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**STEFANO PULEO**

When a painter's imagination - and that is the surprising thing about Stefano Puleo - is able to produce over a long period a flow of images and figures of particular vitality and sensuality and which pass through the various seasons of nature and conditions of existence, we usually say that the painter is a great natural talent, in our effort to rationalize his effort and make it seem normal - almost as if he were a spring of clear pure water or the fiery magma of a volcano - when he is a poetical phenomenon, and really quite mysterious and enigmatic.

Of course, Stefano Puleo has plenty of natural talent, and from his eyes and hands appear the figures of eros to multiply with apparent ease, while most painters extract a figure from the raw material of colour with great difficulty, and almost always it is an academic figure or a mixture of familiar figures from the present and the past. Today most of the painted figures that we see around are constructions or laboratory re-makes: hash-ups and copies.

The figures that Stefano Puleo paints, mostly females and young people, very seldom remind us of another painter: they are figures that the artist tears away from the flow of life but they are quite puzzling at the same time: because they can belong to memory or to the present or again, to the vision and prefiguration of another world, which you would search for in vain here and now on this Earth. And as these figures are so often pacific and erotic females, they are also refinedly intellectual pictorial constructions: figures connected with other dreams of peace and eros of artists of different periods whom Stefano Puleo feels are his kinsmen. Natural talent, therefore, is only one component in the painter's rich imagination, and he is really quite selective and constructive. He makes his choices and he builds up his pictures with great spontaneity, exalting certain qualities and not others: light, Mediterranean sun, eros, fragrance of being, the onlookers of existence, harmony of stylemes, musical rhythm, the presence of the body and human flesh, amity of senses and colours, vitality of energy and an abysmal sense of death.

We can find some of these qualities here and there, buried in the structure of ancient and modern works of Sicilian poets, narrators,

architects, painters, and sculptors: the temptation to classify even such a vitally poetic, but also enigmatic, personality as Stefano Puleo, in the category of "Sicilianistic" can be strong. But the Sicilianistic category would classify the original qualities of the painter a little better than natural talent would. I think that only a long patient journey through the language and the significant form of his images, so sunny and Mediterranean that they reveal their roots in the vase paintings and the statues of Magna Grecia in the V and IV centuries B.C., will tell us something about the origins of his natural talent and his Sicilianness.

And I should like to have as a travelling companion through the language and the significant form of Stefano Puleo, a painter who certainly knew all about sunniness and eros: that Matisse who, in 1910, had already painted "La chambre rouge", "La danse" and "La musique", which means the sublime introduction into contemporary painting of that universal sense of peace and joy of living (all narrated-painted with the most magical colour that man ever discovered deep down inside himself), which will later animate lots of female figures and which will send out other shoots, years later, in his Moroccan and Algerian pictures; he left a valuable collection of notes on colour, line and eros (Einaudi published it in 1979 with the title "Scritti e pensieri sull'arte").

Henri Matisse at a certain point says something about drawing that seems to me to be fundamental. "When I am doing - says Matisse - my drawings for *Variations*, the movement of the pencil over the paper is something like the movement of a man who tries, groping, to find his way in the dark. By this I mean that my drawing has nothing foreseeable about it: I am guided, I do not lead. I go from a point of the object which is my model to another point which stands out alone for me, apart from the others where my pencil will later go. Perhaps I am directed by an inner force which I transform gradually while it grows, it is not something external. My eyes are looking outwards, but for me in that instant the outside is no more important than a dim glow in the night, towards which I start to go, then, when I get there, I see another light and I head for that, inventing as I go along the way to get

there. It is very interesting to proceed like this; isn't it perhaps the most interesting part of the whole thing?"

In this splendid book edited by Mauro Lombardo to show the up-to-date poetical quality of Stefano Puleo's paintings and drawings, the beautiful lay-out shows the drawings to great advantage, and this is a good thing. From the first drawings, we can see just how true what Matisse said about a man groping his way in the dark was, and that he is guided and heads for a certain point because an inner force is moving him: one little light after another, inventing the way to go!

Stefano Puleo is by no means an illustrator: that world of human figures in action that he draws, is something he has been carrying around for ages: it is his world; it is the world that gives him a human identity in tremendous times when it is so easy for us to lose our identity. Drawing his human types, men and women, the painter recognizes himself. That is why the lines are so strong, without regrets, exact in defining a mood, even a secret mood, swirling when he is following the subtle motion of the soul, and when he describes conscious gestures and unwitting movements, the beauty who knows she is lovely, or that mysterious beauty which is only revealed by a sudden movement or when seen in relation with other bodies.

Human figures dragged out, in a Matissian sense, from the obscurity of day-to-day existence and set into the mythology of existence, with a wonderfully lyrical brushstroke, flagrant onlookers, primeval personalities. Figures of being, so different from the figures of having and of possession, so common nowadays, and dominating in our society; I think, because of "having" and "possession", you can no longer tell where civilization ends and uncouthness begins. The gestures of the male and female figures are ancient gestures and yet they are drawn like the first gestures at a beginning. It is not by chance that in the more recent drawings and paintings the image is dominated by the figure or figures of uncontaminated, astonished youth, that Pasolini would have called "the dream of something".

When I was talking about sunny, Mediterranean feeling, I mentioned certain roots that go back to Greek vase painting, for that confusion of young bodies on the rounded shape. The young bodies clustered together of Stefano Puleo are no longer gods, of the handmaidens of the gods, but, in any case, they give life to a modern, laical mythology. The poet Louis Aragon

said of Matisse's figures "luxury, calm, voluptuousness" and the luxury was of the senses and feeling: they are words that I would use to describe the erotic, pacific figures that Puleo likes so much.

Like the needle of a seismograph, both in the plain drawings and in the paintings where it brings and holds back the colour, the line "writes" the gesture, it could be that violent movement that shows the inner energy at the moment when it explodes, or the infinitesimal one that betrays rather than declares a secret, if energetic, movement of the senses and of the soul.

In the years between the second half of the Seventies until half way through the Eighties, Stefano Puleo gave an interpretation of the energy of his human figures that is centrifugal without being disintegrated. His Christ, almost doubled up in the agony of crucifixion, you can almost "touch" the anguish and the sorrow of the women lying at the foot of the cross, was the start, in 1977, of a series of very expressive pictures, sometimes almost grotesque, without being expressionist: the male and female figures carrying a woman; the group of shouting women; the scene of a martyrdom; the men arguing bitterly; the group of anxious women with a white horse; the women in love on the beach; the wedding scene; the couple of lovers who seem to turn into stone. The colour is more or less incandescent but it does not come from a warm and sensual ochre tonality; it is the line drawing that exasperates the anatomy and the expressions, so much so as to deform certain faces expressing rage or shouting. But if you look carefully at the structure of the image you will see that in the composition there is always a centre that irradiates the bitter energy of situations which can be terse or even explosive for the furious feelings they express.

A particularly poetical moment is when the painter meets the characters from Verga's "Malavoglia" (The House by the Medlar Tree) giving rise to a short series of pictures dominated by the sea and by the struggle of mankind. Two paintings are particularly significant and vital in that they are the images of energy: "Lattesa della Provvidenza" (Waiting for the "Provvidenza") and "La pesca notturna" (Night fishing). In the first painting, the energy of man faces the energy of the great movement of the sea; in the second, human energy is diffused in the blue night, quietly slipping along but ready to strike. They are two versions of the same theme of energy, and they

are two beautiful examples of a modern and up-to-date "re-reading" of the pages of Verga, where energy and destiny are so closely interwoven as to inspire any painter for an illustration, also because it is hard to think in terms of language of anything more powerful, dramatic or communicative than the works of Verga.

It could be said that Stefano Puleo has represented in painting the conflict-relationship between man and the sea, perhaps he was remembering Picasso's "night fishing at Antibes" and other sea pictures, including one by Guttuso, deriving from that fishing scene. Towards the distance and towards the deep: azure-blue-green are the magma colours of desire and the struggle for life: a dominating tone of nocturnal stormy colour that Stefano Puleo only uses for his meeting with the "Malavoglia" characters. Soon after, for his sweet girl sorting tomatoes and for his Harlequins, the painter returns to his warm earthy palette.

Of the Harlequins, there is a beautiful variation that goes beyond the famous, lovable clowns and Harlequins of Picasso in his pink period. There is a painting with three boys, one of whom is dressed as Harlequin and the other two are naked but coloured triangles are printed on their flesh, on their bodies. It is an unusually graceful picture, with its gentle colours and the impression it gives of a dawn, life beginning. And the "feeling", just a little bit more melancholy, returns in a solitary figure of a seated Harlequin who has a brilliantly luminous body against the dazzling orange of the space that surrounds him like a womb. The harlequin series means not only a return to the sunny ochre palette, enriched by an amazing array of warm, luminous, immensely varied tonalities, but also a return to the flow towards a centre, part of the structure and part of the story at the same time, of the energy circulating in the picture.

When Stefano Puleo paints "Figure notturne" (Nocturnal figures) in the intimacy of his imagination there must have been a turning-point, with a sudden return to mythography placing at the centre of metamorphosis young people as they walk along the streets, at their meetings in bars and restaurants, in their melancholy or dreaming solitude, so different from the figures of the early Eighties. It is the representation of life that passes by quickly and which captures of each person a gesture, a look, or a moment of waiting, of suspense; and the single gestures melt together to form the flow which is the real characteristic of our

times. A story then? Yes, but once again without illustration and also very sensitive, to certain aspects of modern life and just as a development of that sense of modernness that Charles Baudelaire wrote about for the Paris of his day.

In the Thirties and the Forties, Migneco and Sassu, Manzù the painter and Ziveri, Guttuso and Mafai, Janni and Maccari created a large number of painted images of life going by, often the pictures are unforgettable. They formed a link with the Europe of the Impressionists and the Expressionists, Otto Dix, Max Beckmann, Ludwig Kirchner, George Grosz. These nocturnal scenes with boys and girls of Stefano Puleo's, are not references to the splendid art of the past: they are pictorial figures of the present, and they are so typical of present-day existence and so germinal, as if from them living and being should spring to life.

For that greater or lesser dawn-like quality about them, they remind us of the clowns of Picasso's pink period and the tender sensual odalisques of the early fauve Matisse, who is still a little undecided between Brittany and Gauguin's Tahiti. In relation to the spaciousness of the nocturnal scene, a new incandescence has taken over the colour and the flashes and gleams of glowing tints that spring erotically from the black. If I remember correctly, among the artists of the past, in particular Rembrandt, Rubens and Fragonard used to bring out the light of the flesh from the shadow, like firebrands. Stefano Puleo with his nocturnal figures, moving or waiting, renews this magic of the light of the flesh in shadow. The composition is almost always on a horizontal format, a supple unfolding of the shapes of the bodies, offering almost a keyboard of colours, while the vertical nature of some of the more recent works turns the female figures into lighted torches of colour, bringing the incandescence of bodies, clothes and flesh to a radiant quality of the colour itself that illuminates and reverberates through the whole space, creating an amazing psychic and structural effect.

This occurs for the medium to large size pictures, but I would say it explodes in the small size ones where the colours of the female figures in the rooms are like firebrands carried around in the night. Here the artist has given a profusion of precious colours, with a beautifully vivacious touch and fast, unrepentant brushstrokes that well define the various types and situations. All this series, which we could call in an old-fashioned way the "Harem" series, renews the mystery of the fascination of the female figure as

seen by Ingres, Matisse and Guttuso, giving the bodies and the moods an erotic tension of life that is very up-to-date.

The more recent female figures, above all those painted in 1990, do not need gestures to stand out well: the reality of their youth, of their luminous flesh and bright clothes is sufficient. They are "antique" caryatids that support life with great aplomb; and it should be said that Stefano Puleo has really an inexhaustible imagination in varying types, situations, poses, gestures adhering to the mobility of life with his wonderful artist's gaze and hand.

Tributes to fellow artists, Sicilian or not, are rare. There is a rooftop scene of a Sicilian village, very structural, which is something like a picture painted by Guttuso. There is a glade in Paradise with female figures abandoning themselves to calm and voluptuousness that reminds us of a famous picture by Matisse. That's all, practically. If Stefano Puleo is so parsimonious with his references and tributes, he is even more so about the Sicilian landscape and the people who have been, or are, part of his life. I am not saying that the concreteness of the world and of nature does not filter through in his pictures: I say that his filter is extremely fine and that his eros painting is a very mental exercise, and, to judge by the extraordinary beauty of the colour, is not an imitation but a dream of the world.

The construction of the picture is always a creation of imagination and almost never an imitation: a proceeding from point to point as Matisse said. What Van Gogh said from Auvers-sur-Oise comes to mind: going from one Provence village to another was for him like going from one star to another. There are people, they are managers, merchants, artists, who have the habit of taking the plane to New York: it is possible, I think, that they are travelling less far than Van Gogh did when he walked from one village to another in Provence or than Stefano Puleo does when he goes from one village to another in Sicily, which he knows and loves. If we were to discuss the true human and poetical sense of the journey we should never stop talking; but I wanted to mention it to underline the fact that painting, before being a fact of communication or of buying and selling, is first of all a creative thing which speaks of territories untouched by the human foot, or abandoned for ages, and there is no electronic device capable of imprisoning millions of viewers, that can take the place of the quality and value of the creative factor which is a part of

painting, even in its apparent solitude of research and imaginative human experience in memory, in the present and in prefiguration.

That Van Gogh's Sunflowers reach a value of millions of dollars, and that, through television, millions and millions of human beings can learn of their existence because of their market value is an external thing with respect to the primary creative fact that one day the gaze of Van Gogh decided to tear them from their field and bring their sunlight into his humble room: and there was light, a creative act which we usually attribute to the Divine. Stefano Puleo lives and works near the sea, there is lots of sunshine, near a volcano that for many centuries has never let us forget the fire which burns in its cavernous belly. And yet he never paints the external aspects of a Sicily that is familiar to him with its sunshine and drama.

As a painter, and with the mystery that is part of being a painter, he returns everything that he sees and feels with a certain brushstroke and a certain colour possessing energy, eros, luminosity, that are the products of a re-elaboration of life and what is visible in the depths of ego, using creative pulsations that come from memory and from the present and from vision. That wonderful colour, so sanguine and sensual, that he uses to construct his female figures, certainly does not come out of a tube. And this colour is a constant factor of the Eighties. Even in the "nocturnals" it burns like the golden ochre yellow of Van Gogh's sunflowers. The substance of this colour is flooded with sunlight, which varies in luminous intensity, but never fails, through the days and the seasons. A sunlight carefully constructed and conserved in the ego, which wants this light as a metaphor of life and of the human sense of life. Indeed, it transforms it into the substance-colour-light of a story which involves a large number of boys and girls who bring, with great simplicity, this sunshine, this light, into every time, every situation.

In a small painting by Stefano Puleo can be concentrated the colour-light of a very long period of time and an immense space: this is what the form of every figure and the colour of which it is made "say". The painter is proceeding along an artistic road which has already seen the passage of Matisse and Guttuso, among others, but he does not tread in their footsteps, he makes his own way following his lyricism and his personal experience of life and painting that go together so naturally: in short, I mean to say that he is conscious of belonging to a modern artistic civilization.

At this point I remember Paul Klee's shout of joy, when during his trip to Morocco with his painter friend Macke, in the dazzling sun: "that's it, now I am a painter!" And Klee came from a great cultural tradition, even musical; artistically he was already a very cultured man. He was lacking the sunlight and the imaginative power of colour when it is made up of sunlight. About colour and the power of colour many theories have been presented, and even rigid canons have been proposed. There are artists who have scrupulously, even scientifically, followed these canons but their pictures are cold, very cold, because they had no sunlight inside themselves and sunlight, in painting, is not something that can be improvised.

There are other artists, and Stefano Puleo is one of them, who have sunlight inside themselves and as they paint they educate it and develop it until they reach a set of rigorous rules: such that if the tone of a colour is even a tiny fraction above or below the correct light value, that out-of-tone colour will destroy the whole picture. If an artist, even a good artist, wants to avoid painting flat imitations of nature or life, senses and culture have to be always in active and activating tension. The visual sequence of this monography shows that, in the Eighties, tension between senses and culture found an increasingly harmonious equilibrium, generating pictures which were never repetitive. It is very difficult, for the same years, to find in Italy an artist who varied so much the eros of the female figure as to make of it a pictorial diamond, very transparent and with infinite facets.

Whether the female figure is, still or in movement, in a room or in the street, the space is never for the artist a surrounding to be illustrated by description, it is rather the psychic space, small or large, that every human being creates around himself with his existence and his presence. If attention is paid to the relationship between figure and space, it will be seen that the space is never repetitive, either for the single figure or for the groups of figures. And then the surprise comes from the metamorphic quality of the colour that seems to wrap the figures one by one, each with its gesture and its most intimate expression. It could even be said that Stefano Puleo has created the figures of so many young women who go to make up a generation with its existential enigma, its expectations, its dream of another world. The little scenes of daily life, because of that enigma that goes around from figure to figure, assume the aspect of pictures of destiny, but

Stefano Puleo reaches this symbolic significance of the figure with great simplicity.

I think the words of Henri Matisse could be his: "...Without doubt, you have to paint as you sing, with no constrictions. The acrobat carries out his exercise smoothly and with apparent ease. But let us not lose sight of the long preparation that allows him to reach this result. The same thing happens with painting. Taking possession of the means must pass from the conscious to the unconscious through work, and then you will get this impression of naturalness". That behind naturalness there is lots of work on the means, is demonstrated by certain paintings with their drawing and colouristic structure. An example. The picture with three figures, two young women and a boy Harlequin, forms a "bridge" between the Harlequin series and the series of girls waiting or in the artist's studio. The little Harlequin is like the announcement of the colour that is warming up on his faceted costume, setting alight the beautiful figure near him. It is a passage between one motive to the next, from one tonal harmony to another.

If this is a very gentle and harmonious passage, in the course of the Eighties a profound change came about in the "feeling" of the picture which passes from a strong anatomical and gestual characterization to a subtly erotic and melancholy grace. The youthful and female figures stand out considerably, so much so that the picture ends up by communicating a completely feminine expressive quality, multiplied and varied from type to type, and without being monotonous in mood, sensuality or flagrant existence. The artist proceeds in building up his pictures without violent formal and colouristic disparity. He uses delicate and subtle tonal passages, almost always centring on a figure that has warmer tones and that radiates colour-light. The minimum of movements and various moods, no longer with deformations of forms and colours as occurred in the first pictures of the Eighties, characterized by a much "louder" energy.

I have mentioned more than once the sunniness quality that Stefano Puleo possesses to the greatest degree. That this is a painting principle of light and colour, and not only the registration of nature and the surroundings of a place where he lives and works, is proved by the paintings of the last few years with those lovely girls captured in the studio and while waiting. In the space around the figures there are no windows, no passages, no lamps: the

warm and gentle light comes from the colour of the figures and from the reverberation of the colour-light from one figure to another. It is a radiating light that warms and illuminates the space itself. The artist is good at landscapes, and some of these, published in this monography, prove it well; but in the fundamental series of the girls, their forms are the landscape: a stupendous fragment of sunny nature.

In the larger pictures there is not always evidence of the loveliness of the harmony of such radiating colour-light. For example, on the favourite theme of girls waiting and girls in the studio, there are the small and medium size pictures where the preciousness of the colour, sharpened by brushwork, is greater than in certain large pictures, perhaps because of the effect of concentration of the forms and because the eye of the onlooker can simultaneously perceive the whole thing as a single luminous vibration, while in the large picture the eye must pass from side to side, from one figure to another, and the simultaneousness of vision comes after a fragmentary observation. Of course, the large picture has an enfolding quality towards the observer that a small picture does not possess; and often a well-constructed picture full of colour-light has the power of reflecting the light of the picture onto the observer. It happened to me, during an exhibition of Matisse in Venice - the pictures came from Leningrad and Moscow, they have so many marvellous ones which were taken to Russia at the beginning of the century by the fur traders Sciukin and Morosov who bought them when the paint was still wet - my companion at the exhibition was coloured by the sublime reverberation in blue and red from some large pictures in front of her, where I took her photograph. And the photographs, that I still keep, confirm this colour radiating from the picture and colouring the onlooker standing a metre away.

And when looking at paintings again and again through the years, apart from the various theories on colour, I have noticed that all the natural colourists and those who have sunlight in their veins, always take into account the reflections of colour from one object to another, in real life and in painting. I mean that behind the simplicity, as Matisse said, there is a lot of hard work and natural talent does not become shapes and language without training and method.

Today, from the German cultural area comes the proposal for "wild painting": screaming colours, exasperated materialism, brutal gestures,

a more spectacular version of what was, in the years between 1905-1930, the expressionism of "The Bridge" in Dresden and Berlin or, if you prefer, in our postwar years, the abstract and gesticulatory expressionism of Emilio Vedova. A painting, even when it is just paint on a support of wood or canvas, often for neo-avantgardistic defect or for a return of market taste, wants to come out from the frame and to do this it makes this or that episode spectacular, this or that phenomenon of the history of modern art, and the result is the caricature of what was, in its time, an authentic episode of poetry, even though it was revolutionary. And there are also some people who are nostalgic about the beauty conserved in museums and they fill the present vacuum making a style of nostalgia, assembling with good but gelid technique styles from the past and making anachronisms which are interesting only when they are desperate. In Sicily too, there are some wild ones and quite a few anachronists.

The really modern artists who are attentive to the flowing of the present and who try to fix the colours and the shapes of this frequently ferocious and not easily approachable present, are very rare and they do not have an easy time. Stefano Puleo is one of these rare artists who keep their eye on the present and who manage to see in the tumbling flow of the present what has a modern character and what has not. His artistic language is essentially the lyric language of what he manages to take away from the existentialist flow of the present; indeed, it could be said that his eye has such a penetrating and loving gaze that he manages to discover what is primeval and dawnlike.

Recently I chanced to read an essay by Maurizio Calvesi that forms the introduction to the catalogue of the works exhibited by Ruggero Savinio at Cetona. Savinio is a good and candid artist who refuses any spectacular effect with highly commendable integrity. For some time now he has been painting tired human figures that were once mythical and which are now crouched in melancholy expectancy as if corroded by the ever-thickening shadows of an oppressive twilight. Calvesi feels the lyricism of these pictures and talks of the tremendous times we live in and which make it necessary for an artist to leave the sunlight and go down into the shadows of the caves. I have made a brutal précis of what is painted and written very well, and with disturbing truth.

I have quoted here the points of view of an artist and a critic because the "mood" of

evening loneliness is becoming dangerously more and more frequent in our art and I wanted everyone to see just how much bitterness and energy that sustain, morally as well, the conscious sunniness of Stefano Puleo. To stay as long as possible in the light and to build in the light is today a very difficult poetic feat that requires a total dedication to painting against thousands of adversities and external stimulations. To gaze at the present and to paint in full light is a big risk for a painter: if he mistakes his focus or falsifies the truth of beings and of existence, or if he puts together ancient and modern words of a pictorial language to fill a vacuum with chatter when he should keep quiet, then his collapse can be brutal and there is no reprieve. Let the shapes, the colours, have meaning, let the subject be a minimum and the painting a maximum, and, above all, do not let the subject take off towards rhetoric and spectacle and thus devour the painting.

Looking through the pages of this fascinating monography you will find a painter, a pure and lyrical colourist, who in a few years has learned to build better and better with his colour and who has discovered that colour sings, just like Matisse said, when it is in harmonious relationship with the other colours, instead of screaming, and that emptiness and silence are just as important as fullness and talking or singing out loud. An artist who models imagination and language in the flow of existence cannot be blocked by formal classification and his creative work cannot be indicated as a "way of painting" or a "type of picture".

You cannot tell him: stop here, with your young friends and your waiting girls because they are definitive paintings and drawings like little masterpieces of grace, eros, Mediterranean sunlight, dreams of another world, pacified and amours. You can hope that all that is germinal and primeval in him will develop and conquer the Earth with eros and harmony, as a pictorial metaphor of the desire of liberation that is present in so many human beings. Perhaps, there will be a magical moment when the Algerian and Moroccan girls painted by Eugène Delacroix and Henri Matisse at the dawning of modern art will take the hands of Stefano Puleo's girls and then, in the sun, they will trace on the Mediterranean shore the steps and movements of a new dance, completely new, with colours never seen before in contemporary painting.

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