

Critical text

Patrick Bayly

Painting outside the cave

by Lucia Longhi

Patrick Bayly's paintings present formal characteristics that seem to prelude a story, or a somewhat narrative sequence: there are human figures, domestic settings and still lifes, with visual references that seem to connect the paintings to each other. The truth is, these compositions are not meant to tell a story, describe a situation or express a critical position. Ironically, as indicated by the didactic titles, these images are none other than themselves.

The object of Bayly's concern is not what we find represented in the paintings: the artist will not tell us about candlelight dinners, everyday life in his studio, a group of friends or any personal or collective discourse that could be prompted by these images. Yet, almost paradoxically, it is only by exploring every formal detail that the artist's conceptual proposition is revealed.

Bayly's paintings are open to multiple interpretations. This, one could remark, is an observation that could be valid for any painting. However, the subject of his work are precisely the mechanisms underlying the plurality of meanings referable to a sign - beyond the subjects represented. Therefore, the painter's work goes beyond the boundaries of visual research and expands to the semiotic one. His process is based on the evisceration of the act of interpretation, and ultimately of what constituted the foundation of figurative painting in the history of art: the signifier-signified relationship. As we enter this forest of symbols, we realize that the subject of this exhibition is not the representation given by the images, but representation itself.

We are used to expecting that our aesthetic and semantic perception leads at some point to a univocal interpretation of the work of art, or, recalling the thought of philosopher Stephen Pepper, that the work of art is the ideal limit of an infinite series of perceptions (S. Pepper, *The Work of Art*, Bloomington 1955). Bayly's work goes in the opposite direction and aims rather at a separate analysis of those founding factors of pictorial practice - sign and interpretation - and then analyzes their relation of indexicality. The artist visually highlights this relationship through precise strategies: the reiteration of subjects, the duplication of images - and even of the paintings themselves - and projection used both physically and conceptually. While appearing to be a highly conceptual practice, it is a work in which figuration proves to be fundamental.

Recalling the fundamentals of traditional visual semiotics, Bayly sets out from the premise that subjects are relationships requiring the projection of meaning into a sign in order to function. The artist does not refer to the mimetic or allegorical function of painting - he refers instead to the representative function, understood as a chain of transformations.

This conceptual assumption is activated by the projection of photographs with a projector. If, at first, this technique has the purpose of guiding the pictorial gesture, it then turns into a device that also projects layers of meaning. For instance, in the background of the work *Dealers*, behind the group of people posed in the artist's studio, we can notice the same paintings displayed in the exhibition. In this way, the artist doubles the presence of the paintings in the physical space and in the conceptual space, consequently activating a duplication of meanings and interpretations, and ultimately turning the work into a meta-painting. One of the possible interpretations referable to the work *Dealers* reappears in the painting *Weed*, creating an immediate connection of meaning, almost didactic, yet neither confirmed nor denied. We find the duplication technique also in *Allegory of the Cosmos as a ruined Spaghetti Dinner, or Interrupted Lady and the Tramp*, where a first level of duplication is already suggested in the title, indicating that the scene could be interpreted both as an allegory of the cosmos and an unexpected turning point in the famous dinner of the movie "Lady and the Tramp". And if we wanted to ask ourselves where the protagonists of the dinner have ended up, we could perhaps find them in the painting *Dogs*, which is present twice in the exhibition, as an original and a copy on paper (*Small Dogs*).

In the still life *Fish* we can observe that there are two perfectly identical tabasco bottles. In *Flower Projection* a vase of flowers projects its dark shadow on the wall, doubling its image even in the physical support: the canvases used to create the work are two, of equal size, forming a diptych which, taken in full, it is deliberately the same size as *Allegory of the Cosmos as a ruined Spaghetti Dinner, or Interrupted Lady and the Tramp*. In *We're All Leaving Town for Good Again* the boundaries between reality and representation, mimesis and allegory dissolve completely: a computer screen pierced by rose stalks seems like a canvas where the name of the "best shooter of all time" Jerry Miculek paradoxically becomes the target of a video game player - probably the owner of those Zapp's chips both on and off the screen. Again, we find a figure split in *Helicopter*, where the specular figure of a mild Gwyneth Paltrow who drives a helicopter gives the idea of a mirrored image.

It doesn't really matter, though, why Gwyneth Paltrow is driving a helicopter, what those dogs behind the fence are doing, or whether the romantic dinner is an allegory of the cosmos. Bayly wants to shift our attention and rather ask us why there are two Gwyneth Paltrow, or what could be the function of the two (or rather three...) identical dog paintings. The duplication technique allows us to focus on the concept of representation itself, rather than on the subjects. Projection and duplication are therefore tools that Bayly uses to convey the key concept of his research: the representative function of painting. In fact, representation already contains in itself the idea of duplication - as it consists of both sign and meaning - and projection, because figurative subjects require the projection of meaning. This practice also allows him to bring classical devices, such as the structure of the diptych or the still life, into a contemporary discourse.

Bayly's painting undermines the traditional semiotic equation composed of a referent, a sign and multiple meanings, thus offering an exegesis of painting itself as a practice. The subjects become indications of a transition, marking the end of one conceptual space and the beginning of another. In a sense, they are destined to be misunderstood: what we are observing are not figures, but relationships.

In this way Bayly also experiments a new approach towards the inevitable self-referentiality of the pictorial practice and consequently a speculation on the painting as a semi-autonomous entity. While, on the one hand, the only way to get rid of the artist's presence in the work would seem to give up figuration and take the path of abstraction, Bayly demonstrates that it is thanks to the figurative sign that, almost paradoxically, it is possible to expand painting beyond its formal constraints and authorship.

With this exhibition Bayly provides an extremely contemporary contribution to figurative semiotics. The artist's process goes in the direction of unlocking the formal constraints of painting, by isolating representation as a system of unlimited transformations taking place within an apparently limited medium. By discerning a kaleidoscopic combination of relationships and projections within the representational function, Bayly presents painting as a medium that has no limits both in its formal ductility and conceptual expansion.

Observing painting as a form of agency capable of reflecting the multifaceted quality of experience and interpretative practice, Bayly's art shows proximity to the contemporary post-media culture, in which identities are multiplied, the real and the virtual overlap, the here-and-now has given way to digital ubiquity and the fragmentation of perspectives translates into the fragmentation of the ways in which we project ourselves onto reality in order to understand it. Thus, his practice also resonates with the most compelling issues of the hermeneutics of the new media, based on the abandonment of modern anthropocentric aesthetics. A univocal approach to reality is no longer valid in an era where new technologies shape new ethical and aesthetic codes. A multiplication of perspectives is already underway and is intrinsically linked to the new visual semiotics also in relation to painting.

Bayly manages to show us painting, all painting, under a new perspective: the most traditional of artistic practices is the most contemporary after all.