

A Ghost in the Screen. On Yorgo Manis Paintings

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I first met Google Street View in the words of a friend. He was sitting in a pub sipping his drink, when he saw a car carrying a nine-eyed hydra on its roof. After some days he found himself, and his drink, on a page of Google Maps.

After the first, spontaneous enthusiasm, some questions came to me. Is such a cool project enough to say goodbye to privacy, and make it appear like an old-fashioned dress? Is reality more real when it's shot by nine eyes and reconstructed by a software? Is there still space for imagination, when the symbolic representation of a map is replaced by a navigable reconstruction? How can we resist against this Matrix in runaway growth?

In Yorgo Manis' work, I found out my same ambivalence – sentimental participation and critical detachment. He calls it “cynical romanticism”. What I like in this feeling is that it is shared either by the “system” and by its gang of fans, users and wreckers. When Google says it wants “to organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful”, its romanticism equals only its cynicism.

But the cynical romanticism is, moreover, the condition of the contemporary flaneur, who is moving nimbly across that huge data harvest that we call the Internet: contributing, voting, tagging, commenting, screen-grabbing or simply watching. At the top of this never-ending tsunami of informations and images, which mixes

professional and vernacular, innovation, repetition and remix, I'm not surprised that many painters started working in the way this young greek artist does: depicting not the actual reality, but its clone on the screen (mediated reality) and even its synthetic alternatives (media reality).

Many described this phenomenon as a return of Pop Art. In fact, it's completely different. Pop Art was an ambiguous celebration of commodities and media fetishes (Marilyn, comics, etc.) in an era that considered pop imagery kitschy and lowbrow. Pop Art invited us to consider its power, its appeal, its increasing self-assertion, and to think about it as part of our reality. Today, our reality is little more than that. Google, the free press you are reading in the underground, the news you are watching at lunchtime, the World of Warcraft session you are having after dinner are mediating our connection with reality. We are information addicted, and we need an ecology of the image. Something more similar to Ed Ruscha than to Andy Warhol.

Yorgo Manis is working on this. He selects, decodes, manipulates and encodes the image. Street View, but also Youtube, Flickr, wishtree.com's wishes and the hunters social networks. The result is that, among the hundreds of sets I visited on Street View, the ones I really remember are those, unreal, pictured in his Metaphysical Safari: softened visions of a Rome as you can see it on a postcard, where the functional design of the directional arrows meets in an improbable way a luxurious vegetation. The same ethical ambiguity can be seen in the installation 9 Books From Amazon, with its kaleidoscopic string of aesthetics: a minimal installation, a maximalist painting, a conceptual artwork. Its metaphysical truth is that, today and for many of us, Amazon is a website selling books.

But what is so surprising in these works is the way they are painted. Manis makes passionate, lyrical paintings, refusing the impersonal coolness of most Pop Art. "I prefer to work allegorical and create fairy tales or ghosts out of it, avoiding a functional and immediate dependence", he says in an interview. Only in this way imagination can get the upper hand on documentation, and the subject can settle a score with the monstrosity of a nine-eyed hydra.