

ANDREA GRANCHI  
Oblique journeys  
*Ancient and modern,  
crossed destinies*

An exhibition presented by  
Lara-Vinca Masini

ART AS ASPIRATION of universality, eternity, projection into the future – according to the English, proto-romantic poetics of the «sublime» and the parallel German poetics of «Sturm und Drang» – and the Artist then, as Author, Hero, both classical and romantic. In his ironic, flamboyant certainty this is so for Andrea Granchi.

Art is, also, expansion of vital energy, accumulated energy ready to explode, towards an unknown and probably uncertain end; in all cases, this intense vitality is a response to this.

According to the poetics of the «sublime» nature is an environment both mysterious and hostile, generating in man an acute sense of loneliness and consciousness of the tragicalness of existence. Granchi even succeeds in reducing nature, the whole world, to a human image, following an anthropomorphism which seems inspired more by formal mannerist and baroque grandeur than by the classical<sup>1</sup>.

And for the «Sturm und Drang» (Friedrich), nature, mysterious and secret, is magical and fascinating.

In Granchi's works the gigantic heads substituting rocks, woods, waves, and taking on their consistency (stone, vegetable nature, sea water) and the immense bodies, acquire, at times, the hardness of stone and marble<sup>2</sup>, in the force of the strong sign and the chiaroscuro, or in the vibrant wavy graphic ductus which is a direct homage to Savinio.

Classical and romantic, ancient and modern represent then the two constant factors in all of Granchi's work.

But near the Giant (Giant path, Giant wood, Giant rock like Pratinolo's Giant), or near its enormous head, there is always Man, small but only seemingly defenceless. In reality it is he, the Man, who has cut off the Giant's head (*Ladro di teste*, 1982, *Cacciatore di teste*, 1986, *Salomè*, 1987, *David & Goliath*, 1988), the Man who, in the artist's works, has the same form as the giant, his muscular body, the bold features. Great and small, united in a sort of symbiosis, expression of the same identity. And, linked to Granchi's usual themes (the Giant, then, and the journey – journey into the imaginary, the fantastic, the grotesque) for some time now he has added, the theme of shadows, doubling, tripling, enlarging and reducing the image, multiplying the horizons, often predicting its direction, regulating its crossed destinies (as in *L'Uomo che insegue la sua ombra*, 1982 – «hyperbolic oxymoron» according to Giovanna dalla Chiesa's definition).

The giant-hero-artist is, then, at the same time, the small solitary man. It is not however the laughable little Charlie Chaplin figure, resigned to failure and bitterly, ironically and craftily carrying out small everyday subterfuges. Nearer the Chaplin figure was, perhaps, the unlucky, confused, worried personage of Granchi's films in the Seventies. And, as it happens, even then the personage was Granchi the man on whom the easy-going Granchi the film-maker ironized with bitterness, on the thread of an alternative narrative, in a sort of lived biography, pitilessly revealed, corrosive, accusing (*Il Giovane Rottame*, 1971).

In his most recent work the Man – the Artist – has become a contemporary hero, he reproduces himself wearing a large twentieth-century hat (reminding us of Beuys's



*Battaglia*, 1989  
olio su tela 150 x 200 cm.

large hat, the most classic symbol of the modern European hero), dominating his scale reproductions from on high, his homologues getting smaller and smaller, setting out on *oblique* and unknown roads<sup>3</sup>.

Today the irony is left, perhaps exercised at a greater distance, in the structural and technical game of the construction of the work, when Granchi «tries out» techniques, materials, «ancient» but totally renovated supports, with delicate allusion to the pictorial tradition of his father's workshop<sup>4</sup>, or when, with sharp irony, he creates his delightful artist's books designed and constructed as objects, or his three-dimensional works, halfway between painting and sculpture, flowing out in crooked fashion from the wall, whilst the relationship between great and small, between giant and man is, in any case, one of parity and in the end reciprocal.

Another component, and by no means the least important, of Granchi's work, is his loving, constant reference, as well as to the history of visual art, to the history of literature (from eighteenth and nineteenth century historical-scientific treatises on the arts, to adventure stories).

At the beginning of the Trans avant-garde the relationship with (art) history deliberately favoured sensitive allusiveness, skin deep, fleeting, curious, stimulating, intriguing. As for the «anachronists» their relationship with classical myth is filtered through artistic practice and takes place directly and exclusively within the specific.

In Granchi's case very often the opposite occurs: it is literature which accompanies and at times follows his creativity. Granchi's discovery of a text certainly does not guide the creation of the images, for which he possesses an inexhaustible, tireless, continuous vein, but their placing and composition in a story.

Thus, for this Aosta exhibition which seems almost to represent a synthesis of all his themes, Granchi refers to four texts: Ovid's *Pygmalion*, *Icosameron* by Giacomo Casanova, *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* by Jules Verne and *Arte della Fuga* by Giuseppe Pontiggia. The first is concerned with the mythical relationship between artist and work, and the others with imaginary, oneiric, fantastic, surreal journeys. The four texts were all chosen because of what we could define as their «visual» writing, like that of Savinio which, as it happens, has been a continual point of reference for Granchi. Savinio, I have noted elsewhere, «rather than painting as he writes, writes as he paints, in the sense that his writer's imagination relies on bringing together images, by insertion of «signs», decorative and baroque fabrics, which make up its sparkling vitality».

Thus in the texts to which Granchi refers in the paging of this exhibition, in the upward journey inside Aosta's Tour Fromage – full of its own intense significance – Granchi has obviously sought those motifs and themes most congenial to his poetical and pictorial imagination:

1) *Pygmalion* by Ovid on the ground floor. What better text can so directly express the «classical» (and probably unsurpassed) conception of the relationship of identification, love, eroticism between the artist and his work? «Pygmalion, disgusted by the infinite vices which nature gave woman, lived celibate, without marrying». Then he fell in love



*Il Patrono del Viaggiatore*, 1989  
olio, carbone e tempera su tela centinata  
235 x 125 cm.

with his ivory statue «in the shape of a woman», renouncing for her sake, all other real women. An exemplary case, in my opinion, in which male chauvenism could have been resolved in a sort of self-castration, reducing the artist, in that way, to celibate machine (cruel only towards himself). But at this point Venus intervenes, transforming the statue into a woman and the link between artist and work will become catharsis, will develop into a complete loving relationship.

What better opportunity for an artist like Granchi to develop his conception of the generative capacity of the artist/work relationship?

And in his work this results in happiness and existential anguish, ecstasy and melancholy, sentiment of the artist's solitude, all fusing in a fertile terrain, at times oneiric, mythical, grotesque, marvellous.

2) On the first floor of Tour Fromage the reference is Casanova's *Icosameron*; less well-known than his celebrated *Vita*, it is, in fact, extraordinarily interesting and perhaps Poe also read it transposing in his Maelström the abyss of «Maeltrand», a voyage inside the imagination, in a world without «precise confines» reached «by underground paths», where «one has to... conquer the force of gravity, the force of the abysses, water, air and fire» (the elements, then, around which Granchi has recently worked, also resorting to that contribution of a highly refined and up-to-the-minute technology, represented by the electro-luminescent fabric). Inevitably a text like this of Casanova's exercises an enormous fascination on an artist, when he speaks of a land dominated by the fearful image of a «terrifying figure of a Monster».

So the theme of the giant returns; in addition, in this case, Granchi, with an extraordinary recovery of irony, identifies himself with it: the large head which emerges in the landscape crossed by roads «which are never straight», and becomes part of it (even if the facial features have been almost erased<sup>5</sup>) is his, with that large hat perhaps a symbol of our time, with his (artist's) ability to hold, with his imagination, the world in his hand. But the inhabitants of this fantastic place live in an extraordinary land, made of colours, seemingly created for the delight of a painter, a small, extraordinary Cockaigne for an astute, expert, curious and experimental paintbrush such as that of Granchi who in these and many of his latest works recuperates, with open-minded audacity, the fresco technique, which he applies on a squared base, treated then, following antique tradition, with slaked lime, marble powder and river sand, and sometimes etched with quick decidedly «modern» strokes. (*Visita al paese del colore, La città dell'ingegno...*).

3) The theme of the giant-artist is also dominant in the works exhibited on the Tower's second floor, together with the theme of the journey, Verne's journey «to the centre of the Earth»: here the journey takes on, in the crossing of diverse formal categories (colossal and minute, hot and cold colours, curves and angles) the substance of a conflict organised in graduated dimensions.

4) On the top floor the present is forcibly brought to our attention; the images are structured in clear-cut forms, creating compositions which tend towards an abstraction based on symmetry, created by the crooked lengthening and radiating of the shadows,



*Parete della Geografia*, 1990  
olio, tempera e carbone su tela 300 x 400 cm.  
Firenze, Palazzo dei Vini

the doubling of twin images (*Doppio gioco*, *Fuga per due ombre*, *L'Uomo col piede in tre staffe...*) in the shrewd approach to a text, Pontiggia's *Arte della Fuga*, one of the most hallucinating and enchanting of Italian contemporary literature, full of surreal fantasy, extraordinary poetical intensity in a prose arranged following a vivid musical cadence, with a wealth of evocations and references.

For this reason perhaps, for this more private, more spellbound dimension of the text it seems to me that this last work of Granchi's, linked to the mechanisms of perpetual variation, represents a sort of ideal arrival point for this journey «uphill», which is also a journey in time, through the phases of European artistic culture, up to a contemporary age opening towards a new horizon of freedom.

LARA-VINCA MASINI

- (1) «Classical», characteristic of proto-romanticism – Blake and Fuseli come to mind – , but also today's «anachronists», even if they are closer to the neoclassic than the classical.
- (2) «The stone sought to warn me that we were made of common substance and so something of what constitutes my person would have remained, would not be lost with the end of the world. Communication will still be possible in the desert without life, without my life and all my memories» (from «If on a Winter's night a Traveller» by Italo Calvino, Turin 1979, 7th edition).
- (3) «The road, never straight, proceeded tortuously, unexpectedly... we soon got used to expecting the bends and the corners with trepidation, almost with anxiety, as if, after all the straight stretches, the curtain of a new show rose on an unexpected, surprise scene» (from «Inseguitori di giganti» by A. Granchi, Florence, 1989).
- (4) This recalls the significant painting, *Il mio vecchio tavolo di lavoro* of 1931, where his father, Vittorio Granchi, also a refined painter and decorator, exhibited, in a sort of pictorial listing, an engaging still life, all the instruments used to carry out the methods and techniques of painters since Renaissance times.
- (5) An obvious reference here to Giorgio De Chirico's egg-heads.