

The work of Giorgio Griffa, to be seen in the 2000 & Novecento gallery, is very difficult to write about, even after having read just one of his books, *Cani sciolti antichisti*, 1980, in which he carefully sets out the outlines of his working process. But seeing that courage is the basic requirement of any activity, I will trust to my feelings and luck.

The beginning of Griffa's by now forty-years-long activity was a thoughtful return to analysis, to the specific tools for painting, with a renewed attention given to the picture's support (the canvas, at first hanging freely and un-stretched), to colour (liberated from its denotative aspect became more autonomous), and to gesture, which determined both the field and the function of the boundary.

These were Griffa's interests from the end of 1967, and they have been labelled variously "New Painting", "Painting/Painting", "Analytical Painting", and "Process Painting". It was, in fact, a question of reducing mental and physical emotionalism to a minimum in order to pinpoint the notion of space and space-time through the physical fact of untreated canvas or hessian. It was a question of visual art as action or the experience of the reality of the body; or, in other words, the arm as it traces out a mark with the same morphological characteristics, though always differing according to the energy of the hand. The hand passed over the surface with a full brush and traced out straight lines of different lengths and arranged horizontally, vertically, or else hatched.

This work is closely connected to that of Conceptual Art, as Menna has underlined, and is strongly influenced by the language and ideas of a specific and autonomous art practice, even in the field of painting. We thus notice Griffa's rejection of the necessity for an object-like form for the work, and a re-evaluation of "making", something which had been put to one side by both Pop artists and Minimalists.

All the above refers to the first series of works on show, the *Segni primari*, in which the idea or concept, by eliminating arbitrariness, chance, chaos, emotions, and subjectivity, exalts control, clarity, and sobriety; in fact, the carefully flattened and insignificant marks tend to highlight the process itself. If we examine *Policromo verticale* (1968), *Pennello piatto* (1971), *Dall'alto* (1972), *Linee orizzontali* (1973), and *Spugna* (1977), we become aware that the two-dimensional polychrome mark develops according to a conceptual structure which is the work's intransigent aim. And here we can clearly see Griffa's wish to undertake a systematic attempt to eliminate any kind of empirical component, one for which the choice of method and order becomes fundamental.

Towards the end of the 'seventies, Griffa felt the need to "open up the work to wider implications", as a result of which different marks began to intersect, but they were always linked both to his earlier practice as well as to his extraordinary memory for past painting which he considered a source of enlightenment and suggestion. In this second series, which was concerned with "connections and contaminations"; the layout and combinations of the marks mix and take on varied "forms" and "dimensions", the presence of which, however, demonstrates Griffa's typical additive process, while the combinatory possibilities create rhythmic and multiplying presences on the surface which never become objects.

We find all this in *Punto e linea* (1980), *Dal sole, dalla terra* (diptych - 1980), *Segni bianchi* (1981), and *Discesa rosa* (1996), as well as in other works where the amplification of the variations and their abundance of marks and colour, even though eliminating mental and subjective redundancy, underline visual richness, so much so that the lines are now free to break down the boundaries of classical geometry and to compose themselves freely and follow their musical instinct. Such other works as *Avanti e indietro dall'intervallo* (2001), *Angolare* (2002), and *Polittico* (2002), make us aware that painting, besides being a means for spiritual evolution, also demands a mental effort: a genuine creative contribution on the part of the viewer. In these works, in fact, the marks are part of a constructive and repetitive system which, on the one hand, is based on intense and evocative colour, and, on the other, transforms the wave-like movement of the lines into a vibrating continuum bringing to mind a movement towards the infinite. The linear or curvilinear "writing", guided by motor impulses, takes the place of what, in traditional painting, had mass, volume, and material.

There are inevitable transition areas between the visual and verbal arts, especially when one asks oneself about such things as the image's "aim".

It seems that Griffa, by starting from the remains of "mentally" fertilised painting, wants to show that expressive capacities are limitless, that every gesture can become a pretext for painting, and that it is almost always with this gesture that the man/artist describes and reveals himself. Painting can thus be established as the sequence of human gestures, full of manual and handcrafted naturalness, aimed at summoning up delicate and evocative memories of culture in the guise of both literature and of *joie de vivre*, as well as a musicality deriving from a succession of a-logical yet all-inclusive facts. The marks of colour following the action of the hand are not completely controlled, and they thus come about as events and testify to the vital association between artefact and artifice.

This also means that the impact of the colour has a dynamic quality, a motory chromatic physiognomy, and that at times a colour, even before being perceived, can be heralded by the experience of a certain behaviour of the body.

Already in 1972 Giorgio Griffa had considered using as the title a show of his work in Rome the statement, "I don't represent anything; I paint"; some years earlier Rothko had said, "I don't express myself in painting. I express my not-self". Rothko's statement is to be related to his a-historic, a-temporal, and non-subjective spirit which was part of an originary-archaic dimension of life, the sign of the anonymity of visual perception. For Griffa, instead, the "millennial memory of painting has found, in the development of Minimalism, various possibilities for allowing its immense patrimony (including that of representation) to continue to live without having to rely on obsolete structures". In Griffa's space-time dramaturgy, the capacity of his gesture imperiously asserts itself; in some cases it "dances" and gives rise to the "visible"; it is a gesture that embodies the revelation and indication of something else that stands beyond simple presence. So the effect is not coldly and rigorously anonymous, but extremely sensitive. Each painting is, therefore, a testimonial to a different knowledge of its execution.

At the end of the '70s he began his third series of *Frammenti*. Griffa was to write about it, "The various canvases are cut up into tiny irregular fragments onto which the paint is applied. The fragments are then disseminated in the exhibition space. These selfsame canvases, no longer the neutral support for the painting but an integral part of it, become images and figures together with the paint that they contain". It is enough to recall the installation *Frammenti*, 1979-80, to understand that these small canvases, covered with a just a few variously shaped marks and placed on the wall, do not offer any inherent certainty; they have no bases or points of support because their irregular outline shapes them two-dimensionally and frees them from any definite vectorial or directional position. Just like living bodies, they can adapt themselves to all conditions because they have no compositional problems. With these works Griffa shatters the systematic rigidity of his two-dimensional painting and opposes to it a multi-directionality and ubiquity that makes them become vital and free. By denying the canvases a single reality, Griffa affirms their self-generative existence. While being aware of all this, the artist is also aware that the generative act - even while only being able to derive from a network of allusions, debts, and quotations - needs, at the same time, a breach with, and a deviation from, the past. The question is not one of a rejection of the past: but if you love it too much then a really personal style of painting might slip from your grasp. Of course, if you want to paint you must see "everything" - even the past.

Griffa has said, "In the '80s I introduced a more specific memory of painting into the work, the old problem of the cohabitation of marks which draw, and paint which colours: marks and field". This 4th series, *Segno e campo*, leads us to the question of the primacy of mark or colour. In such paintings as *Narciso* (1986), *Campo rosso campo giallo* (1987), *Campo rosso* (2003), *Volare* (2005), and *Policromo* (2003), we can see an aura shining around a coloured mark on an "infinite" background. It seems to acquire a vibrant corporality and no longer shows itself just as a fragment of language but also, and contradictorily, as a fragment of a mysterious language that emanates flashes of mental energy. This colour-mark, oscillating between its own lightness and its attraction to speed, meets up with the "elsewhere". For Griffa the *mind* is a sacred space in which to activate, as in a theatre, thoughts made up of fragmented words and chromatic paths; a place where there is acted out the abstract-colour-mark play of a world where its poetics are brought into focus, because the act of looking is also an act of reading.

We might speak of “a score of ideograms as weightless as aquatic insects” (Italo Calvino). But the insects are also graphic marks, the writing on a piece of paper, or the notes of a flute playing in silence, and without which there would only be the void-fullness of a world which can only be dissolved by what is light, speedy, and slender. As in Oriental or Orientalist painting, there is no opposition between mark and colour in these works because they are successfully based on their superimposition. The perception of colour had a fundamental role in the manifestation of alchemical ideas which, in turn, have made colour a language of movement which was to emerge as the music of colour in the 20th century. Griffa’s colour has an absolute solidity constructed from the most fluctuating material instability which seems to be obtained from the dust of some cosmic-alchemical atomisation; a colour from space and, therefore, a stem cell importing the taste of an unknown colour. On Griffa’s canvases we find the colours of the beginning and end of a day.

Colour is considered as a means for arriving “elsewhere” or for hinting at the climate within the canvas or at the sensitivity of the artist; it is organised by a syntactic chain of marks that resonate against their frame of reference. The colours selected are neither opaque nor brilliant; they retain their latent radiance and suggest weight, but they remain as tender as certain skies by Carpaccio or Lotto. It is never a question of the chill industrial clarity of Minimalist tradition but, rather, a strength based on a control of details aimed at a silence linked to the history and intensity of ancient colours. If we look at the various canvases called *Tre linee con arabesco*, 1991, part of the 5th series, we become aware that the various sequences of marks adapt to the series of works by imposing on themselves a unifying rule: three lines accompanied by an arabesque. And the arabesque, as its name implies, is linked to Arabic-Islamic, and at times Chinese, art; it represents the surmounting of representation. In fact it is not a representation but a rhythm, even an acoustic one, that acts through the infinite repetition of a theme: a psalmody. Arabesques permit an escape from the conditioning of time by also becoming a support for contemplation because they have neither beginning nor end: in fact they tirelessly quest for limitlessness. So this type of ornamentation is essentially a kind of negation of geometric closed forms. Schlegel went even further when he suggested that arabesques were even an originary form of human fantasy. The manifestation of the chaos from which forms originate into what we might call creation from nothing.

“In the second half of the ‘90s I began the series with numbers which aims at imparting information about the way in which the development of the work was realised. The numbers indicate the order in which the various marks and colours were applied to the canvas.” (Giorgio Griffa). Such paintings as *Quindici colori* (1999), *Sette colori* (2000), and *Otto colori* (2002), do not simply indicate the artist’s way of orchestrating colours and marks – I am now referring to the 6th series – but they remind us that a meaning has been given to the numbers, one that goes far beyond mathematical calculation. From the mystic numbers of antiquity to modern forms of superstition, each culture, from the highest to the lowest, Eastern and Western, has conferred a symbolic value on numbers: religious, philosophical, cosmological, and predictive.

The 7th series, *Alter Ego*, is extremely fascinating. Here the artist gives free rein to his historical memory, a memory that reinvests things with their full import and that can increase attention to differences, to hidden biographical data. His look at the past, and his stratified iconography becomes the just recipe for a search for themes, metaphors, and tales to be dipped into. As Baudrillard says, Art History becomes our “lost reference point”, in other words our myths, and, as such, it takes its place on the canvas. But, as long as the past and memory re-appropriate its meaning and accept its fragmentariness, then it is also necessary to distance ourselves from it and realise the difficulty of understanding it and its fragmentation which, at times, does not reconnect its pieces unless through interpretation and testing. Today, an artist like Griffa draws freely on the storehouse of museums and art history. The artist does not search in the labyrinths of memory in order to debunk values but, rather, for “a comparative model” to be verified, symbols that might represent the origins of existence and action. In our case it is sufficient to look at such works as *Paolo e Piero* (*Paolo Uccello e Piero Dorazio* - 1982), *Matisseria n.1* (1982), *Tre linee con arabesco n.319* (*Matisse* - 1992), *Luxe calme et voluptè* (*Matisse* - 1999), *Fibonacci* (*Mario Merz* - 2006), and *Caro Piero* (*Piero della Francesca* – 2008) in order to understand that this extraction of ideas-icons is purely mental or existential and is the result of his love for, or recognition of, data; these can

then be transformed and restored to us through marks of colour without any hint of “appropriation” or quotation. So the works are tinged with an iconographic “desire” resulting from an activity aimed at dominating what is irrational and intuitive, while severe self-criticism elevates such thoughts and choices to the plane of aesthetic taste. What is immediately evident is Griffa’s passion for the magical colours of Matisse, someone who countered Cubism with an all-embracing idea of the whole and the greatest expressive complexity together with the greatest simplicity. It is a synthesis of the arts – music and poetry come together, and the painting is a synthesis of representation and decoration, lines and colours: everything acts within the ultra-sensitive, though non-transcendental, dimension of the heightened colours.

The group of works comprising the 8th *Sezione aurea* series rounds off, without exhausting, this creative period, a period begun in 2000 and that is concerned with the mathematical aspect of the “golden section”. Once again there are numbers, those studied by the Pythagoreans, also known as the *pentagram*, and which were also considered a symbol of harmony and from which is obtained the *golden number*, the analogical proportional element between the human figure and the subject of nature. In art the concept of harmony and its numerical laws have ruled since archaic times, whether through the golden section or spiral growth processes; they are known as the Fibonacci series or, in other words, a series of numbers that is endless and thus projected towards infinity. In this way a different vision of the world is suggested, after man had, for centuries, been questioning the value of images in relation to their object referent. The development of modernism has led us to go beyond its limits, even though these limits are not external but an internal frontier, an idea of a boundary, because it comes about at the point in which the visible and the invisible touch and where place and non-place are tangential.

This work about the golden section reminds us that also that if music is the most free form of empirical and everyday experience, the one most unbound by any kind of direct relationship with what language “represents”, then it can be affirmed that there exists an analogy between Griffa’s work and music. Deep down his works are visual “scores” of two-dimensional marks, “unconscious and intuitive” exercises in calculation where the execution is nothing other than the translation into marks of conceptual processes. In this sense the work of Griffa are visual “scores” based on silent relationships between concepts and processes.

Each time we try to lend our ears to these sounds they die away only to spark into life once again on another canvas.

All the series by Griffa have a beginning but not an end: they are constantly developing poetic progressions. In this sense Griffa’s “travel book”, because it is a synthesis of varied yet coherent moments, posits itself as a complex regrouping of experience in which distant events are brought together and, as with the sinuous winding of a river, things interlace, disappear, come back again, and thus suggest the outlines of a temporal experience, but one which is different to the one enclosed within philosophical ideas about time, as time becomes meaningful because it draws the traits of temporal experience in a narrative manner.