

CLEFTS OF VISION

FURTHER REMARKS ON JOHN OBERDORF'S WORKS

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In their enigmatic ambiguity, suspended between longing and hope, expectation and nostalgia, the works elaborated by John Oberdorf pursue the traces left by the masters of the Sublime, creating their own distinctive modes of expression both from a stylistic as well as iconographic standpoint. Persuasive and elusive, tangible yet ungraspable, the images elaborated by the Salem-based artist set in fact, before the eyes of the viewer, a most mesmerizing paradox: painted with remarkable meticulousness and selective attention to details, these compositions present very naturalistic depictions of totally invented worlds, giving concrete shapes to imaginary settings, sights and sites, in which totemic emerging figures, mysterious presences and dissolving distances are fused together in the making of a highly visionary – and yet resoundingly mimetic – visual narrative.

Now and then, here and there, far and near become interchangeable elements within John Oberdorf's creative cosmos. Furthermore, by revisiting the complex relationship between collective myths and personal memories, the artist codifies a most intimate cartography of feelings and recurrent metaphors, refraining, however, to adopt any didactic symbolism: deep valleys, eroded rocks, human-shaped mountains, geometric planes appear as *ArcheoSpaces* surrounded by the haziness of an exquisitely rendered aerial perspective. In these paintings and drawings, even the most familiar form appears under a new light, reshaped or reinterpreted in a ceaseless process of iconic as well as hermeneutic metamorphosis. This explains why some of the images elaborated by the artist seem to suggest the existence of a subtle bridge between the lyrical pursuits of Romanticism and the deconstructive methods adopted by Surrealist masters: seen from different angles and perceived according to an unpredictable set of expectations, John Oberdorf's works play with the very notion of familiarity in the attempt to transform crystalized codes into opener signs, connecting ambiguous signifiers with variable meanings, thus creating thought-provoking visual compositions that stimulate (intellectual, emotional) experiences that may, in turn, elicit potential paths of (psychological, cultural) reflections.

Set in motion by this constant process of reinterpretation, the act of painting implies the very action of seeing, presenting the latter as a paradigmatic model for poetic inquiries, during which one may question not only the

(multilayered, mysterious) realities depicted in John Oberdorf's images but, more importantly, Reality itself. "The way I express myself," asserts the artist, "is in the form of asking visual questions [and] presenting visual enigmas to people so that I don't beat them over the head with a stick in terms of trying to provide an answer, but I let them ask the same questions that I ask." Thus conceived, art becomes a powerful mode of aesthetic investigation, a form of personal reassessment of commonly shared parameters of perception, knowledge and cultural points of reference. Through their compelling naturalism and enigmatic narratives, John Oberdorf's works offer a refuge for Doubt, Curiosity and Mystery: the very gates of creativity. The fusion of past, present and future permeates these images as a reflection on the various ways in which signs and symbols adopted by different civilizations – some of which may appear now incoherent, incomprehensible, unreadable – have attempted to visually translate the otherwise vague contents of the collective as well as the personal memory.

For this reason (and in line with a distinctively Romantic motif), John Oberdorf's images often depict a little, nearly imperceptible figure – a wanderer, a traveler, a contemplating shadow? – standing and staring in front of the solemn vastness of these cosmic landscapes, or *ArcheoSpaces*, in which it is visually – as well as conceptually – impossible to distinguish between naturally-shaped geological formations and man-made signs such as hieroglyphics or petroglyphs. Presented as a totem among totems, a mystery among mysteries, these almost invisible characters seem to mimic the very act of contemplation expected from the actual beholder, raising the experience of the gaze into an authentically existential model of knowledge, so that the eyes of the viewer, while facing the immensity of these horizons, may grasp – at least intuitively – one of the essential secrets of life: the illusory distance that separates experience from memory, perception from knowledge, present from past.

Clefts of vision, the images composed by the artist – like maps of untraceable yet fascinating lands – perform the functions of question marks, raising doubts in the viewer while, simultaneously, eliciting individual reflections on themes such as life, memory, loss, hope, desire. "I ask questions," asserts in fact the painter, "and provide windows into other worlds: worlds of the possible."