

Signs of Movement

Davide Ferri

Few things can be said about Santi Alleruzzo's life: he was born in Messina, at a very young age he moved to Calabria, on the other side of the strait that separates Sicily from the mainland, and he worked also in Messina as an adult. It can be said that every morning first as a teacher and then as – until he was the headmaster of the art school – he used to take the ferry to Messina, but that his home and studio were in Villa San Giovanni, on the opposite shore. They were in a two-storey building by the sea, where the windows of his studio did not give onto the sea but rather onto a silent alleyway with little traffic. It can be said that he left no written testimony but many portfolios of sketches, images, and newspaper cuttings – one of which states: "Only the painter can overcome death".¹ That for twenty-five years he was the Secretary of the Villa San Giovanni award and of all the many critics who knew him, the one he had the longest relationship with was Marcello Venturoli.

During one of Venturoli's frequent visits, they decided to go on a brief trip to Sicily to meet the poet Bartalo Cattafi (whose verses he loved)² but the trip never came about. It can be said that he did not travel much, and that he mostly met his friends and critics at his own home.

He was known by many as the "Painter of the Strait" and, even though the label did not really fit him, he ended up keeping it for the rest of his life.

•

One of his very earliest paintings gives the very poetic idea of a portrait of the artist as a young man. It is a small panel with irregular, worn-down outlines, which shows a boy from behind, on the beach, with a boat abandoned on the shore, a row of breakwater boulders, a strip of sea and then again of land, a line that slopes down until it fades into an invisible, atmospheric horizon burnt by the light. A vision of solitude, in other words, of isolation and the impossibility of leaving and getting out of that cramped horizon.

•

At the turn of the forties and fifties, when Alleruzzo began painting, Italian art was in a state of ferment, with a whirlwind of conflicting energies and tensions, heated debates and discussions. On the one hand there were the supporters of abstractionism and on the other those of figuration, and between them those who sought a fusion and who ended up with a sort of (sometimes mannerist) neo-Cubism, which brought together many artists from the two extremes.

In those years, Rome and Milan were the powerhouses of this new Italian art, which was acquiring a new shape. It was here that groups and movements formed, disbanded, and formed again, often with the same artists. They included Forma 1, Origine, the Fronte Nuovo delle Arti, the Movimento Arte

Concreta, the Gruppo degli Otto, through to the Movimento Spazialista and the Movimento Arte Nucleare.

So what part of all this ferment of ideas and influences reached a painter studying and making his debut apparently way out on the margins?

Just next door, Sicily possibly offered other models and directions, and a safer place. In those years, echoes of the 1934 exhibition of works by four Sicilians at the Milione in Milan³ still clearly reverberated. Two of them had been painters – Renato Guttuso and Lia Pasqualino Noto – and it had been an attempt to bring together the different trends of Italian figuration in a form of painting that was “free and expressionist”.⁴

Even though he had lived in Rome since 1937 and defended a cultured, up-to-date, Picasso-style realism, Renato Guttuso was an undisputed authority. The tenacious ties with figurativism – although in this case an erudite rather than provincial figurativism – placed Sicily at the centre of the debate in those years.

Alleruzzo too had been a figurative painter, but his figurativism had not been comparable to any of the experiences and visions that had been evolving in those years in Italy and in Sicily.

I have looked – though in vain – for possible similarities with the works of Piero Guccione, who was a friend of Alleruzzo’s, and with the artists of the Scicli School. This was on the suggestion of his son Giuseppe, who knew that his father had been in contact, though rather on the side-lines and without ever being part of the group, with these painters who chose to live in the same place, in a little town in the province of Ragusa, allowing their research into the landscape to interact. Guccione’s work too is linked to a particular territory – on the southern coast of Sicily and around Modica. Guccione is mainly

a painter of seascapes and horizons, but his approach – unlike Alleruzzo's – is direct, frontal, and capable of embracing a broad view of great depth.

Santi Alleruzzo was an all-round painter, creating landscapes, still lifes, portraits, female figures, nudes, landscapes with figures, interiors, scenes from indoors – a studio-home that acts as a centre, from which the artist appears to look out at the world – and life on the strait.

Alleruzzo was a figurative painter and the motifs of his paintings are always the same: the two shores, the sea, the horizon, lemons, windows and shutters, boats, trains and cars, beaches and bathers.

In some cases, these recurrent motifs or themes became short series, but almost none of these corresponds to a precise period or to a particular season in his life. On the contrary, these series tend to run along parallel lines over long periods, and sometimes it is as though they overlapped, mingling into each other.

In some paintings, a still life encounters a landscape, with the horizon peeping out from behind a table, which might be on a terrace overlooking the sea or simply placed together with the blue water. A portrait might encounter a landscape – faces are often seen as landscapes but in Alleruzzo's case a tangle of vegetation of oblique brushstrokes is superimposed on many portraits, pushing the figure into the distance, like a diaphram that produces its presence. A still life might mingle with a portrait and, as in a painting from the fifties, a female face in the form of a photograph or newspaper cutting may appear among the objects in a still life. And then again, a closed shutter may become a sort of shelf for a still life with lemons, or a still life may combine with a landscape. This can be seen in another,

more recent series by the artist, in which a dialogue between outdoor and indoor space forms around an open window, in an elegant, jarring way: on the one hand – indoors – still lifes with a lemon, and on the other – just outside – with cars racing by.

This erratic nature of the subjects and motifs around a clearly defined centre of gravity are an emblematic feature of Santi Alleruzzo's art. To understand these aspects – the idea of a fragmented, prudent, lively, restless, problematic figurativism, which is never too lyrical, quietly visionary and in a sense even prudish – we first need to think of the landscape around the strait, for all its moods and contradictions are absorbed into Alleruzzo's painting.

In other words, we need to accept the definition of Alleruzzo as the Painter of the Strait – an approximation that this text ought to disprove or at least attempt to water down. But it is precisely the way this painter was attached to his landscape, and this multiplication of visions of a restricted territory, that reveals his diversity.

In April last year I visited Alleruzzo's home in Villa San Giovanni. The little studio at the back is exactly as he left it and his library is still intact: it conveys the idea of a painter who was right up to date, with magazines and catalogues that he had sent to him from around the world.

And I thought how the reverberations of distant places can reach all the way to someone on the margins: the dialectic between the spaces and zones of the paintings, the dusty, unifying luminosity of Pierre Bonnard; the rough, essential outlines and air of certain portraits by Alex Katz; the views through the gratings and balusters of Virgilio Guidi; the segmented, naïve landscapes of David Hockney; the feigned

amateurism of Peter Doig (and also, I would say – if it were not for the fact that the English artist started painting in the late eighties – Peter Doig’s way of overlapping the wefts and warps of stains and almost abstract brushstrokes onto the figures).

I thought that when the painter lives in a secluded place – for that is his privilege – he can more easily attract distant places into the construction of his story.

•

The Strait of Messina forms a landscape that is like a demarcated, concluded universe – land on either side and mountains behind the towns and cities. One has the sensation of being in a sprawling metropolis – with its inhabitants apparently predisposed to immobility. But their immobility is lively for ferries crisscross the strait at every hour of day and night, trains and cars zip along the coast on either side trying to reach the ports in time for boarding, and the winds and currents are known to be strong in that stretch of sea.

Alleruzzo’s paintings reproduce this idea of movement and lively immobility. They show ferries in the middle of the sea, trains travelling, what one sees along the motorway, vaguely distorted and out of focus due to the speed – landscapes run through by horizontal forces. Or they make conflicting forces coexist, like the static nature of a still life and the movement of a speeding car. In this sense, Alleruzzo’s paintings really are “maps of forces”, as Gilles Deleuze used to say about Bacon’s works.⁵

•

Alleruzzo is also a painter of horizons. And of horizontal bands, which form the natural shape of the landscape on the strait: land, sea, breakwater boulders and then sea again, and land, and sky. And horizontal lines, in the form of electric wires or cables, and metal girders of guard rails. And, as I have said, the force lines that run horizontally through the paintings.

It may be because they lack a horizon, or because of the unfulfilled desire for a horizon, that these horizons and horizontal lines proliferate in some of his paintings. They form a musical score, a subdivision into overlapping areas or zones, behind which the elements of the landscape are arranged and distances simplified, within which the spatial separations between things unfold.

This score also transforms the vision and the things within it, taking them to a level closer to abstraction: the profile of the mountain thus becomes more regular, the ferries crossing the straight turn into simple brushstrokes, which might even look like reflections or waves on the water or simply geometrical shapes. The trees and plants become vertical or slightly oblique brushstrokes in the foreground, or blotches with regular outlines.

•

Shutters are another recurring theme in Alleruzzo's work, either closed or ajar and always framed by a portion of wall (to prevent them from becoming too abstract).

They are themselves a grid through which the landscape appears as a luminous infiltration and variation of colours, once again in horizontal lines and bands: the red of the roofs, the yellow of the sand, the blue of the sea and, once again, the yellow of the other shore. The shutter is also a membrane, a diaphragm, a filter, a shelter or an invitation for indirect but inevitable vision.

Another emblematic feature of Alleruzzo's art is precisely this quality of vision – lateral, furtive, in a certain sense seeing through – and it suggests a sort of distrust of figuration, which appears to be automatic and predictable, and all too frontal. This is also true of the figure, which is often an apparition, a face or body seen surreptitiously, just glimpsed between the branches, among the reeds or the blades of grass that the painter turns into vigorous vertical or slanting brushstrokes.

Then there is the figure of a recumbent woman, an apparition, a sort of Olympia, Danae or Pauline Borghese, the profile of an idealised female beauty, which we see in many paintings: in a meadow, for example, behind a row of trees that creates its space of pertinence, separating it from the rest of the surrounding landscape. It may be in the foreground, from behind or from the front, but half-hidden (from the eyes of the viewer) by a tangle of plants and flowers, or in an interior, isolated from the outside by a closed window.

•

Most of the paintings reproduced in this book – all small and medium-format panels and canvases – are from one particular decade, the late seventies and early eighties, which was that of the artist's full maturity. To some extent, a decade that sums up many aspects of his artistic vision.

The selected paintings are mainly landscapes: permeated by forces and inhabited by figures that are as though seen through, they are landscapes with horizontal bands, with stains, paintings that reproduce the lively, ragged life of the strait through a movement within the paintings themselves, pitting the energy of the vertical/slanting brushstrokes, with gestures that at times appear to be erasing the image, against the rigid construction of the picture, using horizons and horizontal lines.

The selection does not take into account other, later works, except in passing references: so there are none of the large landscapes of the nineties, in which the lively view of the strait is softened into peaceful night scenes, and football pitches bathed in light, a subject that often appears in the last years of Alleruzzo's life.

These are things that will naturally need to be told again, but the decade that this book has chosen to examine is, to a great extent, of seminal importance.

Especially when used as contrasting forms, figuration and abstraction are terms that may appear obsolete today, and yet they are essential when describing painting. This is also true when, as in the case of many of the greatest painters of recent generations, they become porous and the borderline between the two is more nuanced and elusive.

From a secluded position during that decade (while art was once again returning to painting in Italy and Europe), Alleruzzo was formulating his own idea of figuration, in a prudent and at times unresolved form. Through its subtraction and isolation, it was very close to abstraction, but to one that has always been a sort of undercurrent and that some paintings appear to be on the point of announcing.

What I mean is that Alleruzzo could even have become an abstract painter during that decade, but there was a landscape to show, the landscape of the strait, and this was a deeply felt need for him and an inspiration that he simply could not abandon.

1. An article by Elémire Zolla entitled “Solo il pittore vince la morte perché riesce a fermare il tempo”, published in the Corriere della Sera on 15 August 1999.
2. Also the title chosen for the Italian original of this essay – *Moto a luogo* – is that of a collection of poems by Bartolo Cattafi published in the book L’osso, l’anima, Mondadori, Milan, 1964.
3. *2 pittori e 2 scultori siciliani*, Galleria del Milione, Milan, May-June 1934.
4. Fabio Benzi, *Arte in Italia tra le due guerre*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin, 2013, p. 196.
5. The idea of Bacon’s works as “force maps” appears a number of times in Gilles Deleuze’s essay *Francis Bacon - Logica della sensazione*, Quodlibet, Macerata, 1995.