

Art Style - August/September 2010

Relaxing in front of the chaos - Simon Raab

By Mirko Cassani

Nothing is destroyed, but everything is transformed. Objects continuously changing, natural elements passing from one state to another, the metamorphosis on which nature itself is based are just some of the initial aspects to be considered in understanding the work of American artist Simon Raab.

Even before becoming an artist, Raab studied nature and observed its laws and mechanisms, obtaining a degree in physics. From there, Raab embarked on a further path that he developed within his artistic expression, leading to a style that mixes (with very surprising results on a perceptive level) painting and sculpture. The result is an extremely lively and mobile chromatic ensemble, and a continuous game of lights and reflections.

What counts is that, for Raab, the main issue is not so much defining a shape, but rather dissolving the contours, representing the transitory element present in objects, confusing ideas, destroying certainties and everything that can be even vaguely reassuring and familiar. "What I want" – states Raab – "is that people relax in front of the chaos that can be generated by what we do not know".

We can certainly say that it is an arduous challenge. However, the path of the Canadian artist is interesting, because his work succeeds in penetrating also the mechanisms of the human psyche, capturing the elements that most typically characterize our society, approaching it also to the research of artists such as Dennis Oppenheim, who – through their art – experiment the continual transitory aspect of things.

Raab's method, as written by the art critic Gerard Haggerty in the *Parleau* catalogue, makes Jasper Johns' maxim his own: "I make something, then I transform it, and then I transform it again". If we look at the portraits and the works belonging to the "Parleau" series, we notice how the artist spans from tradition to modernity, transforming the historical work from which he takes the idea, into a new form that is neither sculpture nor painting, but unites both as if it were a painted bas-relief.

Also interesting is the comparison that the artist makes with Italian painting, re-elaborating with his eclectic style some fundamental works (from the portrait of Michelangelo to that of Caravaggio, up to the revival of some sacred themes of Italian art history). From the portrait to the landscape, up to abstract representation, the technique used is the same: the artist applies acrylic paint on large aluminum sheets and then modifies it by superimposing transparent varnishes that prevent the colors from mixing or becoming opaque. Then, he folds the aluminum, deforms it, beats it with a hammer until he obtains a poly-chromaic bas-relief made up of iridescent and luminous colors. The transparency of the reflections plays an important – and, if we want – metaphoric role, alluded to by the very name given: "Parleau".

The artist indeed once again plays on the theme of metamorphosis, transforming the French term "par l'eau" (literally "through water") in "Parleau". With this poetic play on words, Raab describes what he does and what we see: an ensemble of reflections and vibrations of colors in continuous

movement, that seem to “speak”, to produce a sound, just like what we perceive by watching the flow of water.

Simon Raab will be in Italy with two important appointments organized and catered to by the Galleria Poleschi: in September at the deconsecrated church of San Matteo in Lucca, and in November at the Palazzo Ducale of Massa.