

Claudio Verna

Beautiful Life

I do not know what has connected me so intensely, over the years, to the work of Claudio Verna. When I go to see him in his studio, the chatter - always in a certain sense nourishing, even when it is simply anecdotal - develops against the background of his paintings, which are hung or resting along all the walls. We usually sit on two chairs facing each other in front of the wall where Verna paints. Claudio never asks me to devote exclusive attention to them, but the words we say seem at some point to veer fluidly towards the works that are randomly arranged on the walls. Then we get up. It can happen that he himself puts next to each other a painting of the seventies and a recent one, to trace leading threads, relationships and relationships that cross a very large segment of time and to emphasize that there is something in one that, after a few decades, has been developed and reinterpreted in the other, without premeditation, but because of an inevitable push or drive that seems to go through decades.

This also happens in *Beautiful Life*, his first solo show at LABS gallery. The title of the exhibition is that of one of the exhibited works, a "almost-monochrome" tending to white whose surface is contaminated and dotted with an infinity of undertones that make it vibrate for contrasts, fades and increases in intensity. The painting, that is, because of the dominant color, is the image of a white mixed with dirty and unstable tones, apparently distant from the orange and yellow of certain works of Verna to which, closing his eyes, this title is associated. Sometimes I have heard that orange is its most emblematic recurring color: there is nothing, I think, more inaccurate, because Verna colors, as this exhibition at LABS shows, uses them all.

Beautiful Life can only be, above all, a kind of hymn to life. As if to say that, despite an apparent uniformity, an undifferentiated trend, the beauty of life is this mobility, this pulsating of tones and touches under the skin of the painting, or above, because in Verna's work to this below and above corresponds to a before and after of the painting that are mixed in a mobile and indistinct temporality. As I said, in Verna's painting time has been confused for some years now, and the periods that have marked his path tend to collapse into each other and inevitably to recall and relaunch reciprocally.

It will be for this reason, I think, that Verna does not like to talk about the years in which his work was the protagonist of an important season of Italian art, Analytical Painting. It is complicated with some abstract research of the seventies: establishing genealogies and differences, putting order in the maze of definitions that summarize the experiences that were taking place in those years between Europe and the United States. Analytical Painting, Support/Surface, Radical Painting, New Painting, Painting Painting, Post-Minimal Painting refer to ways of doing and feeling painting: fundamental, essential, reflective, opaque, silent. So, if while I am writing I realize that I have left out some of them, those I have tried to list seem to me sufficient to define the image of a tangle with a solid core: a widespread desire for objectivity (and expulsion of subjectivity, that is, of the disappearance of the author in favor of the presence of the viewer), of purification of language, of restart - a position that does not exclude the awareness of belonging to a story, that of abstraction, already long. So, researches that operate a reduction of language around its primary elements (size, measure, support, color), a simple and verifiable operation, the outcome of which is a pictorial object that denies any narrative, representative and illusionistic character.

In any case, in this exhibition, of works of the seventies are exposed only two, in each of the walls of the gallery: have the function of punctuation and act as a counterpoint to the most recent paintings, and serve to fix some elements or emblematic forms of Verna's painting: they are like basic notes on which the whole score of the exhibition is tuned. The modernist matrix grid, for example, is the subject of a work of 1971, apparently defined and regular on a surface that in all respects is "grade zero" and "blank page" but at the same time it is pulsating and intermittent due to the alternation between continuous orange lines and dotted yellow lines. The grid returns in a recent work, *Transiti 1* (2013), but crooked, as if it were a free rear drawing on a surface teeming with shapes and spots that fluctuate on the dominant orange tone. And why not think that at the origin of the orange lines (on green) traced in *Progetto* (2023) there is still a grid... but an "exploded" grid, which seems to frame and contain an evanescent dust in the center of the painting?

Then there are the oblique bands, so I call this figure (an abstract figure as Filiberto Menna defines it in one of the most influential texts of the second half of the twentieth century), which appear in many of Verna's works since the seventies: two bands that rip, and interrupt, from the lower edge of the surface of the painting *Pittura* (1976), the uniformity of white (and they do it as complementary affirmations: an assertive and positive one, determined by a uniform blue background, and a negative one, as pulsation of colors that seem to emerge from inside or from under the white). The oblique band then returns in two recent paintings: in *Andante appassionato* (2012), as a diagonal line that interrupts, or reconfigures, the movement of a range of unstable and volatile tones; and in *Bone Black* (2009), to counterbalance the great black spot in the center of the picture.

Beautiful Life, therefore, has no claim to exhaustiveness, but, inevitably in a partial way, draws a very wide time span, the trajectory of a lifelong search and ideally understood between two ends: the seventies and the recent work, capable of expressing with renewed vitality aspects and qualities that belong to Verna's painting since its inception: the pulsating and vibrating relationship between geometry - a geometry whose lines and surface marks derive from the painting as an object, as a body, considered in all its material articulation - and color, a color that can contrast this geometry, or emphasize it, but making its boundaries porous and perpetually unstable. The ability of color to explore the surface in all its parts, in the center as well as in the margins, organizing itself in bands and lines that follow or contrast with the perimeter and shape of the painting. It is a kind of agility of color, which results in the succession and articulation between planes and layers that have built the image, with colors that from below seem to emerge on the surface, slashing or dotting the dominant field. The beauty of life is also this agility, in fact.

Finally, there is one last thing I would like to observe about Verna's work. And I would start from here: from the fact that for years I have sat at my desk, in my study, and on the wall in front of me there is a painting of his (called *Rado*, made in 2005) that enters my field of vision every time I raise my head from the computer screen. *Rado* is an unusual painting if I consider Verna's production, with distant tones from both bright yellow/orange and saturated and intense blues that connote part of his works. It is a painting, that is, darker, earthy, as if it were part of those works where the tonal range is lowered, and the luminous accents are entrusted to a few single brushstrokes (white but a white mixed with yellow in the case of *Rado*) rather than a background tone. In addition, on the surface develops a kind of clot or development - that two orange lines running along the lateral margins, try to contain -, in which their end colors difficult to name, which turn, say, from a yellow/green to gray/purple. And from this development or clot, which has an unstable character - this mobility of color is another side of that agility I was talking about earlier - I seem to see emerging from the deeper layers when I look at it for a long time, but only from time to time, the features of something traceable to the real, I would say a kind of figure (perhaps a face) or, better, a figure as we see it when we carefully observe a cloud, fickle and momentary.

And it is precisely this that must be observed about some paintings of *Beautiful Life*: from the perpetual instability of their forms, their layers, and their brushstrokes, from the movement that seems to animate them, you can see something emerging that agglutinates in a form with some referent in the real world, something close to a figure, but an unstable and unnamable figure. What is, for example, in *Project*, that form that advances towards the observer, and that a geometric score (a broken and broken grid) tries to contain or identify? An atmospheric clot? A cloud, in fact, from which we could expect to see suddenly emerge a figure? The cloud, as Hubert Damisch said, in a beautiful book entitled *Cloud Theory*, has always been a problem for painters, since the Renaissance, when they wondered how to get that changing element into the perspective grid. In the active relationship in Verna's paintings between geometry and color, it is as if this tension was continually relaunched. So, Verna is also, in some way, a figurative painter? I would not say. I would say rather: he is a painter of potential, variable, subterranean figures.

Davide Ferri