

BACK TO THE ORIGINS OF A SPECIAL SYMPOSIUM WITH THE LIGHT

The artist Diego Esposito, born in 1940 in Teramo in Abruzzi, has been invited by his hometown to make a large anthological exhibition of his work, from the first experiments to the more recent production.

Throughout the development of his artistic practice up until today's works, he has grown to become an internationally renowned artist with numerous solo exhibitions and participation in many group exhibitions all over the world.

Who is he then, this man who has exhibited in some of the most well-known Italian galleries from the early 1970s onwards, who went on to make a long study stay in the United States, who started by travelling the whole of the Mediterranean area and then went on to explore Asia and California, who always looked for a relation with space and, most importantly, with light. He can look back upon participation in a great number of interesting exhibitions and actions, artist in residencies and teaching jobs, and for many years now he is also referred to as a wonderful teacher for young artists at the Academy of Brera in Milan.

Diego Esposito could today be said to be one of the very few Italian conceptual artists. His roots, when one thinks of Italian art, could be traced to Fontana or Manzoni. Looking at the international art scene, Malevich or Yves Klein might be mentioned as references. His strong and almost scientific interest in colour leads to thoughts of Barnett Newman or Mark Rothko; all in all there are links to the whole palette of North American Minimal and Conceptual artists of the 1960s and 1970s and their artistic concerns. As for many European artists of the time, an important part of their arts practice was based upon trying to break down the traditional borders of painting and sculpture, upon the use of materials from everyday life or nature and the wish to break free from the traditional exhibition room. They were looking for a new relation between artwork and the surrounding space and definitely had strong conceptual concerns. Today, one must not forget to situate Diego Esposito in relation to some of the most important Californian light artists, be it Robert Irwin, James Turrell or Maria Nordman.

Logically, there are also resemblances to the work of certain artists of the Arte Povera movement. This is more evident within his early work, and can of course be traced to common exhibitions, actions and other activities with artists such as Fabro, Anselmo, Boetti, Paolini or Pistoletto and Castellani. Prominent galleries of the time such as Ariete or Toselli in Milan, La Bertesca in Genoa, Massimo Minini in Brescia or Area in Florence exhibited the early works of Esposito, works exploring colour, form and light. Predominantly he experimented with light. Esposito understandably looks further back in time when he speaks of the influence of the Sistine Chapel or Caravaggio and Titian, which he encountered on his early discovery trips in the Villa Borghese. During his studies in Naples, visiting the National Museum, he gained knowledge which was to be of major importance in his entire artistic career, especially from the Pompeii frescoes. "There I understood that there is no difference between antique and modern art, there is only art and it is always contemporary", the artist once stated in an interview.

Evidently, and this closes the circle in a fascinating way, with this major solo show the artist now returns to his hometown

Teramo, the place where, more than forty years ago, as a young man he sat and painted his first watercolours in the style of Paul Cézanne. Evidently Cézanne was an early influence along with Matisse, later also Malevich and Duchamp. Also worth mentioning are friendships with artists of more or less the same generation, such as Francesco Clemente or Marco Bagnoli. A great fascination for the art of Mexico and the culture of the Mayas and the Aztecs was also apparent. This inspired his systematic travel and exploration of cultures from quite diverse places - especially to countries where he felt an especially close affinity because of richness in mythology and light. He travelled for example throughout the whole of the Mediterranean area, to Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, then later also to Japan and Korea. Finally also regions like sunny California become important sources of inspiration. Let's also not forget the place that Diego Esposito has referred to as home for several decades now: Venice, the "Serenissima", the city of the great painters Tintoretto, Canaletto, Guardi and many others, but also of William Turner, all of whom came here in search of the very special Venetian light. Venice, the "city of light" par excellence and of water, has without doubt influenced the artist and been able to satisfy his longing for light in a unique way.

All of these influences, all these individual stages or achievements have in their own way helped make clear to the artist where he is heading.

The sheer amount and variety of stimuli is probably what enabled the artist to follow his own way: untroubled by fashionable trends, he simply develops and follows his own: untroubled by fashionable trends, he simply develops and follows his own solitary path. It remains a fact that the artist Diego Esposito today cannot be compared to anyone, especially within the Italian art scene. Esposito embodies the remarkable and exceptional case of an artist who, probably consciously, always remained a great loner.

Let us return to the exhibition *Blue Outside*, in Esposito's hometown Teramo, which will open its doors in October this year. Diego Esposito did not, by any means, want to limit himself to the tried and well-known rooms of the Pinacoteca Civica. He is an artist for whom the relation between artwork and environment plays an important role, and so he wanted to create new works within the framework of an anthropological exhibition and, when possible, use spaces external to the city's picture gallery. Esposito started his search for a suitable place within the city and its environments, and soon found an ideal place for another adventure. The place he found is the empty factory building of the company Villeroy & Boch, a building architecturally not uninteresting, dating back to the early 1960s, marked by a strong history.

Also, the location geographically is most fascinating for Esposito, on the outskirts of town, right in front of the Colurania mountain range. There, in almost exactly the same spot that he has now chosen for his new installation, which deals with the place and its history, he sat as a young man romantically painting his watercolours in the tradition of Cézanne and Matisse.

This empty industrial building is unbelievably monumental and stands dormant. In itself it is interesting because of its special architectural features. It has a cartridge roof shaped

out of rhomboids, through which very fascinating light and shadow effects come about. The whole building poses a great challenge for an artist who is used to dealing with dimension, movement, perception and light as elements of his work. The artist must always first conquer the room for himself. It lies in his hand to lead the visitor through the endless rooms of a labyrinth, show the ways to go and let him stand astonished in front of surprising optical solutions.

For example, Esposito has mounted large blue lattice gates, which stand in clear analogy to the architecture of the vaults, and surprisingly tints the viewers' vision of the exterior landscape to that of an intense blue colour: *Blue Outside* is indeed the title of the exhibition.

A further installation is clearly referring to one of his earlier, conceptual works, the *Rievocazione del mio orizzonte* from 1976, which at the time caused a sensation in the Florentine Area gallery. It consisted of nothing more than a delicate, horizontal pencil line on the wall exactly at the eye-level of the artist, whose eyes were reflected in a mirror mounted in the midst of this line on the wall. A simple line on the wall, one that so to say connected with sight. The work turned out to be a brilliant foreboding of all works of Esposito's to come, by referring to an "inner horizon", a vision and the revival of something thought forgotten: "Today, it seems possible to create a more developed, speculative three-way relationship between the dimensions of the mental and the physical 'voyage', the inner magnetic light and the apparent, quite concrete 'vehicles' which have moved the works of Diego Esposito in the last couple of years" (Bruno Corà in *Diego Esposito. La conoscenza di sé alla luce dell'opera*, Milan 1992). The new work of Esposito's in the former Villeroy & Boch factory closes off the view to the exterior landscape. It does this by means of a wall made out of 5-metre-high MDF boards, but the view is not completely blocked off. At eye-level, the horizon level of the artist's eyes, and automatically also the horizon of every visitor, there is a few centimetres wide, narrow horizontal opening cut through the whole length of the MDF-wall (it measures 430 x 20 cm). A view of the exterior, but a clearly limited one, is still possible, one enhanced by the artist to greater intensity, turned into a very special "see-through". It is not to be excluded that a sound recording will be part of this artwork, creating an all together powerful room installation.

All the works of Diego Esposito predominantly deal with light and space, with colour and form, with movement and sound. Although most of his works seem stern and puritanic at first glance, they stimulate all senses. They relate to myths and religion, nature and architecture, music, painting, movement and dance. The works created seem clear and simple and are in fact reduced to the formal minimum. At the same time they maintain intensity, rendered with sureness in choice of colour, material, shape and dimensions and are all executed with tremendous precision. No speck of dust has any part to play on these works, no unevenness, nor even the smallest imperfection is allowed in the material, no fingerprint allowed to disturb and draw the attention away from that which is essential. The irregularity of a brushstroke is never seen on a painted surface. The surfaces are flawlessly smooth and clean, to such a degree that they are often allowed to remain unpainted. The colour of the material itself the light, soft untreated wood or the rich brown of the MDF-boards, the strong shining silver of stainless steel, even the reddish nuance of the raw Corten steel, all play a part in making the

artworks radiate expert flawless calm, with an aura all their own.

We experience these works by approaching them or distancing ourselves from them. The artist is always the director, the one who is leading us through the exhibition room. He decides the distance from one work to the next, the height of hanging for the pieces, and most important of all, the precisely chosen relation of every work to its surroundings. The artist has always ordered his sculptures and paintings into a defined rhythm within every room, they hang in different heights on the walls, heights not decided by any average museum standard, but solely decided by the artist's eye-level and experience.

In other cases, the works stand in unusual, but always very precise, formations in the middle of the room, each and every one in direct relation to the angles of the walls, the ceiling or floor, as well as in relation to the room next door. Maybe this is so because one should be able to experience them on the axis of vision and movement, the one on which one approaches the room. And this is why, through our own movements, we make it possible to experience more about these artworks. Striding through the rooms, or taking a slow attentive walk around, is therefore of great importance to the relationship that we create to the pieces. The artwork takes on the movement of every step with which we approach it. And by every step it seems to inevitably change its appearance. Its dimension in relation to the room, to us, to the other works, changes, but the power it exerts upon us remains the same. The eye level of the artist, or our own, our horizon or the horizon of the viewer, are always pre-set. Added to this, giving us the possibility of creative perception, is our own behaviour, the joy and surprise of for example finding a second work placed in the same room, one only perceivable upon second glance. Possibilities like these have been important in the layout of the rooms.

The objects communicate with us and with one another, but they also maintain a presence when standing alone. Some rooms are consciously left more airy and emptier than others, containing maybe only a single work, others have works presented closely hung on the walls, and here the phenomenon of abundance is stated.

The installation *Naos* radiates an extremely attractive yellow light and seems to be of major importance to Esposito. It was already shown in the Baroque city of Ludwigsburg, in the Villa Franck. Placed in the dominant middle room of the Schwabian house, it shone mysteriously upon almost the whole exhibition. Now, in a more weatherproof version it stands in a small lake in the public garden of the city of Teramo.

Light, Lux, Lumen - spreading light but remaining mysterious, it maintains a distance and at the same time produces reverence, a temptation enticing curiosity.

A door, inviting us to come nearer, upon closer scrutiny turns out to refuse us entrance, the opening is decidedly too narrow and, more importantly, it is blocked from within. "Naos" was the name of the holiest shrine in old Greece and nobody could approach beyond a certain point in its inner core. Here, *Naos* consists of a large cube, constructed out of cartridge walls, which keep us at a distance, but at the same time remind us of Japanese architecture. In its inner second cube is placed, and between the two bodies - in Ludwigsburg they were of wood, here they are necessarily made of Corten steel - is a space filled with light, strong yellow light signifying the sun, the south, but also with the meaning of a

spiritual light, the “enlightenment, which first lets you see, to a certain extent an inner vision, an enrichment”. This son of light comes about very early in Esposito’s work, and it always had the function of a filter, a “purifying yellow”, a separation between interior and exterior.

The Teramo Pinacoteca Civica will show numerous more or less well known works of Diego Esposito, displayed on three levels of the exhibition space. They originate from the most diverse creative periods within his œuvre and were selected specifically to suit the localities and their characteristics. One example is *Altre parole / altri movimenti*, a piece that seems extremely “musical”. It is a work that boldly and spaciouly extends across the walls of a bright, light-filled room, in fact it suggests the way a musical score would be written down on paper. Ready to be performed, ready to be played. Five long, black-and-white striped horizontal elements of varnished wood are placed in irregular, but carefully chosen distances on the two disposable walls and exert a strong feeling of movement. Four of the wooden sticks carry an intensely shining embedded inlay in one of the basic colours, blue, yellow, red and orange. Musical scores could be envisaged in this work, associations to music and tones immediately come to mind. A quite similar work, with the title *Colore verso suono*, was already exhibited in Pistoia some years ago. Although it had almost exactly the same structure and colours, the work appeared much more compact because it was made out of one single element. The newer version, made in 2001 as an homage to the “Baroque” soul of the city of Ludwigsburg, now looks for a new context in the Abruzzi city of Teramo. The piece has dissolved and has a completely new momentum through its generous five-part display on the wall.

The “movements” are here different, and consequently also the “words”. Two other works are named *Unicum*.

One orange-yellow and one dark blue - one could almost describe it as Yves Klein blue, and this meant as a compliment - square with a hollow-like embedded circular form and on top of it the already familiar concave ellipse. Once more an ellipse, the soft shape, the horizontal oval, an egg as the origin of the world, represents tolerance and openness to the artist, Continuing these thoughts, there are *O giallo* and *O blu*, two further works on the wall, and the wonderful shining-black mosaic-objects *Corpi neri*, which we probably have a trip to Turkey to thank for, even though they were actually executed in Venice.

The piece *Dualitudine* will also be on show, a work that only step-by-step, upon closer inspection reveals its secret. It has the power to attract us from afar, seductive with its shining stainless steel surface. Some visitors may then become unsettled, as they perceive the chrome point raging out of the top of the central double container. *Dualitudine* stands on a plinth of Corten steel that is part of the piece; the two materials are separated through a thin layer of Plexiglas. This layer holds one of the deeper meanings of the artwork. Are we not dealing with *Dualitudine*, double-sidedness? Where is then the second point? To the attentive visitor it soon becomes visible. He can see it when peering through the glass; see how it threateningly drills itself into the red steel. Everything else, the room and everything passing through it, is reflected and exposed upon the mirroring surface of the container, not only once, but twice, in relation to our movements.

A wall filled with a whole row of watercolours represent an opulent richness of gesture, which the artist cannot allow

himself in the minute construction of his objects with their carefully painted or engraved surfaces. In these drawings, watercolours and collages there is room for experiment and sudden ideas; here lays only a short distance between idea and execution.

The fluidity of the watercolour lets the artist use unusual combinations of colours; make small studies or compositions of unexpected individual lines. Interestingly, in opposition to the sculptures, these often relate closely to nature. For example, from something captured on only one part of the paper, following an idea, a partial thought or intuition, wonderful voluptuous poetry is created. The pieces are hung very close next to one another: this is the artist’s intention and these works offer a starting point for his programmatic thought.

However rich and voluptuous, colourful and formally sensual and manifold the impressions created by the artist are - and impressions to the point of bursting are only to be expected from an artist who is incessantly travelling through far away countries - they are consciously reduced in shape and colour when he is creating and perfecting his big pieces. Here the distance, from idea to finally perfected execution, is indeed very long.

It may seem to us that Diego Esposito creates in his art a curious interplay between temptation and keeping distance with us, the viewers, but also with himself.

Already in 1995 Esposito created an outdoor work, one that gave him the possibility to work in nature. For him this was also an opportunity to take a closer look at the two concepts of “natural” and “nature” and this play on words.

In the garden of a couple, friends of his and art collectors, he was to work with a small stream, one that flows down untamed from a small height. Here Esposito developed his idea of the *Cascata*, his waterfalls. He reinforced the already existing vertical partition of the grounds by a seven fold scanning over big granite plates.

The plates, corresponding to the slope, had vertical grooves cut into them, over which the water had to “fall down”. Esposito even manages to give the water different tonal qualities depending on the different heights of the grooves. This scanning, cutting into, creating rhythm through lines, grooves or elevations play a major role within the whole work of Esposito, as we have already seen.

He has later, in an exhibition in the Netherlands as well as one in Palazzo Fabroni in Pistoia, used long, deep hallways for a reworked installation of *Cascata*, now as an indoor sculpture. Here in Teramo, the more quiet, blue “waterfall” finds its suitable placement in the Pinacoteca Civica.

“A waterfall, which does not bring water anymore, only light”, as Diego Esposito himself explained, thereby simply and clearly expressing the essential within his work: the light in the piece.

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