

PAYSAGES DE PHANTASIE

1.

The journey of this life of ours often seems like crossing a wasteland, as T.S. Eliot put it, dotted with way-stations, or oases if you wish, which might have been created expressly for those who will one day succeed not only in reaching them, but also in summoning up the courage to venture inside. It might also happen, in fact, that our traveller, wanderer, nomad – each of these names, along with many others that could be used to define this condition, has, beneath an apparent analogy, a very distinct meaning – remains waiting outside it for ever (Franz Kafka), *en attendant* (Samuel Beckett).

What art sometimes succeeds in doing, it seems to me, is help one to enter.

This thought occurs to me not so much on account of the individual works of Janet Mullarney, as the effect these works have in an exhibition, in a particular setting, including her home and her studio.

2.

Ever since the 19th century Tuscany has been the more or less temporary home of many foreigners, chiefly European, and most of all the English, who in the course of that century created the mythical image of it that still persists. This mythology was based on a sort of imaginary late Middle Ages, the fruit of a literature and visual art that, to be sure, had to do with what was indeed created there in the 13th to 15th centuries, but was associated even more with what remained of that epoch in the environment and the landscape.

Years ago Janet Mullarney chose this territory as a possible place to live.

I have always wondered whether it was her art that led to this choice, or the choice that influenced her art; but I have never managed to come up with a convincing answer.

What is certain is that between the Tuscany of myth and the art of Janet Mullarney there is a connecting thread both evident and slender, and therefore subterranean, unfathomable, and in the end rather uncanny. What is certain is that it leaves its mark on her work as an artist, on her style, her *personal* style, that is, and on its meaning.

As we all know, Tuscany is an arid region which does not maintain the promises it seems to make at first sight. A great number of writers, poets and artists have succumbed to its attractions, have borne witness to it in their work, and have ended by creating *paysages de phantasie*, as harsh and gaunt as the rocky landscapes we see in the (largely Sienese) Tuscan painters of the Fourteenth Century.

3.

I have only once been to Ireland. It was in the early Nineteen-Nineties, and most of the time I spent at Huntington Castle, near Clonegal in County Wicklow.

It was a very mild February, which made it possible to take pleasant walks, both morning and evening, within the bounds of the estate. My sole companion was always a Labrador by the name of Beau, who was eternal. Because the owners of the castle always kept two dogs: Beau outside the house and a dachshund called Carpet indoors. Near the hall door was a wooden notice board reading *DO NOT LET CARPET OUT*. When one or other of the dogs grew old and was presumed to be near death, they searched around for another of the breed as similar as possible, which was kept hidden in the castle until the demise of the one of which it was the double. And this was not the only idiosyncrasy of the lords of Huntington Castle.

One day, in a gentle evenfall, I was with Beau at the far end of the orchard, where the rosemary bushes were already in flower, interspersed at that point by small trees with low, still leafless branches. On some of these branches, in the uncertain light of dusk, I thought I saw small, whitish inflorescences. Surprised and curious, for we were still in the middle of winter, I stretched out a hand and touched them: they were soft and sticky. They were not flowers, but mushrooms.

All the same, I sometimes took leave of the castle for short trips by car to visit ancient Celtic sites. My companions on these trips were two young Germans, one of them a pupil of my host, who was also German, and a woman friend of his who, emerging from a love affair which had ended unhappily for her, thought that a holiday in Ireland would alleviate the stress of the moment. We drove along country roads almost always deserted, to the sound of the music of Michael Nyman. I well remember our visit to what I think were called The Three Rings of Rah. Apart from the crows there was no one else there that day, a dark day with clouds hanging low, and at a certain point we lost sight of each other for a very long time, only to suddenly discover each other again, lost in our thoughts, motionless in a motionless landscape, into which we fitted to perfection, as if all that had been set up especially for us and was there waiting for us (*en attendant*).

4.

Janet is a woman.

She shares certain qualities with those artists who introduced the feminine sensibility into the traditionally masculine arena of art: from Louise Bourgeois to Yayoi Kusama, from Marisa Merz to Diane Arbus, from Marina Abramovic to Marlene Dumas.

First and foremost a sense of independent solitude: neither she nor her predecessors have ever joined the club. Furthermore, their work takes the form of a continual, dispersed germination – and here I am thinking above all of Bourgeois and Marisa Merz. Agglomerations of meaning, in which everything is gathered together without ever becoming a monument. Demonstrations of an experience in progress which is revealed in the forms, in the materials used, in a parentless iconography and an ‘instinctive’ use of colour with no history but that of an allusion to an unwritten tradition, which nails time to the spot. As if everything were born and took on form from what the artist happened to have available in her surroundings, as in the life that falls to us, which we take as it is.

5.

[*On the huge mango tree outside my window crowd more birds of different kinds and sizes than I have seen in other parts of this country: from tiny birds with brilliant plumage to large ones which fly as swiftly and silently as shadows the moment darkness falls. But none of them ever utters a sound.*]

The show-space is large enough to enable each work not so much to have space to spare, still less to enlarge its aura as much as possible without interfering with those of other works, but rather to enjoy a precise position of its own within a setting which remains, despite the presence of the works, empty.¹

The final impression is that of a void studded with objects. The occupation of space is therefore frugal .

The objects take the form of sculptures using a great variety of materials – from aluminium to plaster of Paris, from wood to bronze, from sponge to stone – presented in conjunction with various supporting structures such as plinths, tables , a step-ladder, things which for the most part are *objets trouvés*. They tend to draw on a sculptural history and tradition that ranges from Irish religious art to the polychromatic art of 13th-century Italy, from the timeless religious sculpture of India to the art of the 20th century, from the figurines of ancient cultures of every age and place to present-day mass plastic iconography, with constant attention given to the highbrow of art, the middlebrow of craftsmanship and the lowbrow of kitsch, without any order of precedence. There are images, even partial, of human and animal bodies, sometimes in monstrous mutations, clad in fabrics or coloured, flaunting embarrassing prostheses in which, whether human or animal, stress is usually laid on the gender.

In appearance, and maybe also in substance, vivid descriptions of obsessions, dreams and fantasies, used with a view to “universal” exorcism and personal therapy, like so much of the work of women artists both before and since the explosive entry of the feminine sensibility into the lists of art (as mentioned above), might not these objects, once positioned in the show-space, and in still more tangible form, be allegorical props intended to represent that oasis, perhaps one of those way-stations we spoke of at the beginning? Might they not once again be constituent parts of a *paysage de phantasie*?

Pier Luigi Tazzi

Bangkok, at the dawn of the year our Lord 2011.

¹

Even more so than is typical of another present-day Celtic artist , the Welshwoman Bethan Huws.