

Thirty years of common purpose

Some years ago - quite a while now - I found myself president of the 'Accademia della Sembola', a group of good writers and poets in the Pisan vernacular. It was on that occasion that I discovered 'Er Tramme', a magazine directed and well edited by Benozzo Gianetti with an engaging graphic layout, popular, of immediate appeal, ironic and amusing in its stylistic development, starting from the title. A sort of halfway between illustration and cutting expertise. My curiosity to meet its author was immediate. Therefore, at the suggestion of Dino Carlesi and with the generous mediation of Riccardo Ferrucci, I met Giorgio Dal Canto in his studio-workshop. A man of few words, he entrusted communication to his fleeting, sly and yet charmingly disenchanted smile, to the liveliness of his gaze and to his shrug when he considered it useless or superfluous to talk beyond what his works made immediately clear. Five seconds were enough. And in that room there were so many of them. Engravings - often collected in folders - and paintings of the most varied formats. It was an instant understanding between us, over thirty years ago.

I began to enthusiastically attend to his work, with the firm conviction that I was dealing with an artist in whom a keen spirit of observation, intense humanity, craftsmanship and articulate thinking converged. Therefore, in 1983, we organised an exhibition together at the Verdi Theatre in Pisa: *'La storia finita. 26 paintings for the Tower'*. It was immediately clear that his poetry consisted in revealing the essence of one of those conflicts that have always pervaded relations between people. On the one hand, arrogant and truncated figures in black with the classic bowler hat, the obvious symbol of an opulent bourgeoisie. On the other, tender and pitiful men in horizontal striped shirts, seemingly subject to the symbols of power, actually striving to achieve their own dimension of freedom, devoid of relations with a world full of myths and dehumanising illusions. We agreed to define the former by the term 'Bowler hats' and the latter by 'Stripes'. From then on, the two definitions became part of the lexicon around Babb, to delineate his magical, enchanted, sometimes disturbing world, populated with figures and symbols of great common significance. It is a world built with an ironic charge, at times light and suffused, at times melancholic and biting, at times pitiful and desecrating, typical of Babb the artist, but also of Giorgio Dal Canto the man.

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Cover sketch for the volume *Er Tramme*, 1985-1989
(Sauro Macelloni)



Primi manichini (First Mannequins), 1978
oil on canvas 60x80 cm

The common man in the cloud notes the invasion of the "anonymous" mannequins. The hats are on the ground because the mannequins have no head. We are becoming automatons.

In our frequent encounters, such traits always came to the fore. In that man, an apparently easy-going, hardened individualist anarchist, there was always concealed a rare depth of thought and a sincere concern for the fate of his fellow man. Thoughts, emotions and feelings that only found their way to the surface thanks to the artist's ability to condense them into highly expressive figures. Thoughts, emotions and feelings developed not through organic reasoning, but entrusted to the evocative power of images.

We walked along that path together, also on many public occasions, from the extensive interventions at the Pisa airport, to the installations at the Venice Biennale, to the stimulating presence at the Piaggio Museum. It was a long and very demanding journey, conducted under the skilful leadership and collaboration of Alberto Bartalini. It was 2011, the time when Babb developed the Pinocchio cycle. He needed Carlo Lorenzini's creation to evoke universally known immediate references: Pinocchio is the puppet par excellence; by taking on his likeness, the whole of mankind is transformed into a set of puppets. The Bombetta and the Rigne also share the same fate: they become veritable dummies at the mercy of a few selfish manipulators who, perhaps, do not even exist as physical persons, but identify themselves with the ugly fairy tales by which we are all beguiled, inhabitants of the small village that has become our miserable, noisy and quarrelsome planet today.

We talked about this and more, together with other diners - including Giuseppe Diomelli, his passionate patron - during an amusing and lavish dinner, not lacking in libations, at the Aeroscalo restaurant in Pontedera. We did so in the memory of those figures with their woody bodies and limbs, long noses, round, wide-open eyes, expressions that were sometimes astonished, sometimes indifferent, sometimes perplexed or amused, emblems of a world in free fall. We discussed the new and tempting mirages - first and foremost the pressing technological innovations - which even today still threaten to lead to the dulling of critical faculties and to the detriment of independent thinking. Surely, we would of course later have the opportunity to continue talking about this once more.

But Babb has gone.

Ilario Luperini



Sketch
(Sergio Vivaldi Archive)



La trottola (The spinning top),
Illustration for the periodical
"Er Tramme"

