



The presence of the profound:

The Winner as an archetypal-image of collective awareness (2000)

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The process of working in series of images – one that is far from foreign to contemporary art, starting at least as far back as Monet – seems to be tailor-made for Angelo Titonel's poetic. He has actually always taken a keen interest in the development of individual subjects – and, within them, of particular problems, of language and of meaning – in consequential sequences: from the one that dates back to 1962, at the beginning of his career as a painter, focused on a female figure (his Joan of Arc), to his recent, relentless, 1998 identikit of the face and, through it, of the personality of Padre Pio (Father Pius)¹.

In these analyses, however, the artist has always articulated his research within a variety of cuts and postures, of solutions of form and structural elaborations that invest the object of his operation, figures or things that may at times be analogous or contiguous, but remain differentiated. In his Joan of Arc series, his point of reference remained the same throughout (not a Joan of Arc at all, to tell the truth, but a pre-Columbian statuette), but was modified internally, stage by stage, in terms of a primarily linear manipulation indebted to Picasso's 1907 geometrics, which Titonel had – significantly – observed in that first phase of his artistic work, after years of dedication to advertising graphics, and not only on the plane of linguistics, but also right into its primitivistic connotations, involving a choice of sides that, as we shall see, was to be premonitory. In his intense gallery of *Ritratti del Beato di Pietrelcina* (Portraits of the Blessed of Pietrelcina – which, however, also remained detached, as an analytical thrust requires), while his style and subject remained homogenous, what changed was the figure's expression and sometimes also his gestures, as well as the way that the image was framed, as though it were part of a chain of still shots. To a certain extent, the same can be said of the 'posing' adopted, in the late seventies and early eighties, in *Stazioni* (Stations) and *Locomotiva* (Locomotive), although in these cases the changes also involved the protagonist, albeit within the framework of an affinity of theme. Much as had been the case a few years earlier, at the beginning of the seventies, in the repeated close-ups in *Sub* (Diver), *Corridori automobilistici* (Racing Car Drivers) and *Giocatori di rugby* (Rugby Players).

This time, in the series documented in this volume, the image which the artist chooses as his starting point is a stereotype, always the same. The interventions of form take place on this stereotype without ever affecting its identity, which is repeated like a Leitmotiv whose changelessness halts a vital expressive gesture in a dimension without time that seems to contradict the basic reference: an athlete captured by the artist in his camera lens in the mid-eighties, immediately after his victory in the Olympic Stadium in Rome, his right arm raised in the air in triumph and his hand open, both in celebration and to greet the audience. The vision is life itself, charged with the captured energy that holds the entire body tense and comes to istic expression in that hand, which however Titonel renders absolute, exemplary, archetypal. It is the image of a winner transformed into the image of the winner: from the particular to the general, from the contingent to the universal.

The shots change and with them the cuts, also of the figure itself, focusing on details differently connected and emphasised, such as then derives above all from the way that the entire or partial image, isolated or reiterated, is placed on the plane, in its original erect stance, sloping at a diagonal or stretched out horizontally. The procedures used are aimed primarily at decanting, isolating from the chance context, synthesising: all actions that transform the figuring into an emblematic icon that preserves the fresh flavour of the photographic document by evolving beyond it.

One very interesting exercise calls on the observer to follow how the reproductions on these pages enable the artist's long, complex itinerary about this theme to be followed through the numerous paintings he executed between 1999 and 2000.

Starting with the smaller ones, which are not sketches for his larger compositions, but have an evident autonomy of their own, and not only because of the diversity of the space occupied by the image, which inevitably contributes to determining them to some extent. And yet it is also true that the larger paintings do develop from here, do presume that there has already been this previous phase, which therefore inevitably has to be evaluated in relation to what has taken place afterwards. There is often evidence in the smaller works – albeit within dislocations of the basic figure in overall contexts that serve due notice of the larger-scale solutions to come – that the ‘realistic’ flagrancy of the photographic image remains more alive. Much the same can also be said for Titonel’s first works on paper, where we once again find him anticipating the itinerary that was to lead him to the final images which, as might quite naturally be expected, the artist had envisaged quite clearly from the very outset, at least in broad terms.

And so we find that the artist passes from the verbatim repetition of the photographic image – albeit already cut out from the context that originally surrounded it – to a process of progressively reducing it to its essentials, omitting and cancelling secondary details (the stripes and lettering on the athlete’s sportswear) by graphically transposing the outlines that were first traced in black and white, then filled with uniform but differentiated fields of colour (different for the shorts and the T-shirt), then ultimately transformed into margins of unitary shapes, almost shadows projected in the surface.

To return to the smaller paintings, a veritable research laboratory, rich and many-faceted, of this new phase of Titonel’s, one noticeable fact of some significance is the frequent presence in them of an insistence with matter that sometimes even goes so far as to compete with the figure of the athlete for the leading rôle. This matter is colour in an Informel key, applied with quick, dynamic brushstrokes, whose physical consistency – in some cases so very evident as to raise perceptible reliefs on the surface – enters into a dialectic relationship with the figure of the athlete, which has been cooled down from the original photograph, so that the former not infrequently interferes with the latter, an interference that takes the form of overspilling and overlapping. These are the reasons of his painting, of the way he uses his hands and the way he uses his body, ways that speak about it, ways that also leave a discernible trace in his larger canvases, although usually in a notably softened form, both of the urgency of his expression and, above all, of the consistency of the matter. Nevertheless, it is a softened form that does not cancel out these presences and thus the value of this less mediated and detached component, worthy of consideration in the context of the operation of synthesis and movement away from contingency that denotes the entire cycle of works published here.

Although I have already had occasion to use the term archetypal once in this essay, I now have no alternative but to repeat myself, as this is really the nerve centre of the work to which this artist is currently committed. And the way for which he paved with all his previous work, as Titonel himself is at pains to point out in a testimonial he sent to me on the occasion of the relationship that has developed for the purpose of this publication, which sees me strongly involved among other reasons also because of the relevance and continuity of this problematic consistency. “The Leitmotiv that has always run through my artistic research, ever since the beginning, is concerned with reducing whatever I am investigating – whether man or object – to its most elementary form,” writes the artist in the missive in question. “This, in its essence, enables both me and the observer to establish a closer, more spiritual and transcendent relationship with the new form, which is no longer contaminated by superstructures”. “I have tried to put this into practice,” he later goes on to add, “also through realistic figuring, creating a psychic, metaphysical suspension with the atmosphere and the colour. The symbolism of signs or forms, often with the mediation of matter, has helped me express myself, manifesting the archetype generated by the subconscious.”

Of course, the “metaphysics” mentioned by the artist is not the philosophical brand in this case. The reference here is to de Chirico, to the procedures to which Titonel has referred in the past, autonomously and for reasons of his own, in an only apparently ‘realistic’ figuring, if by realism we intend something that favours the representation of reality, mimesis, in its various interpretations, including the one that was most in vogue in the later sixties and the seventies, when Titonel followed this path, in his case from 1968 to the early eighties. And of course I am also thinking of Pop Art and Hyperrealism, in its United States origins and its European vulgate. From all of whom this artist stood apart. As he had also done from others beforehand – although he certainly took them into consideration – such as Germany’s New Objectivity and, in a

framework of Magical Realism, American Precisionism.

In these paintings, the way that Titonel 'posed' his subjects in an as it were unnatural 'suspension', without any vibrations, without any air even, demonstrated the tendency that we find again now in the *Il Vincitore* (The Winner) series: to "a symbolism without any symbolic apparatus". This definition was coined by Duilio Morosini², who fully understood the meaning of the work that the painter was doing at the time, expressing it in a series of very acute essays that are also of great assistance today for achieving a more than superficial understanding of Titonel's world and for grasping its coherence, apart from certainly differentiated choices of language. Morosini identified and emphasised the fact that, however naked, immediate and true to life Titonel's images appear to an inattentive observer, they are anything but passive. "Even where everything may look at first sight to be so close to the observer," noted the critic, "everything ends up appearing to be a long way away from you as soon as you get to grips with considering the logical structuring of the reality presented there. In other words, the object to be perceived is proposed simultaneously in the dual dimension of the perceptive and the symbolic, while the intransigent nature of the forms has increased in direct proportion to the polyvalence of the meanings"³. Morosini was of the opinion that "the principal component" of those paintings was to be identified "in the [artist's] desire to persist beyond the indistinct, the episodic, the transient, to isolate a *de facto* situation from its context"⁴. And this was the sense in which that term "metaphysical" was used, as ambiguous and perilous for those now remote works as it is for today's, as indeed can also be said for such concepts as archetypal and primordial. Although it must be said that they are apt for Titonel's work, all his work.

And so we already find evidence in the youthful drawings of his Joan of Arc of that procedure that tends towards an elementary, primitive figuring, like other immediately subsequent images⁵. Up to his 1967 triptych dedicated to *Nascere, Vivere, Morire* (Birth, Life and Death) and to the numerous studies related to it, whose topic – primary as no other can be – is rendered substantial in germinal, organic forms, with repercussions of a certain surrealistically inclined liquidity of the kind found in Moore or even in Picasso himself. And, to bring ourselves into closer vicinity with the works to which this volume is dedicated, in the nineties Titonel made the radical decision to devote himself to a truly elementary form of painting, starting with a step that was not new for him – that of renouncing the use of any colours apart from black and white, so that there was space for the surface of perception to be occupied by primitively-inclined, ancestral memories, in the form of codified, mysterious signs that evoke the subconscious and the original with a significance that was cryptic and for that very reason to a considerable extent allusive. The effect – one that has been overturned by his latest works – was in any case one that tended towards a figuring pregnant with echoes, with multiple and multidimensional resonances, yet only apparently more uncovered.

The link between *The Winner*, as he stands foursquare and peremptory across his large supports or is proposed in situations that differ, yet always comply with the matrix image as it is differently positioned and cut, and the arcane signs in Titonel's previous paintings is one that is close indeed on the plane of emblematics, archetypes and thus of the reference to meanings that have more consistency to them than what is merely seen and of which the image is only a 'symbol'. Which means that they also have to be deciphered in the case of *The Winner*. And to a certain extent this is even more difficult. Primarily because of the risk – never to be underestimated – intrinsic to an explicit, or apparently explicit, figuring, which may lead to the presumption that nothing is concealed and, thus, discourage any research that penetrates any further than the confines of the immediately perceptible. Then because of the presence of particular cultural matrices, even actually of image, that might give rise to misleading interpretations, such as the fixedness of the pose and the very choice of the subject. Quite apart from the classical roots, and in spite of the 'objectivity' of communication deriving from the use – albeit mediated – of the photograph (and, it could also be added, in spite of the effects deriving from the artist's experience with advertising graphics, which gives the message a 'younger' appeal), there may be a hint of other, more recent 'legends', which have also gone the way of exhibiting the athlete's body in a metahistorical exemplification charged with conveying ideological meanings that were obviously intended to benefit from the choice of vehicle. To look at this on the positive side, these are all questions that highlight the wealth of cultural implications intrinsic to this latest cycle of works by Titonel, for whom the observations recorded by Morosini thirty years ago are once again so fitting in their intelligence and usefulness

that I am happy to conclude with them⁶.

Referring in particular to a 1969 painting that depicted crash helmets on top of a pile of car wheel rims (Totem), the critic noted that "there was nothing foreign to that composition [in] the idea of hinting at a connection between the immobility, the emptiness or the 'terribleness' of the fictional person created by simply heaping together a pile of objects and shapes, of the centuries-old cultural inheritance of the bust and the herm. In the idea, in short, of stimulating in the spectator the awareness of the relativity of the 'unprecedented' proposed to him by contemporaneity; [...] the idea of inviting the spectator to reflect on the fact that, seen in this light, there is no 'modern object' without any history behind it whose context it cannot escape". "Many recent paintings" by Titonel "should be seen in relation to a creative and critical design of this nature", continued Morosini; "in particular the entire cycle of 'portraits' or compositions of runners who are cosmonauts", where it is possible to see "tracksuits whose folds have something 'modular' about them and a chromatic weave [...] that indicates that they are strips of synthetic material, of traditional drapery, robes, 'shrouds' ". With an "analogical movement that branches out in depth – in immediately identifiable or vaguely 'inscrutable' layers – into the consistency of art history [...] as the history of 'mankind' ". References "to cultural experiences that, however extremely variable, rest on the bed of every man's awareness and are liable to stimulate and increase his faculties of judgement". Which is precisely the case of these Winners.

- 1 Cf.: E Rossetti, Padre Pio, with 81 paintings by Angelo Titonel, Edit Faenza, 1999.
- 2 D. Morosini, Titonel, Catalogue of the exhibition, Michaud Gallery, Florence (Italy) 1971, p. 10.
- 3 D. Morosini, Titonel, Catalogue of the exhibition, La Seggiola Gallery, Salerno (Italy) 1972.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Cf. the reproductions, in G.G. Lemaire, Titonel, memorie inquiete, Edizioni Carte Segrete, Rome 1989, pp. 21-22, ill. 1-7.
- 6 D. Morosini, Tifonel, 1971, op. cit.