

MELATI'S PROMISING CHALLENGES

by Emanuela Nobile Mino

Melati Suryodarmo's work consists in creating very powerful images, captured and reiterated in long time performances which show the artist's body engaged in redundant actions whose strength and solemnity look closer to epical challenges than to everyday behaviours or happenings translated and reinvented into artistic language.

A sort of "poetic of overcoming" seems to be the intrinsic timbre of her artistic research and aesthetic. Which is not to be read as a bent to the "achievement at any costs". The aim that the artist persecutes is not connected with the idea of "winning" and demonstrating it to somebody else but, at the contrary, it is actually related to the concept of going ahead, improving self potentialities by experiencing the effective risk of climbing over the limits, in order to conquer a real confidence with the body and a deeper consciousness of the mind aptitudes.

I am thinking about the "Exergie butter dance" piece, in which the artist get into a sexual dance, or better, she tries to maintain a very sinuous aplomb while dancing on a platform made of butter bars. Or the "Second-long Dream" piece, a kind of claustrophobic image which show the artist dressing up with as many clothes as possible, until her body gets imprisoned in the fabric layers and she's transformed into a sort of living puppet.

In her actions, woman fragility seems destined to be redeemed and, although she is seriously interested in defending and forwarding her origins, she induces the immediate overlapping of any common place connected with them, thanks to her capability of mixing in her work the ancient and the new, the traditional pride and the nowadays woman conditions, insisting on personifying universal weakness and conventional prejudice which are part of everybody's background and each of us' everyday life.

The icons that Suryodarmo is able to create seem properly conceived to excavate the most intimate and ataxic origin of woman instincts, to bring out of the dark her inedited ability (physical and mental) and to reveal a completely new role and meaning of the "feminine".

Maternity, for instance, which is the first subject coming up to the mind looking at Suryodarmo performing "The Promise": the artist, wearing a wide red dress and eleven meters long black hairs, sits on the floor embracing and fondling a raw cow's liver. This image, static at first sight, as time goes by it evolves in a series of delicate expressions and unperceivable movements, walking the audience into a path where different emotions and suggestions overlap, conveying more than one iconographic meaning and contrasting quotations played between sacred and profane, and supplying a totally new key of interpretation of the "motherhood".

On one side, the main reference is the classical image of the "Madonna with Child", iconography widely diffused in the Renaissance period across Europe and that since the XV century became one of the most popular subject of paintings and sculptures.

So immediately, Suryodarmo's image refers both to a religious and devotional imprint and to an intellectual content, consequentially to the thousand and different interpretations several artists gave of this precise moment, most of the times presenting it like a beautiful woman wearing a sumptuous dress, sitting on a throne and in the act of embracing an already "aware" child. But this iconography is also known as "Madonna Eleusa" (word that in ancient Greek language means "image of tenderness") or as "Icona dell'incarnazione" (icon of the incarnation), to underline the mystery of the birth and to remind the human essence of the Christ.

This new point of view helps to encourage even more keys of interpretation of the image. In fact, looking at Suryodarmo's work, also a domestic memory (a mother cradling her child in the intimacy of their own house) spontaneously reaches spectator's mind. The perception of an intimate gesture and the deep and warm glance of the woman make the attention shifting from the triumphant and transcendent apparition to an immanent and profane setting, where a maternal female figure sits on the floor and, all alone, takes care of her baby.

And, on the other hand, the strong vision that Suryodarmo creates in this performance, is suddenly dragged into a shocking translation and into myth and legend territory when the everyday action depicted into the frame of a familiar environment and a private atmosphere develops into a surrealistic apparition strictly connected to the oriental fairy tale universe.

The awareness of what actually the woman is keeping over her breast (not a child demanding cares but a heavy bleeding cow's liver that the artist tries patiently to contain with her arms), comes up as a lucid flash back on the ancient traditions, costumes and symbols belonging to the artist's native country heritage. Since history began, liver has ranked above all other offal as one of the most prized culinary delights. Some cultures place such a high value on liver, regarding it as a source of great strength and as providing almost magical curative powers. In the roman galenic medicine tradition the liver was considered the centre of the venous blood (while the heart was the centre of the arterial blood), so one of the most important life's engine.

Liver is often quoted as a symbolic element in popular proverbs. The Java idiom "eat the liver", for example - from which the performance takes inspiration -, is still currently used to indicate an introverted person: eating your own liver then means bringing your own life into death.

Whereas, the action of caressing and cuddling it could immediately obtain the opposite result. The figurate message of the performance, of course concerns the recovering of the real values of life and it can be read as an invitation to take care of yourself, of your own body and soul, as well as a mother protects her child, and the Madonna watch over the Holy Baby and the whole humanity. It also looks like a kind of encouraging action to communicate the importance of preserving the soul from envy and from hate.

But, actually, Suryodarmo's intents can be even more sophisticated. Usually her images give the audience several ways of comprehension and, in this specific work, the complexity of life is the deepened thematic the work was aimed also to show. The work seems to display the dualistic aspect of reality, together with the need of being always aware of the fact that existence, just like a coin, has a double side. The most of the times in her works Melati manages to present to her viewers these two contrasting sides simultaneously. So in this case, we can appreciate and enjoy the vision of the eternal ideal of the beauty, but we are also horrified by the monstrous and the grotesque of the rest, we perceive a sacred tone but at the same time we catch a glimpse of the demonic.

Suryodarmo, in just one shot, demonstrates us how inevitable is to cohabit with all this. Rome,

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