

Precise gestures, registers of time

Maria Lucia Cattani comes from a generation of artists that, despite some uncertainties, inherited an interest in geometric abstraction, and she has retained a taste for formal rigour. She is a distinguished member of that line of artists who have chosen to concentrate on more sober, simple and essential visual values that allow the spectator free exercise of thought.

Throughout her career, in the extreme south of Brazil, with periods in the USA, England and Japan, she has always been more interested in the intrinsic qualities of a certain plastic-visual vocabulary than in the metaphorical potential that these elements may contain. For this reason she is not interested in making thematic or representational pieces. The general direction of her work is in the conscious and balanced use of graphic and plastic resources, which she controls with precision.

Perhaps the most significant characteristic of Maria Lucia Cattani's personality is that she has found ways of bringing together knowledge from a variety of sources, without them becoming mutually exclusive. Her career has developed fully within the field of contemporary art, and is an example of the persistence of artistic practices that do not abandon traditional practices. Her early experience of printmaking led her to develop a special appreciation for processes that develop in well-defined phases. In her work, the irresistible attraction for pure and regular forms, which can only be created with rational intelligence, is completed by laborious activity that demands specific technical knowledge and does not reject direct contact with materials.

She has taken what most interests her from a knowledge of historical methods of production and reproduction of images, bringing new uses and different methods to the instruments and tools. The idea of the “block” or “plate”, for example, reappears in various forms in her work, generating impressions in series. But these series end up creating individual pieces, even when the modules that comprise them are interchangeable, subverting the original use of the technical processes of image reproduction.

The use of repetition is, without doubt, an identifying strain in her work. However, the act of repeating is not simply a reiteration of the founding premise, but a symptom of the difference between almost equal parts in her works. They may have important relationships of proportion and symmetry, one module is never exactly the same as another. They are rhythms that repeat almost identically, defined by intervals undergoing slight mathematical inaccuracies, as if declaring that they are made by human hand and not an infallible machine.

In some of her works the support is radically transformed. Square or rectangular bases are abandoned and in their place appear long, narrow, rectangular bars of wood or metal completely covered by repeated impressions. The meticulous juxtaposition of these bars brings a final composition that can be modified, in an endless game of arrangement. In other cases the fragility of these interrupted supports is accentuated and, without being fixed to the wall or the floor, the bars depend upon the stability and balance of forces in the environment where they are placed.

Although numbers and measurements undergo slight variations, and the mathematical bases of these compositions seem not so clear, they do exist as structuring elements. As a result of arranging equal parts among themselves, without one dominating the others, and without central themes, the eye of the spectator can rest here and there, attracted to greater or lesser degrees by continuities and little occurrences along the way: a line following a long, curved path, another suddenly interrupted, a mark a little wider, an incision a little deeper, certain edges created by the superimposition of colours, some unaligned spacings.

The stamping blocks play an important role in producing the colours upon which the graphic work is developed. Afterwards, the surface is worked on with gouges: first the long incisions, establishing connections between different areas of the plane; then shorter, more regular and constant ones. The carved lines and other elements allow the intervention of the white, ductile material beneath the paint film. This working method results in works with a great optical vibration, in which the white lines and marks suggest a constant movement upon bases of successive layers of colour. The force of the dynamism making up these elements produces a visual effect that makes them seem at one moment to compete to occupy the space, and at another to be superimposed upon each other.

Even when the wall itself is chosen as the support, the method of repeatedly using tiny blocks to create large areas of colour is maintained. This process, which uses an enormous number of superimposed/juxtaposed, applied/removed, painted/stamped, drawn/engraved elements, demands a great deal of physical and mental concentration. Many weeks are spent filling in a previously defined space with colours and shapes.

Delicate dancing forms spring to life in these worlds of art whose limits are the rules created in order for them to exist. They require an attentive eye, these drawn marks that aspire to language, seeming close to some cuneiform script. They are visual poems that recall the quick movement of elements in constant dynamism, like comets or microscopic particles, full of life, continuously crossing the space of their own existences. Concentrated records of the passing of time in which the artist leaves traces of her creative and ordering impulse, and her unshakeable joy for life.

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