

A striving to love – Romana Loda.

We love only what we do not possess entirely.

(Marcel Proust)

When an artist expresses with immediacy what comes to him from the innermost regions of the senses, he cannot but make a genuine striving to love. A striving connected with knowledge and possession, which starts from the peripheral zones of the subject and then gradually approaches the core, following a course that ranges from abstract ideation to rational definition, passing through a magmatic vision of the problem. A long and by no means easy journey, with narrows and grilles posed by intelligence and by the desire to slow down and filter the thrusts, cleansing them from the inevitable sentimentalising dross. The genuineness of the original inspiration is however commensurate with the content of love that is found in the finished work. Other components are certainly important, especially cultural components governing correct application of the aesthetic rules, but there is no doubt that the driving function always pertains to the primary motivations of the deed and the collateral implications.

For the woman artist the matter takes on still greater importance since, for historic-social reasons now fully clarified, she must remain firmly attached to content rather than form. In fact, male culture has progressively appropriated all stages of knowledge, right to the extreme sophistication of the symbols that have currently become refined expressions of power. Woman participates purely marginally in this power, does not know its secret levers, and hence cannot but remain anchored to the concreteness of subjects and their contents. The urge to understand, to communicate, nevertheless overshadows all the rest even in the practice of art, a discipline that more than others lends itself to the purpose for a woman who feels the anguish of a situation that is no longer acceptable and who is coerced by the will to testify, even before she has been able to make a free choice.

To attribute a single sex to art is not correct, but this does not alter the facts that it has always been done by men in order to express and interpret their desire, interests and frustrations, and this has given it a definite trend. Only too rarely has woman been able to insert her feeble voice into this power chorus, and when it has happened she has been forced to undergo indescribable conditions in order to go into art, so that in the end she has accumulated secret stresses and vindictory harshness that have finished by allowing her to express less than she potentially could. This has done nothing but add a paralyzing anger to the original anger, to the great satisfaction of all those (especially the self-defined progressives) who have been able to lay aside the subject once and for all, concluding that even in art woman does not suffer from an inferiority complex, but really is inferior.

It is on the other hand an indisputable fact that, whenever any breach has been created in the thick crust of male solidarity, the strivings of love have followed one another more frequently and with completely effective results. This has been the case above all in the last decade, even if there can be no suggestion of parity or any radical changes, but only a reversal of trend arising from reappropriatory forays rather than convinced concessions. Within the marasma thus created, when Gretta Sarfaty abandoned her first pictorial exercises in order, with the aid of particular optical equipment, to carry out the first series of distorting self-photos of her own face, she plunged into a turbulent current with the aim of directly denouncing an anguished state of desolating dissociation. She thus set out along the road of appropriatory experience by denouncing an age-old situation of false hedonism obliging woman to make use of her face as a sender of reassuring signals of submissive availability.

The distortions she performed on a face which one feels is normal generated disagreeable surprise, mixed with revolutions; moreover, in these photos there is also the sarcasm of a woman generally looked at an who now takes the liberty of looking without reticence and judging. There is a reversal of the classic situation with standards by which the woman must be passive, with a static, perfectly polished face showing an unequivocally erotic expression. A stereotyped and hence abstract fact, nonexistent in daily life.

To infringe this standard was not easy, since it meant overthrowing accepted tenets and forcing the admissions that a woman's face and the woman herself can become independent subject capable of having and transmitting genuine and not only induced or conventional emotions.

Gretta Sarfaty's striving to love has thus gone beyond the fact of manipulating itself with aims other than the usual ones of adulation: it has broken the mirror with violence, without fear of being disfigured, and in this way has brought to the surface deep-lying motives of existential malaise. It has opened up an irreversible process of knowledge, starting precisely from that bodily part, the face, that nature has delegated to the transmission of high potential signals and which only social aberrations have reduced to the site of trivial glances.

The provocation is in no way invalidated by the fact that the distortions are purely optical, since, beyond the technical means used, it is the result that counts; the images do not have to mime artificial grief or even ape exasperation, but exemplify the refusal arising from a new consciousness. The operation is not interpretative, but analytical according to the logic of the mechanisms of knowledge and reappropriation, which in the specific case are directed to that part of the body which more than others has suffered the insults of the sickliest conventionalisms.

The gesture consists precisely in consciously displaying all the elements of a situation that has become intolerable and in feeding it with ever new proofs of support. The sarcasm and revulsion are likewise symptoms, being born of an attachment to the paradigms of the entire actions.

With the fears removed, with the motives for contrition shed, a new consciousness comes to light, derived from the recognition of a reality it has been possible to affect decisively. At this stage the striving to love is no longer such, but love, and love alone; Gretta Sarfaty has pushed it to the extreme consequences, to the point of placing it in that kind of no man's land where the innermost experiences can merge with art and they can continue together in the search for ever new aspects to be added to the incomplete mosaic of equality and overall consciousness. A love which, it must be recognized, also feeds on conflicts, from which it draws further stimuli in the direction of the object of so much solicitude, in a kind of intoxicating whirl that is calmed only when possession is complete.

Deep surfaces veiled

Depth must be hidden.

Where? On the surface.

(Hugo von Hofmannsthal)

In the not always straightforward vicissitudes marking the relations between art and public, preconceived ideas stagnate with such deep roots that it is difficult to think not only of removing them, but even more simply of correcting them. Among the toughest and most resilient is the widespread conviction that the main task of art is to distract from the serious thing of life, providing pleasant flights from reality and helping to kill time. A macabre idea, on reflection, even more than involuntarily humorous, since it suggests a view of art loitering furtively in museums and galleries with the task of billing visitor's

boredom and providing pleasant entertainment. Art is undoubtedly a tangle of things difficult to unravel, but certainly not a killer of existential frustrations and not even a charter flight to the Bahamas or the Galapagos. It is a means of knowledge, not the only one, which even when it is not expressed in a direct social commitment, is nevertheless a catalyst of conscience.

Adorno's anguished questioning on the possibility of still making art after Auschwitz (and everything it meant for human kind) has its undoubted validity from the emotive standpoint, but even without reaching these extremes it is legitimate to wonder whether in the world of today, torn by violence of every kind, there is still sense – if there ever has been any – in an art of pure escape, cut off from every civil stress as well as from the necessary dialectical contrasts.

The artist is not so much the person consumed with passion at the disequalities existing in the world, as the person loaded like a spring with a such anguish and succeeding in letting fly and arrow in the right participative direction, striking the target of synthesis and aesthetic sublimation.

Gretta Sarfaty, por exemple, is not an artist only because, like and more than other woman, she is aware of the weight of a condition, but also because starting from this fact she carries out rigorous formal research until she reaches unexceptionable aesthetic evidence without halting at the code-images of pure and simple denunciation. This she did with the series of distorting self-photos, and has done even more by subsequently widening the subject and finding the right *modus operandi* in realistic figuration, still of photographic derivation, with the woman's body as overall theme. A body generally nude, depicted in the typical poses of pornography and rendered pictorially with ochre and rosy colours having the most faithful verisimilitude. <<The legitimate object of the highest imagination is the human body>>, Hofmannsthal wrote, but in all probability by human he meant female; a body as the world's sheath, as a vessel of sensations, the aim of conquests of medieval stamp. Books, magazines, city walls and station lavatories are full of woman's body; the subject of daily rapist fancies, of so-called virile forays, of devastating projections, here in front of us is the sexual object par excellence, splendid in its total availability for the pleasure of others! The poses are the right ones, the colours are sickly-sweets enough, and not even the ritual accessories are lacking, such as the great bed to invade, the soft cushion to be handled ambiguously and the ruffled kitten to fondle.

The operation would seem to be complete, but it is enough to observe the finished work with a minimum of attention to feel a cold and disagreeable sensation, the first symptom of a number of betrayals made by Gretta on the conventional canvases. The body is seen from the back, almost as though to ridicule every possible promise even before it has been made; the poses are artificially forced and improbable; the overall atmosphere is heavy, lacking airiness. There is no irony in these pictures, but once again sarcasm, followed by interruption of the fluid that should flow between spectator and female nude. But the artist has consummated her last and final betrayal by covering the body with a genuine veil. A veil of heavy nineteenth century embroideries, thick and palpable, which has been referred to as a robust mosquito net and even a magic hood, but which on the contrary is more precisely a thick sieve for seekers after emotional nuggets. A folded grille forming zones of shadow on the nude body, making the overall vision more fleeting and ambiguous.

With these assemblages Gretta Sarfaty has achieved the twofold purpose of defusing the female nude's erotic charge without denaturing it, and also of revitalizing a figuration which, in art, seemed to have exhausted all grounds for interest. The evidence and ambiguity go forward in step: the veil triumphs over the body, which is situated much further away on the bottom of a ruffled aquarium. The body becomes a component of the whole, and the superficial element sinks to levels where it can no longer be fingered, seized and consumed.

It the distortions of the face radicalized a position taken against the false myths of female agreeableness, in the works with the whole body it is the very idea of agreeableness that softly, forcibly refuses the cliché of the disposable object; here the tone is less emphasized, the technique is more allusive, but the result is equally dramatic.

Under the embroidered gauze the limbs are as though benumbed, fixed in abnormal positions, and play of lights and shadows creates illusions that are immediately destroyed. The atmosphere is still evocative, but the prisoner is champion of a revolt no longer yelled but not thereby any less resolute. She is prisoner of that mystique of femininity which makes able use of the elements that have always characterized it in order to break it down and pin-point its mystifying elements made up of lies and abuses.

We see her behind bars, but she is facing the other way, on the point of leaving; she is imperturbable, not sad; perhaps she alone knows with certainty that the grilles are our prison, no longer hers. She is on the other side, already free, and she is still there only because she gives this stay the value of a symbol that can serve as an example to all those others who have not yet been able to make the step. Those women for whom the veil is always the decorative element that sets off the body, and for whom the latter is an object to display in order to feel male fancies, eye exercises as retinal cannibalism, a source of possessive and overwhelming desires.

With this explosion of heavy, violent forms, Gretta Sarfaty has again found a different and effective way of rendering aesthetic experience as a lucid exercise in civil effort, for the use of everyone, women and men, and directed to widening of sensibility. This in order to bring about consideration of the woman not as a face or a body, but as a complex and harmonious entity with a dignity not only asserted, but finally assumed as an inalienable rule of life.

Romana Loda

