

Gonfalons and magic



A gondola sporting the gonfalon of the Orsini shortly arrived, and I got on board with Silvio, Juan Bautista and my luggage, feeling better all of a sudden for the simple fact that I could see the rose, serpent and bears fluttering on the small standard.

Manuel Mújica Láinez, Bomarzo (1962).

There was a time when happiness and horror were played out beneath the bright colours of brilliant flags. Charlemagne shared his command with Roland by bestowing a standard upon him; the authority of the Kings of France was legitimised by holy banners; and King Arthur's army gathered beneath proud standards to fight Mordred in the days when Excalibur was a symbol of power in the world. These were pieces of cloth that cast heraldic messages to the wind and blended history with myth. Regardless of whether they were born of mortal flesh or dreamt up by minstrels, the princes of centuries gone by and the knights of legend were illuminated in our imagination by the light of the banners fluttering above their heads. One such ensign, the name of which has virtually fallen into disuse today, was the gonfalon, a flag usually bearing several tails and suspended from a crosspiece to accentuate its verticality. In the quote above, the Renaissance nobleman Pier Francesco takes shelter beneath the gonfalon of the Orsini family, the public image of his lineage, one that distinguishes him from other men. While it does not convert him into a character from a tale it takes him, nevertheless, a step closer to the territory that extends beyond the merely human. And, as if that were not enough, the hunchbacked duke treats the flag as if it were a close relative, displaying an intimacy that, somewhat contradictorily, is far more private than it is public. He is aware that the piece of fabric reflects his outward image in addition to another reserved solely for his close family. Reality and fiction, the public and the private are interwoven and indistinguishable in the cloth of old flags. Thread and paradoxes hang from their poles.

Even today there are people who keep a watchful eye on the selfsame tension generated by these opposites. One such person is Maria Papacharalambous, an artist closely bound to ancient times. Born a mere two years after Mújica Láinez wrote Bomarzo, in the Cypriot capital Nicosia, a city whose name evokes the clashes between opposing empires, her most recent work combines forms and materials that link up in subterranean fashion with the gonfalons of yore. The series "re-tales" -Léger comme une plume et libre comme l'air (2005) consists of monumental pieces (fabrics stretching 3,5 metres long). When viewed together, both equally solemn, they have an overpowering effect. Only the weight of fabric on a wall could look so magnificent, be so closely linked to the mysterious times in which the shadowy darkness of castles was broken by tapestries and banderoles peopled by enigmatic ladies, unicorns and other chimera of Good and Evil - the fifteenth-century La dame à la licorne being one such example. Papacharalambous' series may impose, but it was not designed to overwhelm. The same is true of the great sculpted heroes of the fourteenth-century Beautiful Fountain in Nuremberg at the end of the XIV century - literary and historical figures of the stature of Hector, Alexander the Great, King Arthur and

Godfried of Bouillon to name but a few. One is almost tempted to kneel down in front of them. It is then that you realise they are not there to make us feel humble, but to enrich us with their virtues.

At the same time, and by way of initiating the fascinating dance of contradictions that underpin Papacharalambous' oeuvre, what distinguishes her work from the sumptuous art of medieval times is its complete lack of show and ostentation. When viewed separately, the pieces of "re-tales" -Léger comme une plume... are revealed for what they are: modest and penetrating exercises in intuition. In their evocative subtlety they are reminiscent of the series 21.III.2003 by the Catalan artist Matilde Grau, who, over several weeks, outlined the ever-changing shadows cast by the tree visible from the window of her studio in Charlotte (North Carolina, USA) before embroidering them on large rectangular pieces of fabric. Papacharalambous and Grau invoke memories of evenings spent by women patiently embroidering and sewing, absorbed by the task of connecting and joining things that were once separate to each other. There is something in these tasks of transformation that evokes the mechanisms of memory, also bound up in the recreation of experiences. Fabrics stained by impersonal machines, scraps cobbled together in makeshift fashion, the use of recycled items: everything in Papacharalambous' gonfalons is founded on that humble yet equally beautiful material we call "memory". It is a material that, following its very own logic, is nourished by both lived and imagined experiences, a material that so many ladies leaning over distaffs and embroidery rings knew so well. In order to handle such fragility they had to be very strong.

Papacharalambous' determination grows with the selection of her main theme. Childhood makes an appearance in a good number of pieces through the use of charming little objects attached to the fabrics, such as toys, smiling dolls, plastic animals and minute pieces of clothing, all of them fading traces of infancy. Herein lies yet another paradox - the old as a metaphor for the new. They are vestiges of a time in which magical thought has not yet drowned in the rationalism of adulthood, a time when the mythical still possessed the same ontological value as empirical facts (in other words, the time of Merlin, Gandalf and other great magicians). Papacharalambous' gonfalons are raised like triumphant standards championing a lost era that memory turns into a paradise, days in which anything could be recreated through magic, through spells such as the one used by the bard in the ancient Finnish saga Kalevala: "Old man Väinämöinen sang: / the lake stirred the ground shook, the coppery hills trembled / the hard rocks exploded / the stones split in two / even the rocks on the riverbanks." (Rune III, 290-295, according to Elias Lönnrot's version).

In moulding childhood with such delicacy, Papacharalambous employs consummate skill to deal with the hazards normally associated with the subject - to drift without intention towards the sinister or kitsch. In the hands of another artist, a bootie or baby's pyjamas suspended - somewhat defencelessly it has to be said - on fabrics of subdued colours would become the remnants of hypothetical tragedies. By contrast, here, far from the ground, they become almost sublime tender entities that draw a smile from the onlooker. Nor are they kitsch, should we say, because the bright colours and the soft, rounded, plump forms of the toys have been shaped with extreme care so as to distinguish their very essence. With exemplary compositional balance, the proportion of children's toys is so exact that far from being abusive, the image created is one of extreme dignity.

Not everything is as lively, however. In fact, it cannot be so. The proposals put forward by the artist, such as the Orsini gonfalon, are sustained by opposites. Where there is joy - a child's smiling face - there must also be sadness. The fact is that what is evoked can only be evoked because it has happened. Therein lies the wonder and the trap laid by memory. Thanks to Leonardo da Vinci we know that the most distant parts of a landscape must be painted with blues and greys. Similarly, Papacharalambous' palette, trained on a distant time, consists of dark glacier-like tones, aquatic combinations, and misty colours reminiscent of slate, appropriate all of them for those who lose their way in the mists of time and myth. In conjunction, and to heighten the feeling of loss (and paradox), she resorts to raw materials that are remarkably close at hand - remnants left to gather dust in forgotten draws and lofts, patched-up pieces that still retain something of their original use: the distant and the nearby, the beautiful and the sad.

Maria Papacharalambous' art is utterly contemporary and unburdened (one of most important contemporary Catalan artist Antoni Llena, always says that the only real and possible revolution in painting must be done without paint). It is precisely for this reason that it links up so seamlessly with the timeless - with the tale, with the temporary suspension of legend - and with other centuries, as there are certain concerns and desires that persist in spite of change and which only intrepid artists have the nerve to investigate, deep-seated concerns linked to our place in the world, melancholy anxieties that manifest themselves before works such as "re-*tales*" -*Léger comme une plume et libre comme l'air*. It is in such works that they become visible and rise above our heads like flags "as light as a feather and as free as the air." They are genuinely magical.

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