BATO

Critical texts

Writings on Bato

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DANILO PETTE

L’ILLUMI-BATO

2022

I was with Harry Potter at Jack Nicholson’s place, after a day spent unloading fruit and vegetables.

The poker game had gone well: Jack and I had cleaned out young Potter, and then Jack had partly cleaned out me.

When the clock strikes one, Potter buries his face in his hands in despair, and Jack, blind drunk, snaps furiously: “Get the fuck out of here, the pair of you!”

He doesn’t have to tell us twice.

Potter, ahead of me, faces life with a weary gait, a disappointed stride.

Poor guy.

It happens to everyone sooner or later. Everything’s plain sailing and suddenly… nothing.

The trick doesn’t work anymore.

And the APPLAUSE turns into BOOOO.

Harry sobs into his cloak as he staggers along.

“Don’t think about it, kid… let it go,” I tell him.

He turns, looks at me and points to a broom leaning against the wall.

“Need a lift?”

“No.”

“Then take this. It’s an invitation. Go only when you’re ready.”

He twirls his fingers under my nose and a little card pops up on his ring finger.

Then he jumps on the broom and vanishes into the night.

I look at the card in the moonlight.

MIRABILIA, it says, and an address underneath.

Days later I find myself unloading fruit and vegetables for a few cents, as always; but this time, as chance would have it, right near the place on the card.

Just a stone’s throw away, as if it were a sign, a calling.

Of all places, an urgent request to unload fruit and greens had come from right there; right there my professional skills had become necessary.

So I start thinking about Potter’s words: ‘go only when you’re ready’.

Was I ready to leave the greengrocery trade, to which I owed everything?

What do I do? Do I stay in the business of loading and unloading turnips-courgettes-oranges-bananas, or do I throw myself into the mirabilia just round the corner?

The cultivated fields or the circus.

What would you do?

Well, I don't know what you would do, but I put down yet another crate of Roman courgettes and tell my colleague: "I'm done."

He looks at me, picks the courgettes up off the ground and says "Take care, mate…" and then disappears into the darkness of a supermarket.

I turn my back on him, reach the street number and go in.

And who do I find there?

Drum roll

The Bato.

If I remember correctly, Round Four.

ding-ding

After great drifts into the brush, Jazz and Risorgimentos, and more new conquests of forms in a flora-and-fauna mould[1]… here he is again.

Now he's carrying on with the occult, in fierce and magical beasts, in the Holy Scriptures, in ancient and mighty things.

BATO the illuminATO.

He starts off calmly, without pretensions: just a 200-by-150 of Adam naming the animals.

A two-footed tackle on modernity.

And yet Bato is right there.

He never loses sight of himself for a moment, he is fully present: these are his melodies.

With them he drains the endless verbosity of captions and dries out the tomes of encyclopaedias.

And the Batoid Adam is a conductor who perhaps plays the clarinet, and traces in the air two smoky, bewitched knots that have drawn in all the felines, the snakes, the birds, the sheep and the cattle. All of Bato's Beasts: the tigers, those C-heads and the flowering leonine manes, the crocodiles harnessed in gold with musket snouts, the bears and the birds, the bulls at Mycenae and Adam holding them all, in high-heeled shoes, muzzle outstretched, Orpheus and the Sirens.

And then boom.

A blue whale hits you in the face, shot at full speed from the abyss to the surface, with flicks of its tail and dragon fins. It's a fishy monster with a boxing-glove head, undefeated Champion of the Seven Seas, with Jonah in the corner as its second. It's a bluish right hook that opens up my guard and that I really didn't see coming.

And in fact it knocks my sunshade clean off.

My sunglasses, I mean.

One to Bato.

He knows what he's doing.

This show of monsters is an initiation. Every piece is a trial to be passed. He has slipped into the oldest story ever told, the Blessed Age. Not for the exclusive use of human beings. And so off we go with gods and gnomes, warlike heroes, weapons of everlasting fire and raging winds.

And underneath, the beasts devour each other, entwined.

That's where he takes us this time, into the harsh circle of hell: among a red unicorn charging with forward thrust and taking aim, complete with a drop of blood on its horn, a syringe loaded with a spring-screw-spiral. The maps of the place become ambiguous, they follow sea routes older than the sea itself, no longer the shape of spheres but circles of land bordered by land, peopled by impressive folk, Gog and Magog, Battisti and Mogol, sea dragons, Scylla and Charybdis, Cyclopes, Vampires. The maps show them all, coordinates in hand, but nobody has ever gone to check, and those who did never came back, or got lost at sea.

And on the brink of drowning the Leviathan opens up, like a dandelion with six deadly stems you wouldn't dare blow on, Master of the Land and Master of the Sea. You are saved by a brotherly companion, an everlasting dragon sparkling in many colours, and the more you watch it sparkle the more it feels like biting your head off. You sense the danger but you watch it, you think it over: maybe it's better to end up as food for this monster here,

Schytalis the good-looking, and be done with it.

But you can only choose the ending for the paths that don't matter.

This is a slaughter; you come out a bit chewed up.

Pasiphae the Infamous comes to tend your wounds, as a friend, needless to say: it seems she has high expectations of her lovers (Daedalus's trick is a real Trojan horse).

Then you follow the current and land in the hot desert of prehistoric Pangaea, where a bronze foot rises, baked to perfection by the sun, and beneath it its owner, who crawls on the ground all his life, covering his head with that enormous extremity.

"Friend Sciapod," you feel like saying, "are you sure you want to cover up that ugly head of yours? Is this any way to keep out of the sun?"

But then you say nothing, and he points you towards some horrid woods, and if it were up to me I'd go back to the courgettes, but the path of initiation doesn't wait for fools. In the middle of the woods there is a rooster, a cat and a king inside a ball, held up by the winches of nearby

ships.

I don’t know the names of the rooster and the cat, but I do know the King’s, because no name is better known than his.

Not even ‘Michael Jackson’, not even ‘Bergoglio’, ‘Kennedy’, ‘Rolling Stones’…

He really holds his own against the heavyweights, with Jesus Christ and names like that, never mind…

It’s Alexander, who, not content with conquering all the lands then known, amuses himself by conquering the depths, complete with cat, rooster, a diving suit with a breathing beak, a conical contraption and a golden thread. He has barely had time to dry off when the Great King leaps onto a winged chariot, driven by a Griffin, drawn in pencil and blue-toothed.

No kingdom resists the Great King.

Everything is gathered into one: long live the god of life.

Let the legends turn to stone: the burnished lions brought back to life, rubbed until the gold comes out of them, the she-bear moulding her heir with blows of her muzzle, and Pasiphae with her Minotaur on one side and a Crocodiled Dragon on the other rise up as imperious statues, the columns of a Phantom Gate guarding the great secret: the vibration that sets everything in order and takes everything apart.

And you vibrate with Mirabilia at Bato’s exhibition.

Let’s just hope that, from painting so many monsters, he doesn’t run the risk of becoming a painting himself.

— Danilo Pette, L’ILLUMI-BATO, 2022

MARTA SPANÒ

Mirabilia

2022

Mirabilia is a journey, an exploration of forms and colours in a fantastical key, a dimension in which visions, ideas, memories, stories and mysterious creatures express themselves freely, arousing curiosity and wonder. Medieval cartography, the adventures told by Rudyard Kipling, Emilio Salgari and Herman Melville, the biblical Genesis or the Letter of Prester John are the starting point of Bato's works, the start of a journey towards distant lands inhabited by animals both real and imaginary which, between the 12th and 13th centuries, gave rise to the Bestiaries, anthologies of an imagination that still fascinates us today. Heirs to a very ancient tradition, friends, antagonists, allegories of human vices and virtues and therefore bearers of a strongly symbolic and moralising charge, animals become the protagonists of the contemporary bestiary traced by Bato: unstable figures, with negated volumes, born of a quick yet meditated gesture, emerge with essential elegance and harmony from the white surface of the canvas; here there is no room for adjustments, overlaps or second thoughts, because everything rests on a weighed, measured balance in which the immediacy of the gesture is only apparent. Pictorial lightness gives way to the concreteness of matter in the sculptures of bears, lions and crocodiles: volumes are recovered and called to inhabit space through the essentiality of supple, elegant lines, echoes of their painted counterparts. Going beyond direct imitation and the simple recognition of the subjects, the concreteness of reality becomes for the artist the occasion to create compositions of colours and marks that intertwine, in order to give new forms back to that animal world, the object of an ancient imagination and culture in which fable and fantasy, religious and popular beliefs, scientific and naturalistic knowledge mingle, creating an idyllic, mythological world, at once distant and fearsome, which Bato subjects to a sharp and precise synthesis capable of bringing out the core of things. An essentiality that does not rule out the possibility of travelling, of getting lost in a story, of choosing whether to take it in as a whole or to linger over a detail, a stain, the brilliance of a colour used in a non-realistic way, while being certain that the Mirabilia observed will not only tell us something but also show us the way to another world, weightless, full of life, in which real time and the time of the story are suspended. Indeed, the essence of the forms, made visible by Bato's darting, sinuous strokes, gives back the possibility of stopping to listen to the story those animals tell, accompanying the viewer on his path just as, in the Middle Ages, the *Mirabilia* guided travellers among the wonders of a city. *Mirabilia* carries a new, contemporary vision of the journey into the present, makes visible the essence of nature and its inhabitants, and offers the chance to explore distant lands, a microcosm on the border between the human and the animal dimension, between fantasy and reality.

— Marta Spanò, Mirabilia, 2022

LUCA CESARI

Giungla

2019

on 'Jungle: Bato's solo exhibition'

Opening the Tonino Guerra museum in Santarcangelo to images other than his own is the sign of a soft and mysterious conversation that the great writer and artist continues to have with a variety of figures different from himself. What happened throughout the screenwriter's career with the most dissimilar directors, in soul and in cinema, is repeated here, in many ways and yet in an intimately similar fashion. What could the inner thread be, the 'fantastic alphabet' that unites, or brings together, the mental universe of Tonino Guerra and that of Bato? I would almost say that universes are born in the same way as encounters and as the drift of continents. Who could plan them in advance? And so a precious improbability seems to tie together the figurative Eden that Tonino Guerra opens before our eyes with watercolour, with pastel, even with plaster, and the fragmented, barely feral Jungle that Bato sets loose through the rooms of the museum, answering the flute call of the poet's imperfect, allusive creations. Bato's mark, his line, his 'language of water', as Tonino Guerra would say, spills entirely into the kinaesthetic act which, after a long apprenticeship, condenses the short circuit of animal being into a sharp and precise synthesis, repeating itself in various ways in the sculptures too. For Bato, animal being reveals itself in a circumstance, making the most of the core of nature, 'bare', grasping the body within the body and fixing, almost in a dazzling, intuitive instant, the open space in which that capacity for movement becomes a great rhythm of the universe. In this way the serenity of the eternal impulse, or the coexistence of the animal world with the state of emergency at the origin of its being in the world, speaks to us like the Kipling book that Bato loves so much. There is indeed, as in great virtuosity, perhaps a fundamental intention of celebration in these meticulous and essential images, whose liquid touch aims at a 'finish' that is practically the negation of 'volume', and defines a body by using emptiness. Yet Bato's Jungle has nothing bestial or violent about it. With these unstable figures, resting nonetheless on a carefully weighed balance, Bato means to show that the Jungle is not the world closest to conflict, but to 'measure' and harmony; whereas human civilisation, the so-called 'second nature' that we so pompously boast of against the 'brutality' of the first, is entirely given over to 'excess'. It does not matter how long it takes the artist to distil this truth; the observation of animals, reproduced in series upon series of sketches, scrupulously worked down to the smallest details, may last hours or days. What matters is that the singular event is born after all this process: when the creative act breaks out all of a sudden, unanalysed and spontaneous. Bato's watercolours are therefore 'sumi-e' in colour and, in this sense, they resemble not so much Tonino Guerra's drawing as the poetry on silk scrolls hung on walls that Antonio Baldini liked so much that, in one of his "Tastiera" columns of 1950, he declared it more Chinese than the verses of Li Po. The poet's approach to painting is quite different. The emptiness, the innocent, childlike space he seeks passes through the swiftness of the volumes of air he captures in the 'full', in his bottles, sustaining a living communion with colour that does not exist without the layers and filters of memory. Everything is memory in Tonino's painting. Behind every pastel

lies the lesson of Morandi and De Pisis, clashing without a fight and sometimes, in flashes, reaching the true eloquence of a sumi-e painter. But there is no doubt that Tonino's authentic water painting is embodied in his poetry of 'air', in the childlike breath of a weightless speech. In another way, the painted figures always reproduce the great book of poetic and narrative images; the final outcome of the dialogue between the arts that Guerra explores aims at the interdisciplinary erosion of all the fences that have been set up between the "genres", turning towards a total idea of poetry long pursued. Not by chance Tonino Guerra once declared that he did everything 'in the same way': screenplays, poems, paintings, stories. So, on the level of 'making' (which is also that of thinking, *Verum ipsum factum*), it is as important for Guerra to circumscribe with a 'closed' line that sense of refuge which, for Bachelard, awakens our original bond with the house (as the basis for every later measure of the world), as it is important for Bato to 'open' the line. Tonino constantly thinks about what he gives shape to; he paints with a film in his piece of chalk. Bato thinks about nothing. Despite his wonderful naivety, Tonino Guerra is a sumi-e painter only with words. And it is on this poetic bond that the encounter with Bato's Jungle takes shape. Some years ago a great psychologist spoke, in a fascinating book, of the 'breakdown' of the ancient 'bicameral' mind in our present psychic life. Although we know broadly what happens in the two hemispheres of the brain, the three great areas governing language are concentrated in only one of them, the left. In practice, we do almost everything with one hemisphere. The other, the 'heart of darkness' of our spirit, is for us a hemisphere that is – as Jaynes says – "mute". The origin of consciousness wiped it out. And yet, like a drifting continent bearing down on us, with tectonic thrusts that cause tremors and earthquakes, it speaks to us as the atavistic, acoustic memory of our deepest and most remote life. Today Harari writes about it in *Homo Deus*, with regard to the ancient animist hunter-gatherers, that is, us: "The world belonged to all its inhabitants", its rules "involved continual negotiation between all the creatures concerned. People talked with animals, trees and stones, as well as with fairies, demons and ghosts. Out of this web of communications emerged the values and norms that were equally binding on humans, elephants, oak trees and wraiths." So meeting, or making art, means precisely negotiating with the 'heart of darkness', entering the other chamber, being 'bicameral' as before the 'breakdown' and the silencing by consciousness. We talk, and we make art, because we feel a deep nostalgia for our 'mute', arcane, ancient hemisphere, for our Jungle. I therefore believe that the true reason for a personal and artistic encounter is to have none at all, searching for the hemisphere we do not remember. Indeed, one can say of true encounters what Goethe wrote about poems: they are always born of an 'occasion'. And what could be less premeditated and occasional than the encounter between Bato and Tonino Guerra? To be truly worthwhile, an encounter must serve no purpose; it must be accidental, aphoristic, contradictory. The most important encounters always happen by chance. Or, as Tonino Guerra writes in the beautiful long poem *Quattro giorni laggiù*: "It is precisely with the greetings that the encounter begins."

— Luca Cesari, Giungla, 2019

DANILO PETTE

La Bestia Rara

marzo 2018

When I think of something jungly, I think of Salgari.
Basically, here's how it works: you take one thing, anything, and then you "salgarize" it, and it immediately turns jungly. You hear the roar of burnished tigers,
tree fronds become congested with birds and primates, sunny beaches, thundering
drums, vines and ambushes.
And then a bright green that drips everywhere and swallows everything.
Hence my amazement in having learned that Bato has disappeared right in the jungle!
But what the hell is Bato doing? In the last episode he laying low,
among claws and wings, the creeping snares and the improbable escapes, the pointed horns and the opposable fingers, and all that intricate and infesting green?
Does he wish to swap drinks?
From the brown coffee concoctions to those tea-based?
Just to start priming with a coat of green?
Bato, however, seems to laugh at what we expect from Bato; he takes a sleeping bag and a machete, and on the threshold of the forest he exclaims:
"I'm going back to the figure."
Kaboom.
Lenzi told me, desperate, over the phone:
"That's exactly what he said, go get him back, Frà!!"
"Is there a bounty?"
"Fifteen guineas".
Good, I could dig that…
So first I'll take a nice ride around, then I'll call Sciarelli a couple of times,
then I'll hear what the latest is in the darkest alleys of filthy Rome.
I wake up the umpteenth morning and I'm still in Pietralata, and the more time
I spend here, the more I grow weak, while Bato becomes stronger every minute
he spends crouched in the jungle.
I could see him, among the vines and the beasts and all the other creatures.
I would have found him, he or some rare, unspeakable, mysterious beast.
I finally hitch a ride with a motorized raft that goes upstream
the Aniene and along the Tiber river; and I finally get to Ponte Sisto, and reach
via delle Zoccolette, where he was seen the last time.
I set foot inside, and two wild beasts cast in iron warn me to carefully watch my step, once I'm in.
Among all the beasts, the most implacable and exceptional are a tiger and a lion.
The tiger is a gurgling C, with its slim back made of wrought and welded iron leaf.
She just landed and is ready to strike.
The lion is a large carnivorous plant corolla on a powerful curving back.

Nobody, not even at night, would dare to challenge him.
And that was just the threshold of the jungle…
I push aside the wide leaf of a giant plant that alone was blocking my view,
as if it were a diaphanous and photosynthetic curtain.
And then: kaboom.
Bato's Jungle as far as the eye can see.
Everything speaks of his passage, as with Kurtz; however, he passed through as merrily as Mowgli, as well-adjusted as Tarzan.
But what am I saying? Rather: he's an Adam, authorized to give shape to things, instead of names! And this is really a comeback to the figure, gentlemen!
Everything in the intricate forest is a figure, but a figure that refers to Bato.
To his curves, his ripples, those colors of his and his charcoal marks.
Bato gave it, the jungle, the shapes that refer to him the most, to the point of modeling it on him.
And he had lots of fun, believe me…
Just to make it clear that this is not a joke at all, he has split himself into three:
Paintings, sketches and sculptures.
A trinity, with a triple effect, like god and certain toothpastes.
One yet triune…but what did he set his mind on?
Bato has become like those deltas that flow, enormous, at the surrender of the Congo, he put himself to the test, he is a Bato being a Ganges.
He reiterates the concept of shapes, which, also in different styles,
resonate with each other.
There is no Voodoo here.
There's Technicolor!!
There's a tiger jumping fiercely in black and brown triangles, and its long jump is tinged with the color of the plants it moves, and it slowly turns into a beautiful
green. And the tiger has the same expression of a nervous C that the one at
the entrance has.
A caiman with graphite teeth and gold Egyptian armor emerges from the water, and emerges from the supreme lands of foamed color, to which Bato has already accustomed us. And the same caiman is sketched as in four moments of the day, and while it always reappears, it's as if it's always on its way back.
Marabous rise in black spots that become wings and tails in the explosion, and red are the carrions' beaks. And then a severe din, a
Rumble into the Jungle, the meeting at the top of two gorillas that kick and
bite, painted by a confident Bato, with superb stains that, surely, will provide
the shapes, but also add something else. And along the back of one of them, the charcoal draws a spinal tract, then triangular, which ends up resembling those leaves hatched between the Sketches of plants and flowers, Bato's Flora.
Again incarnated, in toothed mouths, inflamed mucous membranes and trees like mountains.
And in the meantime, the Parade of the Vigorous Mandrills; triptych of Scarlet Ibis;
snakes in cahoots against a Hornbeard, who quickly wanders away; an emerald boa that

swallows the monkey; a fishing bear; a handsome babirusa resting near a tree (it's like a super wild-boar, and therefore also 'boar resting near a tree' is fine); a stick insect peeling from the green blanket of a military moss; a lion colliding with a boa, and at the end they mix together, such was the impetus of excelling.
And the sketches are the ingredients of the paintings, scattered along the paving
by the thousands, they still outline those elusive, round and watered down shapes,
half mixed together, partly broken up and then packed down.
The game of Bato.
The Kingdom of Cong.
There is no Voodoo here, just the fun of enclosing everything in a few precise and definitive shapes.
Bato is behind this jungle, he concocted everything himself.
Basically, he pops up everywhere.
He has made a vegetable cathedral out of himself and a self-referential faun.
To him his gorilla statues with arms of bridges, poignant lions blooming in April and roaring, bronzes, resins, and waxes; the pencils, the Indian ink and the mixed techniques.
It's all an intricate chaos of heads shaped like "C"s (as in life, don't you think?):
tigers, snakes, bears, lions; and then all the bodies in strong colors, which are rendered with quick gestures that resize them to leaves and light steps.
When I returned, I realized that there was no need to look for Bato, because I had been with him in the last hours.
Lost in there, among his solutions and his conclusions.
Eventually I entered the jungle and found a rare beast.
It's the Bato.
(needless to say, I haven't seen the fifteen guineas yet, right?)

— Danilo Pette, La Bestia Rara, marzo 2018

LUISA GRIGOLETTO

RvB Arts

March 2018

Bestiarum vocabulum proprie convenit leonibus, pardis, tigribus, lupis et vulpibus canibusque et simiis ac ceteris, quae vel ore vel unguibus
saeviunt, exceptis serpentibus. Bestiae dictae a vi, qua saeviunt.

The term ‘beast,’ properly speaking, includes lions, panthers, tigers, wolves, foxes, dogs, apes, and other animals that attack either with their mouth or their claws,
excepting serpents. They are called beasts from the force with which they attack.
Isidore of Seville (560 ca.- 636), Etymologies

In the Middle Ages, bestiaries were didactic-educational works of a symbolic, allegorical and moralizing nature, which collected and mixed scientific and naturalistic knowledge with religious and popular beliefs, along with fabulous and fantastic creations on the animal world. Descendant of the zoological treaties from antiquity and late antiquity (including the Etymologies by Isidore of Seville), they became a proper literary genre between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: such Christian encyclopedias allowed one to interpret the wonders of creation through an edifying perspective.
In Jungle, Bato takes his cue from this tradition to investigate the structural affinities that bind man and animal. Focusing his research on the jungle’s inhabitants, Bato creates his own personal contemporary bestiary, which feeds on suggestions absorbed from reading numerous scientific sources and the works of some adventure writers, including Rudyard Kipling, Emilio Salgari, and Herman Melville.
His taxonomy of beasts – which includes bears, monkeys, tigers, marabous, lions, gorillas, mandrills, and crocodiles – trail almost literally the definition of Isidore of Seville, according to whom the mouth is the creatures’ hallmark of aggression and ferocity. And it is precisely this feature that is always present in Bato’s works: with a flickering and sinuous trait, he links the animal world to the human world in an indissoluble way, under the sign of instinct and ruthlessness, moving from analogy to homology, thanks to the free association of forms. Even the plants – innocuous spectators only in appearance – reveal thorny pitfalls.
The elegance of the sign and the color scheme, rarefied in warm and brilliant hues and used in an unrealistic way, spread over vast white backgrounds, and accentuate the violence of the subject matter. Despite the sense of apparent immediacy that the paintings communicate, Bato’s creative process includes elaborate studies, sketches and drafts, which allow him to create a balanced, harmonious, and essential composition, as if it were a calculated improvisation that leaves no room to afterthoughts.
If the works on canvas aim at simplifying and emptying the form, until it is reduced to its outline, the sculptures – a new chapter in Bato’s artistic research – represent its volumetric counterpart, with obvious cross references.
By comparing the versions of the same animal made with different materials, such as wax, white acrylic resin, bronze, and wrought iron, we discover new and different cues upon multiple

viewings, as if we were investigating a subject through different lenses. Here the sign seems to abandon the ethereal nature of the paintings and become concrete and three-dimensional, while maintaining the same flexibility and impressionistic character. With Jungle, Bato draws on a surreal imaginarium to create a microcosm inhabited by a nebula of creatures: in this stratification of shapes and images, we oscillate between the animal and the human, on the traces of a footprint and the arc of a mouth.

— Luisa Grigoletto, RvB Arts, March 2018

DANILO PETTE

HIC SUNT BATOCCHIONES

9 December 2011

The Romans, for example, used the expression Hic sunt leones ("here are lions") to mark unexplored and therefore dangerous regions on maps.

Sure, you could do it: look for a complete meaning, or a foothold, in the drops of Coffee&Ink escaped from some restless sip, which then float like liquid islands on the wood of the table. Of course you could. You could assign shapes to the clouds parked illegally in the sky, if you have nothing better to do. Like the drunk who no longer lifts his head from the table because he has found a mission there. Like an immense starry sky of moka, laid out on the tablecloth to be contemplated. Stamped with the bottoms of coffee cups. Bubble wrap. Ready to ship. The old witch sees omens in the coffee grounds. Poor naive fool. Here there is someone who turns it into a means of expression, no bullshit. The caffeine silhouettes that Bato offers us release an exciting aroma, a spell of perpetual wakefulness that makes you addicted. Diluted, splashed, vaporous, pouring. Leftover drips. They look like dark stains on tooth enamel, swarming with linear microbes and circular lactic ferments. Someone would put a filling in. That is not quite the case here. The brush that traced them must be a sugared, havana-coloured spoon pulled out of an Indian-ink cappuccino froth. And the Colour scheme, you will say? Colour scheme my arse. It is the Concoction conquered, the substance. The realisation that ink decaffeinates. "We'll have one in a glass and one in a cup, laced with black pigment, thanks." The recipe is simple, for all the ladies at home. The alchemical painting-espresso mixture on a milk-white base behaves decoratively, like a stain on a starched collar. With its essence it creates brown oases and parallel mirrors, silky camel coats, marble veined with tow. If you look closely it is organic, sometimes breadcrumb or rusk, sometimes woodworm holes in the bottom of caramelised wood. Seen from above they are maps of great savannahs and tangled lions. Coordinates of distant expeditions on yellowed papyrus. Decorations in thick tobacco, corrupting the territory in waves and spillages. That is where they would take us, if it were up to them: to a decaffeinated shipwreck. That is what they offer us: studies of unexplored regions of wild pictorial matter, where the shadow of the gesture & the trace of the will & the reasons of taste can be shown. And the Figure, you will say? The figure, nothing: look for it elsewhere. Whales mirrored in whales, trees bent over the sand like the back of a warrior in retreat, seeds marching in good order out of vegetable navels, figures twisting into panoramas until everything becomes a landscape of pictorial intuition. What do you want with the figure? The figure has taken to the brush, along latitudes already beaten by education. Here we are talking about something else. Hic sunt batocchiones.

— Danilo Pette, HIC SUNT BATOCCHIONES, 9 December 2011

BELINDA GRANATA

Ombra Tremula

7 December 2011

I am writing to you from the bowels of the earth, the “region of the mothers” perhaps, where I have descended to keep safe certain immaterial values, not convertible, of course, which belong to the domain of the human spirit. In this still-green depth, the land of origins perhaps, I will try to recover the primitive secret of our meaning in the cosmos. Osvaldo Licini, [from a letter of February 1941]

Bato’s is an abstract vocabulary equally attentive to geometry, modulated with a chromatic intensity that breaks the regular texture of the composition. His paintings are made of pictorially sensitive surfaces, with tonal depths that avoid flat, compact fields of colour. Thus his creatures are born: unsettling, ironic, fascinating and sensual, freed from any attempt to enclose them in a “modelling” and projected towards absolute formal purity. His creations possess an enchanting grace in which painting becomes a measured play of shadows, releasing an original poetic vein that can be felt in the fragile, light structures made of colours at once soft and strong laid down in zones, of fluid forms charged with a sense of dynamism. In depicting bodies Bato reduces anatomical details and almost entirely cancels the features of the context, yet the light volumetric structure of his figures vividly dominates the space. The artist thus dissolves the human figure and its identity, reducing bodies to barely sketched lines, erasing their details and bringing out his search for harmony and balance of volumes and lines. Essential, clear structures prevail, straight or curved, undulating surfaces that reflect or imprison light in their various supple movements: these are open structures, smooth and luminous like plaster bas-reliefs, where the play of light and shadow is the only compositional aim. The absence of dense brushstrokes and the choice of a fluid material – coffee and Indian ink – give the work a life of its own, an autonomous becoming, through a pictorial structure that is freely modulated in space in intervals that create an effect at times harmonious and at times disharmonious. These pauses are essential in these paintings; they can be caught between the thin lines and the full masses of colour, and they make the surfaces vibrant, light, made of fantasy and ironic poetry. A lightness at once provocative and gentle takes hold of the imperceptible marks on the canvas, which retain an almost suffering intensity that recalls the immaterial sounds of a symphony. The artist strips the forms of any illustrative or demonstrative superficiality; rather, they tend to voice his wish to teach the world to breathe lightly; with grace and discretion they come out of the canvas like the lines of a poem; they are marks dictated by the heart, forms that become feeling.

— Belinda Granata, Ombra Tremula, 7 December 2011

COSIMO ANGELERI

ASTRI NERI (Black Stars)

2009

The sadistic/grotesque/cyberpunk collection, a permanent part of the website, the Bato that came before today's Bato, cannot so easily be likened to a pre-printed "Bacon", as the critics have so enthusiastically claimed, but rather to an estrangement, through colour, of a kind of dark and violent imagery dear to underground culture or to the cybernetic-primordial culture of our days. From the thickened shadow of figures and flesh comes the shadow distilled into drops, stuck into the black-brown of the congealed coffee grounds from which these new works are made: dry, perverse silences, a collection of BLACK STARS, from which sex, drugs, heavy metal, dark and industrial descend (in the sense of coming before, and descending again). Precisely in this dark sexuality, fleeing towards infinite DARKNESSES, we can identify a musical parallel with dark, electro-dark and industrial. "Heavy stuff", so to speak. But now distilled, dry (in the sense of a curt sentence). Then I let myself be captured by the lapidary beauty of certain titles – *Ipotesi X O R 4*, for example – embracing an entire solo show, for their sound coming from deep caverns of starry universes; I know very well that there is a meaning and a theory behind them, but I like to see the signifier, like Munari's alphabets of unknown peoples, or the indecipherable languages of the Writers. An underground "out of time" or "against time", and as far as possible, at least as an impulse, Outside time: for me, who have known it, the impulse to step out of our own is quite evident. The remaining time, that of the day, is blurred like a shadow on a damaged film frame; it stays compressed behind the other time, a misshapen colour behind the colour-Outside.

— Cosimo Angeleri, ASTRI NERI (Black Stars), 2009

MARCO TRAMONTANA

Melanconia

2008

I had come to the end of the day, and I was still alive and partly lucid. I lifted the motionless cloth that lay over the painting. I studied it for a long time, looking for some imprecision that might help me understand whether it was *Melanconia* or a possible temporal derivation of it. At the time of its creation we had gone very deep into the concept of time. “Time does not exist,” he confided to me as he stared into space. After all, it was an acceptable and not so trivial solution.

That evening I realised that the painting spoke a different language, distant and familiar at the same time. I tried to decipher it as far as I could conceptualise each of its layers: the vision, the forms, the concepts, the emotions, the colours, the densities, the fractality, the chemical waves and the probability amplitudes. Inside and outside, above and below, light and dark, linear and differential. It was all there, on a single canvas, the motionless expression of possible and alternative versions of the reality in which we *feel* we are immersed. “Time does not exist, but it is not a constant,” I added in a flash. “Time and space influence each other through zones of localisation of greater or lesser density.” By now the spirit that had characterised one of the most interesting people I have ever known was gone. I watched him as he fought against the idea of the end, as he tried to alter as much as possible the entropic distance that was gradually narrowing. It was an unequal fight and I watched helplessly. He pointed to a small dark notebook held together by a lace, lying on the floor next to the pomegranate vase. I picked it up and began reading a page at random. [.. does the simplest possible plane figure, the triangle, exist as such, or does it exist insofar as it can be made? If we respect the geometric constraints underlying the construction of a triangle, are we sure that once it is made – drawn on a sheet of paper – it represents the concept it claims to arouse in every observer? A plane defines a geometry from which arise the objective conditions (axioms) that define the layer on which that specific reality rests. The very concept of curvature is foreign to the context of the “geometric plane”, while every line and every point achieve that approximation which suits the human intellect so well. On the other hand, we live on a planet that three-dimensionally approaches the concept of a sphere, and therefore no triangle, however infinitesimal, will be flat if it is made on a sphere. Now I find it possible to redefine the idea of the triangle as “the possible and indeterminate idea”. Yesterday the curvature of space-time whispered in my ear, without any shame, the nature of its existence..] He explained to me that the vase represents the use one can generally make of a generic container: every person can be expressed as *content* and *container*. In fact every spirituality and every personal consciousness shapes the prototype *vase* into what we are. Besides the human figures he usually referred to in his paintings, this time he had also included inanimate, decorative, serial natural elements. Geometric series born of the mother of all deceptions. There it was in front of me, listless but imposing. A painting in which nature took on form and outline was all he was leaving to the world. He was collapsing, and with him the wave function of human thought. I turned to look for some emotional foothold. He had stopped speaking and his gaze was growing ever dimmer. In the secluded figure at the bottom

right I caught himself, frightened but at the same time curious about what was happening outside – in the centre of the painting – where characters organised on pyramidal models altered and manoeuvred the lives of unaware human beings, bent over to gather what seemed to them to lead to the foundations of existence. I was rather amazed at what he had achieved. Many of the conversations we had begun in recent months had sprouted into a concrete work. After all, it was right that I should be there trying to loosen the intricate pictorial weight bearing down on the painting: I had unknowingly contributed to its conceptual genesis and now I had to complete its intention. [.. once the concept of "event" is established, we can define the identity between two points. Hence non-identity is the very concept of the straight line. Applying this reasoning recursively we quickly move on to three dimensions and arrive at our starting point, the "probable" fourth dimension ..] He had noted down everything that could not be painted but could be conceptualised. *Melanconia* changes the layer on which its meaning rests, instant after instant. There was an area, the one at the top behind the street lamp, that had strangely remained blank. Only probability waves and tetrahedral orbitals to explain its insubstantiality. And sitting on the bed. I felt my left wrist being squeezed, so I turned round. His determined gaze defined the final surge: he was ready, while I was completely dazed. I understood that I had to complete the painting. He needed it in order to leave. I took a pencil and began to write. From that moment on I cannot say for certain whether the events that followed were consistent with the laws of this world. ".. from the point to the line, towards the minimal two-dimensional figure, passing through the square until its sides increase exponentially. The circle as the last state of enlightenment.." π becomes what one strives towards in order to connect perceived rationality with the irrationality suggested by the infinitely small and the infinitely large. Linear superpositions of equally probable states, defined by probability amplitudes, which smile at the idea that an observer might try to imitate them. To observe is to perturb; the only solution to existence is sharing. Nature fulfils itself through quadratic laws. The discrepancy between the area of the square and the area of the circle relates every circumference to every diameter regardless of the scale of observation, and therefore regardless of the observer. Uncertainty violated! I felt the equivalence between energy and localised mass density growing ever stronger. The upper limit was suddenly broken; I fell to the ground and forgot who I was. When I opened my eyes again there were more or less elegant people explaining *Melanconia* to an uninterested audience. Some drunk, some lascivious, some pseudo-satisfied in their ego, some disappointed by a cowardly life led without a jolt, some deluded that they are better regardless, some dying in a room full of corpses, some still too curious to understand who is going to screw them, some lost in an all-too-experienced womb, some convinced they can get in and out of any situation, some too attached to their roots and some envious of funerals, some who have solved equations and some who pass off other people's results as their own, some tired and some just born, but all in the end more alike than they think. The method is the method itself, and *Melanconia* was about exactly this. Now all I could make out in the crowd was a blank canvas about two metres by one and a half, on which anyone could draw anything at all.

— Marco Tramontana, Melanconia, 2008

GIOVANNI LAURICELLA

Bato

27 June 2008

Bato fully expresses that authoritative gesture which great artists of the past put forward with great mastery. Like Bacon, with quick brushstrokes he finds an analytical composition, as if intercepted by a dowser's intuition: a painting that draws you into a reflection on the message it gives off. A very mature gesture, as if worn by time. Mainly two-dimensional, it insists until the forms dematerialise; in many cases one can speak of mark or of gesture. When they are not monochromes he does not use many colours, and leaves the specific elaboration to the viewer. Works that must be looked at carefully in order to find their real key, as if they referred to a later time, or to a lasting assimilability.

— Giovanni Lauricella, Bato, 27 June 2008

PAOLO BERTI

Soriano nel Cimino

22 July 2008

Inside a Roman palazzo, one of those from the Umbertine early twentieth century, in a square more than Royal dedicated to Queen Margherita, second floor, I ring at flat 5, after opening the old lift with its black mesh outer door and its two little doors that must always be closed again as soon as you get out. There are two, three, ten, fifteen of them, one sitting on the floor with a cigarette in his mouth: the guests at the private view of an artist who himself seems to belong to the early twentieth century. I get my bearings, without much effort; on the right as you enter, beautiful, neat, clean, a white painting immediately attracts me. Soft forms, lines of coffee. What ostentatious nerve, to exhibit such a naked, poor painting with such difficult content. I ask: wonderful, a mysterious white is the ground of the large canvas, and those soft, continuous, unbroken lines open and close the synthesis of an image no doubt linked to a sign or to a false randomness. I ask where Bato is. Lanky-looking (he has a certain resemblance to Federico García Lorca), he welcomes me, truly happy with my visit. I tell him my impression: I am shaken by so much expressive courage. One line, just one, and the work is complete. Almost an affront to the various academic schools or to some new self-styled author. All the components of a painting that claims to deserve articulate criticism are absent. A single line of diluted coffee, a warm burnt sienna, captivating, restrained and silent. The painting is there. These young artists, what surprises they have in store for the emaciated survivors of the post-'68 generation! The artist has given it a title, trying to rein in that image or deliberately desecrating it to bring the boundaries of the dreams it provokes back into an immanent reality. "Asino" (Donkey) is the title, but I cannot see it. A doubt arises: perhaps I do not understand that light of the canvas and the musicality of that warm ochre mark with a few points of Van Dyck brown. Then I understand: looking again and thinking, it is yet another successful attempt by Bato to leave no room for the pointless digressions of art critics, condensing meaning into the pure line. And yet it is not a donkey! As an observer I respect that placing of the work inside a box where Bato perhaps gathers his intimate and sacred convictions about how and why a work of art should exist! "Hey, Daniele, I'm really shaken by your work, it moves me, it grips me, it unleashes emotions, I'm falling in love with your paintings," I tell him! He looks at me and lets slip an amazement that comes from the gratification of my words. We are both happy, and so are the others around us. I go through the rooms with him, one by one; I linger over the large paintings that contain conceptuality and art history, with Bacon as a guiding spirit, but I am drawn again to the many works similar to "Asino". Brilliant syntheses of Sun, light, spaces, movements, forms, narratives, documents, meanings, immoral hints and refined ethics. Bato seeks reason and release, up to the most extreme possible synthesis of an image. He has his own personal explanation of every work on show, but it is not needed. The viewer already has his reading ready, because every work immediately gives it to him. And yet there is a solid academic background, abandoned in an instant and never brought back. And yet his challenge, Bato knows it, is a difficult one, almost on the brink of certain failure. Bato also knows that he is a "borderline" painter, at high risk of being misunderstood, as the hermetic poets were.

Images reduced to the expressive minimum are a real entrance into the light and the glimmers of everyone's dream, with the risk of being underestimated. But entering Bato's creative world allows you – and that is no small thing – to reconnect with a myriad of cultural and social experiences of the twentieth century, from the refined cinema of Antonioni and Bergman to Vespignani's Grosz-like experiences of the 1940s and 1950s, right up to the most experimental syntheses with the whites of Castellani or Fontana. The whites, after all, enchant, leaving the canvas a merciless and infinite field of image, frightening and questioning. The bare marks in the colour of coffee and earth have given me an artist, a real one, whom until today I had been desperately looking for and not finding. Am I the victim of suggestion? No!

— Paolo Berti, Soriano nel Cimino, 22 July 2008

MICHELE GERCO

Passaggi della memoria (Passages of Memory)

2007

Bato's recent pictorial production shows an artistic path that rapidly burns through the stages of a representational maturity increasingly focused on the essential. If in his early works the echo of great masters of contemporary art, such as Bacon, had influenced his composition and colours, now, faced with the renewal of his mark, ever freer and more spatial, we cannot help directing our reading towards a genuine autonomy, towards a personality that is gaining more and more character and individuality. Many works of the imagination are in fact a crude cloning of social reality. They are nothing but mimesis. In Bato, reality is not "photographed" and then presented as such, faithful to a false social model, but is interpreted, commented on, in several works ridiculed, and set against the vision of his own critical and dissenting viewpoint. Mimetic or imaginary-specular desire is the desire for the identical. It reproduces the real, even without knowing it. It gives birth to a great number of "narratives", works of fiction, or even collective behaviours such as carnival, where the imagination does nothing but re-propose power, even if it only draws a parody of it. Bato, on the other hand, works on *phantasia*, which discards every superficial mimetic effect and, by taking deliberately fictitious objects as the subject of its discourse, reveals structures that disclose another reality, which gives them meaning. The meaning of Bato's works today is the meaning that a gesture, a simple mark, a blink of an eye very often takes on. A non-mimetic alphabet, but one that is essential and sufficient to describe a "fact" of memory or to tell an emotional event that has developed only in our inner self, stimulated from outside. We could therefore conclude by noting the underlying irony that gives definition to the message, whose representation today appears more instinctive, less bound to formal perfection, and also aimed at re-evaluating space or, as a due reference, the unspoilt environment that surrounds us, unaware and often unknown to us.

— Michele Gerco, Passaggi della memoria (Passages of Memory), 2007