

Closer

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Among the many stories of violence and horror that characterise the late European Renaissance, that of Beatrice Cenci is possibly one of the most tragic and obscure. Even though historically proven to be true, the story is imbued with symbolic meaning that few narrations can express. This story has also been of great inspiration to the fantasy of many romantic writers, from Stendhal to Percy Bysshe Shelley. Beatrice Cenci is the ultimate symbol of female sensibility that rebels against patriarchal authority, at first against her father, who rapes her, and afterwards against the Pope, who has her decapitated.

Beatrice was the daughter of Francesco Cenci, a violent and perverted nobleman, recognized as such by the authorities and his family who try to isolate him without any success. She thus organizes his murder together with her mother and brothers. This brief liberation is really only the beginning of a higher level of violence she has to go through and which she would not survive. Though knowing the true nature of the father, the Papacy could not endorse a patricide: the social consequences of such a defeat to authorities would be devastating.

Even due to this, the torture and torment for patricides take the most spectacular shape that the seventeen centuries of Christian civilisation had ever witnessed and was able to devise. Beatrice was subject to rope pulling, hanging by her hair, and finally decapitation, together with her mother, in front of Castel Sant'Angelo; while

her brother Giacomo is tortured with hot iron tongs before being crushed under the blow of a club. Bernardo, her twelve-year-old brother is spared his life, but only after being incarcerated for life and forced to follow every stage of the torment of his family. All the Cenci family possessions were confiscated by the Papacy.

Tragical Plots

A character such as Beatrice Cenci can be narrated in various ways. The way chosen by Dani Marti comes through as rather unusual, although by no means “unsuitable”. In front of his “woven constructions”, the spectator can remain perplexed, troubled, but not emotionless. The fact that one cannot decipher the way in which that thick and orderly weave of artificial fibres and beaded chains can relate the story of Beatrice Cenci, does not mean that one cannot derive from these works an exact insight of the tragedy. Observe the work “Beatrice”, the pure white of the synthetic ropes enlightened by the intricate reflections of the metal beading or even “Between Madness and Folly” in which the black weave, as dark as night, eliminates any shine those little star-like spots radiate. Follow the regular monotony of the vertical entwining of “Shadow after Shadow”, which seems to raise a barrier like that of prison bars. Or let that opaque and soft surface of “Dark Bones” absorb our glance like light, removing all its vitality. The sensation is that of finding oneself in front of a story narrated in a language which we cannot yet decipher – or which we cannot decipher anymore – but one that still manages to move our entire emotional spectrum. Entering Dani Marti’s work means to re-possess the rules of this forgotten language.

Emotional Minimalism

One of the most evident characteristics of Dani Marti’s work, instantly perceivable by critics and by the general public, is the illuminating mixture of a

“cold” medium and an ardent content. On the one hand we have the choice of an abstract language, based on simple geometries which are repeated in a modular manner; on the other there is the will to concentrate on a figurative genre, the portrait, particularly on the psychological introspection and on that high degree of intimacy between artist and subject (but also between subject and spectator) that it entails.

The technique chosen to work with which implies a repetitive and patient labour, a concentration on the rule that governs the weaving of the cords that does not allow any emotions or distractions; and then there is the ability of communication, bound to the sensuality of the materials used and the emotional force of the colour. Marti glances at minimalism and all the abstract-geometric tradition of the twentieth century in his forms, in the way he uses space, in the choice of lowly and industrial materials, in the patient warping of the surfaces. However he manages to express a rather baroque style in the way in which he makes these forms become opulent, luxuriant and communicative.

The Press has often tried to relate this dichotomy to his personal story. Marti is Spanish, and this can be seen in the sense of spirituality of his native land, and the strong sensuality he evokes. At the same time though, he represents a stateless nature: born in Spain, studying in the United States, living for a long time in Australia and finally moving to Glasgow, Scotland. This makes him the right person to represent a globalised and neo-baroque society, full of syncretism and contradiction; a society in which people seek dystopias of illusion and excess because they perceive harmony and happiness as no more than a mirage” [1]. These are legitimate interpretations though they risk to stray from the fact that Dani Marti is deeply rooted in a tendency that flows through all of the 20th century, and which tries to bring together an extremely cold sensation of the forms with an equally heated meaning of the contents. Marcel Duchamp’s work, from “The Large Glass” to “Etant Donnés”, can be considered emblematic of his strategy. In more recent years, one can quote the work by Roman Opalka, who elaborated a monotone and repetitive language, an exhausting methodology in its sobriety to relate his personal journey towards death.

The most pertinent comparison to Dani Marti though could be that with the distressing work of Felix Gonzales-Torres, to whom Marti dedicated a very passionate homage in the exhibition “Looking for Felix” (Firstdraft Gallery, Sydney 2000).

Like Marti, Gonzales-Torres overheats his forms and minimalist and conceptual languages using everyday objects and industrial materials to relate about himself, loss, love, death and other experiences. To all this Dani Marti adds the pious exercise of a craftsman, the study of a language of which he learnt all its subtleties in time. This skill is the starting point from which to enter, finally, into his work.

Passionate Labyrinths

Dani Marti has a very complex relationship with the materials he uses. On the one hand it is rooted in his personal and emotional story (his grandmother knitting), while on the other there is his previous work experience before being an artist, when he worked within the fashion industry in Barcelona as a fashion designer. Marti, though, seems to have moved beyond all of this:

“Now my work is less about design and all about the fabric. Ultimately it’s about the surface jumping out into three dimensions. Most of the time the works are abstract, and I tend to use the notion of the fabric as the carrier of the meaning.” [2]

To do this, Marti tries to constrain huge amounts of industrial textiles into perfect, regular, geometric forms. This means that he engages in a tenacious and almost unfriendly physical battle. He has to twist his threads, pull them, strain them, filling them with an energy and vitality that contrasts the orderly weaves he creates. As Anthony Gardner comments, Marti’s works are bodies, and as such full of vital energy:

“Seen from afar, their power is opaque. Come closer, come in tight as you would to smell a lover’s scent or to graze a stranger’s clothes. Sense the energy still rippling

through these cords about to snap, through these desert dunes that billow like a Napangardi landscape. These tactile surfaces seek out your touch, but one touch could break the tension and the body could dissolve.” [3]

The artist seeks an intimate relation with his work, and in turn the work seems to invite the spectator to do the same. This intimacy is imbued with sensuality and eroticism.

“... Marti, unlike Rothko, is unashamedly sexual, and his woven black surfaces are charged with latent eroticism... The formalism of the black square functions as the straightjacket which conducts you from the thought of a cheeky nipple to the abstract plane of release. All, and nothing. The tight two-dimensional plane of Formalism functions like an elevator, gathering and sublimating erotic energies more usually associated with the Baroque” [4].

The artist insists on the pleasure he derives from working with industrial materials:

“I love painting, but I like the sensuality of the rope, the touch. Sometimes the ropes are so beautiful that they carry many messages already; they almost speak for themselves. I am really inspired by industrial materials. I like the colour and the form of artificial fibres.” [5]

However, the physical relation with the constructions, which are not meant to be only looked at but also touched and felt, is not exclusively meant for the artist only but also for those who experience it. Marti describes his environmental installations as a welcoming uterus in which the spectator is invited to return, or like a dress to be worn:

“I’m interested in the romantic notion of magnifying the fabric to an almost molecular level, enabling people to fall into the fabric, walk into the fabric, allowing them to get close to the essence of the wearer. On the one hand they are very quiet formal pieces but on the other, subliminally, there is a

human and emotional charge to them.” [6]

Soft Pornographies

The woven constructions Dani Marti creates are labyrinths saturated with passion, as Paco Barragán observes. They are minimal forms overloaded with vital energy and strong sensuality. All this however still does not explain totally why to the spectator, those bizarre architectural creations made of synthetic threads, seem so perturbing. Marti does not engage in a combat with himself, nor tries to transmit to the fibres his vitality. The woven constructions are not self-portraits but portraits. Or rather, they are mock-ups of someone else, a historic character or a friend of the artist. The woven constructions are more similar to voodoo dolls rather than to a portrait in the traditional sense. One can compare them to a consecrated Host, or to the heaps of sweets of Gonzales-Torres, although the consecration here does not take place through the transmission of the hands or to a conceptual declaration, but through the physical act of weaving. Better still, Marti seems to want to recover the magical nature of portraiture: that same magic so well known to primitive men who fear photography because of their belief that it steals their soul. As the artist explains:

“My practice is stimulated by what I perceive as challenges within the act of portrayal. I am fascinated by what lies behind the surface of the subject as an essence to be grasped or sought after through attempting to re-present it. The dialectic between the possibility and simultaneous hopelessness of this endeavour emerges in the abstraction of large-scale woven works, and videos that borrow from the language of documentary. The formal polarity that exists between these ways of working is the terrain on which I am able to examine how in approaching the physical and mediated surface of information, alternate readings may be generated by the viewer.

Behind each woven work, what stimulates its process is the essence of an individual. Could be a friend, historical individuals, a comic character or

created characters.” [7]

Marti searches for an intimate relation with each of his subjects, and tries to engage his spirit in the weave of the threads and ropes. In Paco Barragán’s words, “Weaving represents an act of bondage, a ritual that enables the artist to ‘possess’ the person that is portrayed.” [8] Indeed Marti lives fully this widespread technological era and the mapping of the human genome, and his ritual takes the shape of a coding process, the translation of the intimate nature of his portrayed subjects in the structures and in the rules of his own weaving. A cold medium, as we have already pointed out. In McLuhanian terms: a “low resolution medium”, which supplies little data and as such requires a thorough interpretation by the viewer. [9] This gives great magnetism to the woven constructions which grant what they seem to be promising only on condition of a total mental and sensual participation of the viewer.

Impossible Intimacies

As the artist notes, the effort to totally possess someone always ends up with a let-down. Total intimacy is impossible, and the woven constructions are also the witness of an incomplete hug, of an unfulfilled tension. This is even better perceived in the recent video by Dani Marti. It was almost implicit that Marti arrived at using also video in his artistic practice. Once again the medium is cold, but at the same time it allows maximum intimacy (close-ups, exploration of a body or a domestic scene) and it creates an insurmountable distance between artist and subject (and between subject and spectator) through the camera and screen. This is a medium which creates a heap of raw material which then needs to be thoroughly assessed, elaborated and mounted according to its own rules, and through the use of software and appropriate tools.

This impossible intimacy, the insurmountable distance intensified by the medium, is the main theme of Dani Marti’s last video “The Stamp Collector” (2006). The stamp collector is Ken, a friend of the artist: “a very quite guy. Works for an IT

company, never goes out, lives a very quiet life, and his passion is to collect stamps. He also likes rubber.” The black and clammy material of a rubber suit covers all his body: this same body is constantly being “researched” by the lens, which accidentally seems to reveal details of the setting, almost by chance. It is from these glimpses of outlying views that we discover that Ken is actually in a bathtub, which at the end of the video is drained. Even so, the action does not occur only in that place, if it can be considered as action indeed. When the artist shoots the face of the individual behind the mask from the reflection on the glass of the mask a computer screen and a pair of hands quickly typing on the keyboard can be seen. The concentration on detail is such as to distract us from the notions related to the situation: the passing of time, the unfolding of the action, the succession of events. The artist focuses so much on the object that he renders it unrecognisable. Between Ken and ourselves are created two barriers, two walls: one enhanced by the subject (the rubber wetsuit), and the other created by the artist (the angles of the shots). Two obstacles to intimacy which join forces in the filming reflected on the eye, considered to be traditionally the mirror of the soul but which is here denied to our ability of psychological penetration through the glass of the mask. They are two apparently unfathomable barriers from which every now and then appears a glimpse of light: such as the strips of skin revealed by the unzipping of the disturbing wetsuit, or the surrounding elements captured peripherally by the camera.

Just like the woven constructions, “The Stamp Collector” is a denied portrait, a successful attempt to prevent the traditional studies to decipher a portrait. At the same time, however, the textures as well as the video teach the spectator to look in a different manner, to attract a new type of attention. These elements compel us to concentrate our attention on the insignificant details which turn out to be little revelations. And one has to get closer, and closer, ever so closer...

Notes

[1] Paco Barragán, “The art of tying ends”, in *The Seven Pleasures of Snow White*, exhibition catalogue, Sherman Galleries, Sydney 2006.

[2] Victoria Hynes, “Dani Marti. The Semiology of Weaving”, in *Art & Australia*, vol. 40, n° 30, pp. 410 – 417, Autumn 2003.

[3] Anthony Gardner, *Dani Marti – There is nothing at the end of the rainbow*, exhibition catalogue, Arc One, Melbourne 2005.

[4] Ann Finnegan, *Baroque Minimalism: Variations on a serious black dress*, exhibition catalogue, Canberra Contemporary Art space, Canberra 2004.

[5] Victoria Hynes, “Dani Marti. The Semiology of Weaving”, cit.

[6] Victoria Hynes, *Looking for Rover*, exhibition catalogue, Sherman Galleries, Sydney 2004.

[7] In conversation, September 2006.

[8] Paco Barragán, “The art of tying ends”, cit.

[9] Cfr. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, New York, New American Library 1964.