

Karl Stengel: the musicality of colour in the design of life

by Giampaolo TROTTA¹

Karl Stengel (Neusatz, 1925.09.18) may seem, to those who do not know him or don't understand him, a "double" artist, manifesting contemporaneously the dichotomy of the abstract and the figurative. Actually, in Stengel there is no dichotomy, but rather two aspects, not even complementary, fused into a conceptual *unicum* that, in some recent works, becomes physical as well, present together in one and the same work.

In the works of his on exhibit here from many years ago (dating from the '80s) the "sign" and the "design" predominate. A clean, expressionistic gesture, which has its origin in the graphic style of the German George Grosz (1893-1959). Drawings that treat bourgeois respectability with bitter and pungent irony regarding sexual phobia and religious taboos, perceiving even in the love-making of a prostitute the mark of genuine liberty, beyond the provocative and almost "innocent" image. As in a portrait gallery of characters from the society of the Weimar Republic depicted by Grosz, or in some charcoal drawings of taverns with drinkers immortalized by Ottone Rosai (1895-1957), the "tendentious" originality of Stengel does not draw the figures, but "shows" them: archetypal figures of a class, or rather of a way of thinking and of living, i.e. of being in society. Never a hard and "pointed" line, however, reduced to a skeletal simplification as in Grosz, but softer, dense, only at times synthesized (as in the *ermae* figures in front of their screens or, better, in his stage sets on the human stage of life), which aspire to be emblematic. The line that defines his figures becomes impersonal, not individual. The surreal and caricatured meanings are *viatica* of research for truth, reality, liberty. [...] Symbols of nature and history, such as the cypress, standing for immortality, or the seashell, which contains prenatal life like a maternal uterus, accompany his emblematic figures, sometimes larval like butterfly cocoons awaiting their metamorphoses, existentially alone on the stage of life. Art, for Stengel, becomes an instrument

¹ Translation by Barbara Sachs.

against every form of violence and the cunning and punctual descriptive trait – evoking also Marino Marini (1901-1980)² in *Per tutte le prostitute del mondo* – has an iconographic concreteness that frees it from the cry of expressionism, even while secreting ironic rage and disenchantment. Unlike Grosz in his pre-American German period, however, there is no moralistic, political and revolutionary causticity, but rather “pure” will to fly on the wings of liberty, on the notes of nature, of that nature which makes Stengel still today, at 87, a “young” enthusiast whose blue eyes reflect all the goodness and uncontaminated purity of his soul. A very sensitive soul, not inclined to a sweeping flood of speech, which the torments of imprisonment in the Russian camps after the Second World War veiled behind melancholy sadness, sadness that did not keep him from maintaining an open and full taste for life and for its harmony.

Harmony, in fact: for it is really music, be it Romantic or Dodecaphonic – especially by great Russian composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Sergei Prokofiev, Modest Musorgsky o Sergei Rachmaninov – that, poetic and prophetic, inundates his recent abstract works, dynamic evolution “zigzagging” from those large and solid parallelepipeds of his on hinted-at horizons in two or four colours, dating from the early 2000s and recalling Mark Rothko. A vibration of lines and masses of colour that at times recalls the abstraction of late Mirò. A love for music that he – son of a musician – has always cultivated.

Stengel follows the spatial pathways of music: his paintings become figurative scores that go beyond the limits of the visual aspect, towards the goal of a synesthesia, namely of a bringing together of two terms belonging to two different senses, where hearing becomes seeing. As a pure synesthete, he sees sounds and hears colours, just like the Lithuanian painter and musician Mikalojus Konstantinas Čiurlionis (1875-1911), who perceived sound and colour at the same time, or the French composer Olivier Eugène Messiaen (1908-1992), who in his preface to the *Trois Liturgies* described in detail the colours he associated

² See: *Nudo e figura*, china watercolour on paper, published in GALLERIA PANANTI, *Catalogo d'Asta*, Florence, 12 July 2012, lot 2256.

with notes of the scale, chords and instrumental timbres, leaving it up to the music to suggest and recreate these.

Jewels of extraordinary spatial sensitivity, full of surprising dynamism and internal luminosity. His is not Abstraction, but Spatial Poetry...

Stengel is always in search of the truth, without limitations and without veils of censure, of a truth that, like reality, never assumes a static and preestablished configuration, but instead is like that produced by the interaction of the will of man. His openness to the future and complete acceptance of the real, which entails the capacity to find, playfully or ironically, whatever is beautiful in each thing and in every circumstance of life, to put a universe long considered to be failing and in crisis in a positive light. Colour often abandons now the steady and saturated energy of his "purely" abstract paintings in order to exhibit transparent ethereal and watery modulating layers and dripping stains, halos around stains and marks of trickling; the pencil line (sometimes enhanced with oil pastels) of the figures acquires, in contrast with the chaotic primordial magma of the background, a more accentuated synthesis, anchoring itself with expressionistic and emblematic force to the candor of the minimalist scenic space that surrounds it and separates it from the chromatic eruption of the aforesaid backgrounds all exploiting the *horror vacui et picturae sine colore*. Works such as *Dialogo 2*, are the iconic synthesis of this Romanian exhibition: man in front of the sound of the universe, of its music, beyond the stage sets of the world, Stengel who dialogues with his Ego and with the visionary chorality of the music that symbolically issues from a hanging guitar.