man, is linked to mathematical laws; the scientific matter is definitely connected with art... there is for example the golden section, there are very precise relations inside nature and in the human being, quantifiable in terms of numbers, that are beyond my understanding. On the other hand I do not forget in my view, that I try to keep as simple as possible, the caves of Lascaux or other places where the first human attempts to portray reality have been found and also the strong thought of Picasso, thinking of painting as an exorcism, as a way to win, to try to address and overcome the fear of existence; in the case of the caves, it was clear, so they say at least, that there was a symbolical attempt to hold the prey before facing with death... so there was a sort of knowing what lies ahead... in my case I would like to know what surrounds me, what I am...

B.C: What you do not know...

L.P: What I do not know, certainly...

B.C: I think this is the way, now only the work is needed, it is necessary to exercise these perceptions... obviously from work to work we will see what happens.

L.P: Yes, this is the right path...

Bruno Corà (Roma, 1942), is an italian critic, art historian and university professor. Director of museums such as the Art Museum of the City of Lugano, the Pecci Museum in Prato, The Center of Modern Art CAMEC of La Spezia, has curated exhibitions and publications for artists such as Burri, Fontana, Manzoni, Richter, Baselitz, Kounellis, Merz, Gormley, Fabro, Boetti, Kiefer, Spagnolo and many others. He is president of the Foundation Palazzo Albizzini Collezione Burri Città di Castello.