



ANGELO TITONEL, or on writing the body (2010)

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Artistic creativity has always set out to represent something that for most of us defies representation, to nurture a situation in which borderline experiences between chaos and conceivable emotions, between symbolic and asymbolic, achieve a recognisable form of organisation. Art has the great advantage of inducing us to approach “aesthetic” products that are one of the more visible signs of its function as a mediator between our senses and our thoughts. Although in many cases it tends to rely on the codes of tradition, the language of art highlights their limits and their transience, finding ways of breaking and modifying them, so as to make them suitable for containing what has not yet been said and communicating what has hitherto been confined to the realms of the pre-verbal. When it is aesthetically oriented, enabling us to go beyond what has already been heard, said and seen, this type of attention underpins the curiosity of the observer intent on exploring the more specific and poetic facets of the work of the artist with whom we are involved, sharpening his sensitivity for capturing its singularity.

What I want to stress here is the fact that the aesthetic stimulus offered to us, as in the case of Angelo Titonel, takes us away from external reality and brings us closer to the reality of the mind, giving our emotional balance a shake-up and underlining both how little it has in common with objective facts and how much it rekindles subjective experiences that are as yet incompletely digested, so disturbing.

The opus that is worthy of this name unquestionably conveys a certain seductive force, though that need not mean a misleading spell: on the contrary, the perfect beauty that weakens cognitive abilities must do justice to the imaginative creativity that sets out to capture the truth through the medium of the unreal.

Ever since the seventies and even earlier, Angelo Titonel has been investigating the human body, which he interprets as a cosmic sign, the benchmark of space and time, two factors that tend to lose their objective connotations nowadays, in favour of being articulated as proximity and distance from things and feelings, expressing an irrepressible solitude compared to today's consumer society in real time.

As we already saw in his *Winner* series from the earlier part of the decade that is now coming to a close, the body is an endless reservoir of signs where various forms of knowledge choose the ones that are closest to their cultural reasons. The result is the metamorphosis of the body, which from time to time becomes an organism for medicine to study, a labour force for the economy, a subconscious for psychology to set free, a potential source of violence for the law to control or a support of signs for semiology to convey. We have forgotten the body's authentic word: that of a body that is forever being reduced to a mere writing surface, where we can read all the inscriptions that those various forms of knowledge have left there in the course of a lifetime. But we who live in this body run the risk of seeing it as those forms of knowledge describe it to us, so losing all those values of meaning that our body safeguards without hearing, because they are not backed up by any precise instructions that we can relate to recognisable images.

If we have been ignoring our body for some time now, inhabiting only the descriptions of it that these various forms of knowledge have rendered, then all the words, feeling and emotions that they do not render are lost to all of us.

For an artist's work about the body to acquire profound meaning, it needs to surface as a presence *vis-à-vis* the world, so that the de-imbalance of its functions is not just biological in nature, but also takes on the psychological meaning of existing in a dimension of being, in every respect that it can no longer do, dare or undertake.

One of the most striking features of Angelo Titonel's work is his acute spirit of observation, the driving desire to delve and an emotional force that flows over the skin of his works like an interrogative river in space. With this latest group of works, created over the last three years, the artist enables us to grasp many things about the senses and perception on which our conceptual and metaphorical world is founded.

While I am on the subject of metaphorical worlds, the first thing I notice is a considerable group of works (oils on board) representing hands captured in thousands of positions, humorous or dramatic attitudes: they express an idea of activity as

power and dominance. Clad in gloves or as rigid as artificial limbs, offering a glimpse of the unfettered development of internal experience, those hands could depict a microcosm that defies the conditioning of space and time.

For painting as for sculpture, the positioning of hands and fingers is symbolic of inner attitudes – suffice to ponder the more important of Buddhist mudras – meditative concentration, argumentation, dialectic, the offering of a gift, charity, peace-making, enlightenment or the transfer of energy. All civilisations - some more and some less subtly - have used the language of hands at some time and some still do today. But the hand is sometimes compared to the eye: it can “see”. That is how the psychoanalysts explain it, holding that the hand that appears in our dreams is the equivalent of the eye. It is very hard for the hand to tell a lie; ultimately, it is an exclusively human summary of the female and the male: passive when it contains, it is active when it grasps or functions as a weapon or a tool.

Titonel’s architectural hands are always an earthen brown in tone, symbolising a roundish, natural and unsophisticated world, with primitive sensations of gratification and simplicity, which in this case blend from terracotta to a dusty grey. Those hands reveal movements executed calmly; they possess pathos and sometimes emphasis. They are imposing and give off signs that are amply understandable, although if a gesture is executed rapidly, it may convey a very different message: it expresses a lively, uncontrolled feeling, impulsive, enthusiastic or furious and quite capable of intimidating. Even when these images are presented in the form of a *Church, Castle, City, Piazza d’Italia* or *Ancient Warrior*, they exude a certain reserve and betray their author’s profound inner commotion.

Nor is there any doubt that the more intensely our feelings come into play, the more accentuated are our gestures. Gestures tell us so much about the disparities between what people are saying with their words and with their body language, although we should always bear in mind that some of the information we receive from hands is certainly provided by the skin, our body’s largest and most multipurpose organ, which constitutes the border between our inner selves and the outside world, the state of our mental and our physical health. But Titonel’s hands are wooden and mechanical; they lead us towards a flexible, “poor” sensuality.

With this latest series of works, Angelo Titonel makes a statement about the concept related to the communicative potential of image and form, to the effect that mimicry and gesture have a greater communicative force when they are combined: nor should it come as any surprise that the combination of these two categories of signs is particularly revealing, because it obliges us to seek an energy of concentration, i.e. to pay more attention to what is not done with people who speak “openly”. This combination of open and closed gestures, of two categories of signs and signals, shows increasingly clearly that the majority of the information that we receive from these boards – which are painted masterfully, by the way, with well-ordered and smoothed matter – reaches us from thought and from the *hand*, with its content of truth.

But the message that is conveyed to us so forcefully by these works, with their symbolic icons, is that power has become more devious, masked and concealed, yet for that very reason more pervasive, to the point of permeating our subconscious, of making us perceive what are merely its impositions and accept them as obvious. Our civilisation is not held together by ideas of beauty, truth, justice, peace and the cohabitation of people, but by ideas of commerce, property, products, trade, value, profit and money, which govern our western life without our even being aware of them and, by emulation, the life of all the planet’s inhabitants.

As this is a matter of the “unconscious pervasiveness”, used by the powers-that-be these days to condition how we think, it is time for psychology, literature, music and the visual arts to stir from the profound torpor where they languish and to understand, as does Titonel with his metaphors, that it is the dysfunctional ideas of today’s world that need a helping hand from authentic art, to heal the wounds suffered by the inner child of our past. An artist like Titonel counters the power that shapes us with ideas that refer to consumption, to passivity and to individualistic narcissism with the power of ideas that certainly do not shun an imaginative vision or an adventurous, seductive mindset capable of exerting a positive influence on life’s underlying values.

The hands that Titonel paints, standing stark against a cosmic infinite darkness (maybe a black hole) like Utopian architectures, presented as closed, perfect volumetric entities, a universe within the universe, geometric solids that identify the synthesis of idea and thing, are the quintessence of form.

The typology of these architectural hands varies, as some representations have four fingers and other five. The ones with four pinnacle fingers indicate a solid edifice, a metaphor of the four domains of the universe: the regions of space, worlds, lights, senses, universality. The slits we see in these towers are ultimately no more than eyes, or doorways of mystic

perfection, which may be compared to the quaternary evolution of the soul in Jung's theories. The number five, meanwhile, is the sign of union, harmony, balance and the five senses: of the individual man as opposed to the universal man, of life itself manifest. But for Titonel, both the quaternary and the pentagonal harmony of the Pythagoreans leave their mark on the architectural structure of his forms, just as they left their mark on the architecture of Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals. Yet these closed, compact shapes are not enough to do justice to expressing the artist's thinking, so he emphasises the break between certain parts of the hands or bodies, stressing them with changes in level or different shades of colouring. Titonel seems to apply a sharp sense of humour to observing the fascinating technical experiments related to alchemy and mechanics (early robots) that preceded the maturity of the technological era. Robots indicate more than man's ability to create a mechanical construction, while limiting its appearances and actions: they also belong to the echelons of dominance, control and command. There is nothing new and contemporary about this idea, whose history is caught up inextricably with the history of the development of science and of ideas. By holding the history of the idea of the robot up against the light, as it were, it is possible to discern man's continuous effort to master the secrets of creation itself, in the process shaking off the weight of the everyday striving and struggling for survival that can only be achieved by constructing the realm of freedom.

These works by Titonel not only suggest a mechanical construction achieved by man, imitating nature's appearance and actions, but also hint at his dominance of that nature and at a double for mankind, an analogue, whose very essence poses questions.

Some of his works, such as *Playing Skittles*, *The Gesture* and *The Vendetta*, confirm that we are not just 'bodies' any more, but have become 'organisms'; we are not individuals any more but have become a genus: they remind us of the death that medical science still brings with it, like the Renaissance experience of the scalpel used to dissect corpses.

This subtle education that obliges us to think of ourselves as organisms, this harassing pharmacopoeia that ends up convincing us to put more trust in a sleeping pill than in an inner sense of justice, these mental consequences, this ideology shored up by drugs will certainly generate a desire for soul (in the Western sense of the term) in the individual's solitude, which comes about when the body has been reduced to a mere organism and individuals have lost the ability to find any meaning in themselves, other than a mythical entity that desperation forces each of us to invent for ourselves.

Pieces like *Burqa*, *Hiding*, *Inside the Habit* and *Madonna* tell us that the face, like the hands, is one of the privileged parts of the human body: it is what communicates a person's vital essence, it is the 'face' that we can keep or lose, that reveals our emotions, our feelings and our secret thoughts, it is the mirror of the soul; but in this case the external signs lead to the 'absence' of the human character.

All the works on show in this exhibition tell us that in every gesture - and it is gesture that forges the body from the opacity of the flesh - there is Titonel's relationship with the world, his way of seeing it and feeling it, its heritage, its education, its environment and its psychological make-up. The violence or the delicacy of his every gesture contains the whole story of his life, the quality of his relationship with the world: the way he offers himself to us.