

An interview with Alessandro Papetti

By Anna Maria Stagira

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A.M.S.: You have painted quite a few series about industrial archaeology in Europe. When did you first take an interest in this subject?

A.P.: Industrial archaeology has interested me ever since I started painting interiors – around 1986, I believe

A.M.S.: That would be about 10 years before your *Factory Interiors* exhibit in Lecco.

A.P.: Lecco was an opportunity to collect all my works in a public space. I liked the idea that the exhibition wasn't simply for commercial motives. Barbara Cattaneo and Oreste Bellinzona first came up with the idea. For a whole year, Mr. Bellinzona came with me while I took pictures of industrial interiors and spaces. In fact, he helped me get permission to get into those places – which wasn't easy! So it was great because, a part from the painting exhibition, I accumulated a good collection of photos. My interest in industrial archaeology really began a long time before Lecco, with just a few paintings. The exhibition was the reason why I focused on this genre of painting for almost one year. In any case, every time I visited a factory interior, I was amazed. They are fascinating places.

A.M.S.: In what way “fascinating”?

A.P.: Fascinating in a pictorial sense, but also emotionally. These places have an influence on you that goes beyond fascination. They are somehow sacred or even mystical, almost like cathedrals. When I enter a large industrial site, I feel myself change on an emotional level. I feel connected to these huge spaces, and at the same time, different from when I first came in.

Perhaps my wish to express this inner change in these paintings was always there, when I first started painting figures in a space. I used to paint figures; then, in about 1986, I started painting interiors and took out the figures. When I went back to painting figures, they were very different, because I was adapting them to the new spaces that I was painting with a wide-angle perspective.

In any case, I needed a strong artistic subject in order to express this inner space with great emotional power. Now I tend to focus on shipyards; back then it was the industrial space. It

didn't matter whether these places were disused or still operating, I never put people in these paintings because I didn't want my work to be illustrative. You can *assume* people were once present in these surroundings from the traces they left. However, you won't find people at work as a subject in my paintings, not now or ever.

A.M.S.: Factory interiors, then, were a vehicle to strongly express your “inner space”, but certainly not the human as a subject. So was there any difference for you between a factory that was closed down and one that was still operating?

A.P.: Some of these places were still producing. I was able to visit some very old plants that were extremely interesting. Others were cold and sterile like a Swiss clinic – in those places, I had some difficulty finding my subjects, and so I focused on details, such as machinery.

A.M.S.: What struck you in particular about the machinery?

A.P.: Sometimes old machinery has a totemic quality. I saw these huge old abandoned machines, ready to be disposed of or taken away. They looked like sculptures in the cathedral square: but marvellous! What's more, you don't understand their function: I have no idea what they were used for, I just saw curves, shapes and gears. I think it's incredible that there is a style in machinery design: you'd think that they were just supposed to serve their purpose, but they also had a particular form that reflected the time they were built. Since I didn't know what they had been made for, to me they were just wonderful shapes.

A.M.S.: Do you also feel that these places and objects tell the story of people and the times they lived in?

A.P.: They are archaeological sites of your own soul, because you are the one who comes across the traces. I've always been interested in things that are falling into ruins or were halfway completed; in other words, works that were unfinished, for whatever reason. You can express a lot of yourself through them, because you reinterpret them, you bring them to life again inside you. There must be something about these things that strike a chord in you; otherwise you wouldn't care about them. You enter an industrial space and you say: “how desolate”, and you walk away. But something about it already belongs to you. This is what happens to me with these shapes and traces; these disused iron pieces. I don't know, sometimes I almost feel I'm violating holy places: you get in and start painting things that were part of somebody else's life and work. I don't mean in the sense of wondering what exactly took place there or what the workers' lives were like – that's not it. It's a lot of things together, very difficult to explain. They belong to me in some way that I don't even want to reveal to myself, because it would require a lot of analysing. I'd rather “go fishing” in the chaos for a trace or an emotion. Analysis seeks to *explain* emotions, so it's hard to give an answer.

If I'm painting a figure, in that moment I feel the need to get in touch with myself. If I'm painting an interior, I'm getting in touch with my “outside”, my container. Many people, especially writers, don't like to admit it, but there is no doubt that every piece of work is autobiographical. I don't think you, the artist or author, can avoid it. Why did I choose that particular subject instead of something else one day? Because on that day, I needed to get in touch with that part of myself. I couldn't express myself in any other way. So my work must be autobiographical. It's difficult to come to terms with our deeper levels. We're quick to

talk about other people, but it takes a lifetime to understand ourselves, and sometimes, even that is not enough time.

A.M.S.: Some critics have pointed out that your paintings of industrial subjects look like “visions”. For instance, the series *Officina Renault (Renault Factory)* of 2004, where the interiors, disused for years, seem to be lit up by an unnatural light. What do you think?

A.P.: I guess I don’t notice it. I start working on a subject, but while I paint, I don’t try to faithfully reproduce what I see. My work is emotive; I use strong brush strokes so that the painting emerges without my thinking about it too much. Creating a special kind of lightening effect in one part of the painting rather than another are just choices I make instinctively.

A.M.S.: Do you intend to document your work?

A.P.: Not at all

A.M.S.: What about photos you take during your site visits and then use as an inspiration for your paintings?

A.P.: It took 2 years to get permission to take pictures at the Renault factory at Ile Seguin. I was able to photograph a place where almost nobody is allowed to take pictures. Maybe because Pinault is creating his own museum there, but also for political reasons. At one point there were demonstrations against privatisation. Anyway, entry was forbidden and I had the pleasure of being one of the few, and probably the last, who was allowed to take pictures of the site. Later I found out that a lot of young people took undercover pictures of the place. At the Paris opening I met many of them, who had gone to Ile Seguin at night by boat, taking a lot of risks. But I was not interested in documenting. It was not my intention to show what the Renault factory is like now.

A.M.S.: Are you the only one to shoot the pictures that inspire your paintings?

A.P.: Mostly, but if somebody else’s pictures suggest something interesting, I definitely use them as a basis to work from. Visiting the industrial sites was very stimulating, and the memory of experience inspires me when I use my own photos. On the other hand, since it is often difficult to get permission to take pictures, I draw on of my extensive collection of texts and images on this subject as well, and I also use photographs taken by others, or even historical ones.

A.M.S.: Recently, you started painting exteriors as well. Is this a transition?

A.P.: Yes, a transition that is still in progress. I think the subject of water is probably the vehicle for this change. I realized something was pulling me towards the theme of water, but 4 or 5 years went by before I could actually paint it. It was as if I had to reach a new level of awareness. For a while, I concentrated on painting human figures in water. This was a turning point for me and water was the key element. It was not by chance I painted my first exteriors right after this *water phase*, linking water and industry by painting a shipyard. Now, having worked on this for some years, I’m conscious of the transition –I didn’t understand it while it was happening.

A.M.S.: Are your exteriors always shipyards?

A.P.: No, I'm currently painting city exteriors as well, including skies.... an ethereal element. The first water paintings were really interiors to some extent, because even with the presence of the horizon, the subject was a black, almost uterine container with figures in the water. In fact, maybe it's only now that I have begun to actually paint exteriors.

A.M.S.: And what about ships?

A.P.: Back to my passion for industrial environments. I wanted to explore shipyards in particular because, unlike other industrial environments, they are not closed spaces. In other words, a shipyard actually is a factory, but huge, and in the open air, where you have everything, water and iron. The ships themselves are really impressive. From a great distance, they look like toys. But when you walk into a dry dock, you are right below the hull, with 40,000 tons over your head – it's an incredible feeling. They make extraordinary subjects: strong and powerful but, at the same time, ethereal... I sense a sort of fragility in these enormous ships in dry dock, as if they were longing to sail somewhere. These great carriers, stuck there because they are so heavy out of the water. They look like dead animals. So you see it makes sense? Dead animals, carcasses, industrial archaeology: when I first started painting industrial interiors, I created a series called *Reperti (Findings)*, representing abandoned industrial objects, archaeological remains, fossils.

A.M.S.: By introducing the subject of water, you also started analysing photographic or cinematographic sequences that convey the idea of movement (for instance in the series *Trittici – Triptychs*). Why haven't you carried out the same kind of research on workplaces?

A.P.: These structures are the places where I act, a container from this point of view, the place where I move. It's me who is moving: I wouldn't feel like making a triptych out of it. Not because I feel it is motionless. Actually, I feel it is alive and moving with presences. And, as a matter of fact, I think my painting is animated because everything is quite vibrating and tense. This is what I mean when I speak of presences: but it's me who is moving in this space and I'm there although I'm not there as a figure and there is no figure at all, the space is empty.

A.M.S.: Actually, in your paintings machines are always disused. Have you ever been in a factory where machines were working?

A.P.: Once I went to a place where some mechanical presses were working... It was frightening, like entering hell. It was a factory near Lecco, at least 100 years old. Inside, everything was black and dirty. The presses would come down with a terrible crash, so that even taking pictures was difficult. The movement of the presses made you – and the camera on its tripod – jump! Certainly there was no immobility at all in that place: all those people working in that deafening noise. But the painting that came out of that experience represented an empty space again... empty, well... as I explained before, such spaces are not empty to me.

A.M.S.: Which industrial sites mainly inspired your work?

A.P.: Around 1990 I photographed the harbour of Genoa. At that time, I painted the *Reperti (Findings)* series; 30-40 paintings that zoomed in on details rather than a wide-angle point of

view. I took pictures of that harbour, but in the end, I painted pieces of rusting sheet metal, details of objects, chains for instance, and only a few industrial interiors.

In 1996 I took a lot of pictures of interiors in the surroundings of Lecco, and I also photographed Rotterdam harbour. There are a lot of interiors I was able to pictures of, either on purpose or by chance. For instance, some months ago I was in Holland, because Corus, one of the leading iron and steel companies in Europe, ordered a big painting of one of their blast furnaces for the month of June. So I took plenty of pictures. I've had several orders from industries. They ask me to create large paintings for meeting rooms and so on. The same companies whose factories are portrayed have bought a lot of my work. So, often a painting stays on its original industrial site. I like that.

A.M.S.: Do you feel that companies have understood your way of representing industrial subjects?

A.P.: Luckily, yes. I must say they grasped what I was looking for. The companies demonstrated their understanding by either showing me around the oldest parts of the factories or putting archive materials and records at my disposal.