

BETTE MIFSUD

THE INNER JOURNEY

One has to arrive, to make the whole journey.

Marguerite Duras

There is what one knows and what one does not know, what one sees and what one does not see. They do not coincide. To begin to know is actually to accept to part with a perception, an image that was seen as a reality. We then change our position, the angle from which we look at things: we can now perceive.

Conversely, what is visual displays as equally true to our gaze the diverse elements composing the image — which always says “there is” and does not bear, as language does, the mark of negation. In the creation of a visual object there are competing intentions to make something visible, and to allow the vibration of the invisible. The latter may be gathered in a sense of space, in gazes of intent, by the simplicity of gestures combined with a mannerism — as in the paintings by Jacopo di Cione, referred to in Bette Mifsud’s work.

It is this set of questions about visual art that she is concerned with and that underlie the space of her installation. It is not an ‘installation’ for us as if we were potentates standing in front of things believing that we know and do not want to see but just to see again. On the contrary, Bette Mifsud’s work unsettles us by carrying out a diffraction: scattering various photographs which approach the different processes of making paintings. By taking x-rays or micrographs, it is possible to have insights into ‘moments’ of the works, at the level where the matter is equated to the expression of a technique and its successive operations, as well as the care given to these by the painters. Technology bears witness for what took place in the making. It bears, as Leonardo da Vinci said, “the habitus of the art” — the technical mastery, “and the quivering hand” — the search by the painter and the risks he took, how he was coming to terms with the demands of the visible and the invisible.

We are reading the processes and the time needed for the realisation of the paintings. In the subtle elaboration of the surface, one senses the layers which give a depth, a quality of a gesture and of who made it.

Thus, we are close to the work in progress. As well, technology accounts for changes affecting the work, how the matter decays, and undergoes a mutation, is ageing, being also its truth: of the time past between its creation and our gaze on it.

Accompanying this realisation, this becoming of the work, Bette Mifsud has devised what is maybe an ironic apparatus which recalls *inside-out* the perspective adopted precisely after Jacopo di Cione. Our perception continues very much to be affected by the device of the Italian Renaissance in which a central overview in the shape of converging beams is gathered in the eye and reflected inside the body as if it were a camera obscura. In the installation, if we put into perspective the two related transparencies — a photographic negative and its positive showing the back of a painting — what we see is blackened. As with the other elements of the installation, we cannot find any privileged or frontal position: we are encouraged to move, possibly to find oblique ways. Likewise, the chiselling of the wooden panel is oblique, as is the opening attack on the violin, in order to tackle that which resists.

But at this point we have yet some way to go. What the installation raises is perhaps that we have less to find a way than a way to be. Rather than a question of position, it is a question of disposition. Though unbound, technology falls short of what is always beyond — the infinite.

The paintings by Jacopo di Cione were religious: the attempt to present human deeds to, and under, the eyes of God. As we look at them, we know that we do not see what the worshippers saw at the time and knew. We do not perceive in the represented bodies the hold of God’s gaze over them: our bodies must not keep a set position as their’s did; we move from within according to our motives or élan.

The blazing blue or the colours of the faces, the clothes are not ‘other’, incorporeal space, matter, flesh, co-existing with the living ones.

Yet, the longing for the infinite is our own even if it is dismissed in words, or in the way people frame their existence. These paintings are reflecting more than the achievement of a technique, the poise of a gesture, more than what one does.

The installation incites us to go further in the particular journey that each of us has undertaken.

Today, the cleavage between knowing and seeing — which were once in accord, in another time, in another life — opens out, to be *heard* by you and me, here, now, to be felt. That which is also called the sacred is less beyond than within ourselves.

BRIGITTE CARCENAC de TORNÉ

Vault, 1991 ►
photographic emulsion on wood

