

The Work of Alberto Burri

Alberto Burri's artistic career lasted for exactly fifty years, from 1945, the year of his first experiments until 1995, the year of his death. His initial experience as a figurative painter was short and had already ended by 1947.

His abstract period can be divided into two parts, in the first, the surfaces of the paintings are irregular and uneven, sometimes steep, emphasizing the vitality of the different materials (sacks, wood, metals and plastic) with their rough surfaces, in the second they are more even and smooth, interweaving colour, which may assume the principal role, with the lay-out of the materials. Only now are they recognised for their vibrant tones and not just for the dramatic power of their movement. They now have a more uniform presentation, even if they are rough and porous in appearance. During the seventies, a change is distinguishable in the passage from "cretti" to "cellotex".

What does not change is the stillness and breadth of the layout, that sense of space rendered tense and compact by Burri. Initially, with more tormented forms, they later become smoother and more relaxed, while always expressing the same plastic vigour.

The appearance of the "sacks" at the start of the Fifties created a huge scandal. They were an unseen and disturbing novelty. The subsequent series generated the same waves, from the woods to the plastics, though the more intuitive press didn't fail to underline its grasping beauty.

As a matter of fact, none of the other pictorial researches of the Fifties, in Europe and the rest of the world, presented more qualitative characteristics. Nor are they comparable to Burri's works for their radically innovative expression, keeping in mind his anticipation of the American artists who would generate the New Dada and Pop Art movements. Artists who, as a matter of fact, were influenced and stimulated, or preceded by Burri. Examples? In a 1949 painting, the pattern of the American flag, which will be so important to Jasper Johns, already exists. The "gobbi" paintings, in which the canvas is pushed forward by a simple metal structure (sometimes it's a tree branch) stuck in the frame, anticipate the research in the "shaped canvas", pictures conceived as three dimensional canvas structures with internal armour. There are numerous ideas that Rauschenberg (after visiting Burri's studio in Rome in 1952) developed from Burri's work, from the layout assembly to the reason for "tutto nero" or the use of zip flies. We have abundant information about Burri's interest in European Nouveau Réalisme explorers; notwithstanding the Italian Mimmo Rotella with his "décollages", which notoriously emulate Burri's shapes, the "sacks" bound together introducing Christo's packaging. In 1958 Burri allows himself to be photographed while he shoots a beer can. The hole riddled tin is then hoisted onto a pin and presented as a sculpture. This sequence is published in the American magazine "Horizon" in January 1959, entitled "Birth of a New Art Form". For Burri it's only a gesture, but for Niki de Saint-Phalle it's the inspiration for a career. In 1958-59 Yves Klein starts his "Fire paintings" that repeat precisely Burri's combustions. Not to mention a large number of minors in Italy, France, Spain, Germany, United States and elsewhere.

Having become legendary, Burri's sacks are no more than a specific period of his research, which started with the use of materials like tar and moulds, a style still connectable in some way to the nature of paint mixing, with their spreadability, or better still their clotting on canvas. The works realized at the end of the Forties already anticipated the vision that Burri has of painting, as of an entity with its own "organic" life. Every painting is presented as an organism, parched but obscurely shiny, black-blue, earthy red, with its excrescences and contractions, encrusted lumps and specks, tears and grafts, done by incision on the layer of color, or by overlapping darker borders. In other works the painter would pursue an organization of tones with color stains and mixtures of oil and sand, alternating the darker tones of tar with orchestrations of bright materials, which improved the light refraction. The expressive intensity, the tormented tension of the forms and their harshness didn't exclude a refined and sometimes elegant tonal quality.

The sacks are born around 1950. Initially the "poor" theme of the sacking is mixed with the colour but towards 1952 Burri pushes on towards alternating painted areas with grey sacks on the canvas without overlapping these two distinct and dialectically matched elements.

The texture of the worn jute patches isn't veiled or lost within the layers of colour, rather it is highlighted, emphasizing its intrinsic beauty. Between a robust opaque black and a whitewash firmly embedded at the edge of the painting, the dimmed and torpidly suggestive light that the sack fibers exalt, is light of a battered and compromised resistance, sweat of time, but also the savoring, of that ostentatious passing of time, a tone of pleasurable duration; almost a liberation or a sublimation of suffering deep within.

While proceeding one enters a phase of increasingly explicit "action". The tears and the stitching always more like wounds, healing almost like flesh, the material sustains ripping and fraying. The cruel act of laceration, cauterization, gaping, piercing and tacking with a needle, is portrayed firmly in the tension of the page.

There is an exchange of influences between Burri and his materials, a deep understanding with the sacks which are evocative and significant in their existential verbatim, with an evenness of presence and intervention. The plastics are richer in receptive possibilities and determine a violent intervention, made evident through the combustion expressionism.

The fire leaves black traces of its actions, as already seen with the woods and metals, returning to drawing those disturbing holes that we met in the tar and sacks. With the metals, the open and folded over plates reflect an

intervention whose unconscious symbolism might be further sought, perhaps in the context of an indivisible psycho-esthetic process that emerges in the terms of a concise formal discourse.

The robust presence of space and composition in the layout is a constant trait even while the materials are changing or being renewed. It's something closely complementary to the lacerations inflicted on the materials, it's like a fatal horizon of immobility, almost eternity with which one confronts the relative temporality of deterioration and action. It's the constructive phase that interacts with the "destructive" one, forming a tight unity. Geometry and matter, the picture and the gesture, shape and shapelessness are also psychologically connected and inseparable facts.

After the scandal and the rejection by the majority of the critics, Burri's unreserved success arrives towards the Sixties and is consolidated at the start of the Seventies. In the meanwhile, his vision tends to be more tranquil; he lays aside the dramatic tones of his informal research, while still maintaining its fullness and solemnity, as can be seen in the wonderful "cellotex" series exposed here.

The post war period in which climate the sacks were born is far behind now but in the opinion of one eminent critic they were seen as the symbol of a poor and torn Italy, involved in a painful defeat, thirsty for new values.

In the kaolin "cretti" series the emphasis remains the phenomenology of matter. The works no longer undergo violence but are set in a wonderfully drawn composition created by the almost calligraphic effect of the crackling. They lay out a net, sometimes dense, sometime refined, which underlines the formal discourse and its sublime desire for order. Following on are the big "cellotex", where the artist creates refined effects with the unique grain of this industrial material that changes shade and pattern in the areas that the painter defines geometrically and then makes them undergo a particular treatment, removing the "skin". This is how Burri creates visions of an extraordinary and majestic architectural simplicity, marked by a kind of horizon that suggests the extension of the space, or where enormous samples of colour or black shapes of a monolithic power settle. One of the most eloquent results of this purified and solemn research are the great iron sculptures from the first half of the Eighties.

Colour is the basis of the 1982 series entitled "Sestante". Burri, the Great Abstract artist, overturns his personal challenge and returns to paintbrushes just when this seemed out of the question because of the explosion of extra-pictorial research, in which he was internationally dominant. As with the "Cellotex", wonderful equilibriums connect one area of colour to the other, each area has weight but also agility which is at once fixed immobility but with a dynamic potential. The vast compositions transmit liveliness and sadness at the same time, lightness and weight, mobility and immobility. The shapes are extremely varied: rigid squaring is alternated with curves and arabesques, rarified pauses by crowded meetings of organic particles, as lively as amoeboid cells. The black rimmed reds and blues, receive a lively impulse. Every colour is strongly pronounced and identified in its physical consistency. Stripped of every lyrical or symbolic movement, it doesn't seek clarity but imposes its own solidity and sign. Colour is also a material for Burri, tangible, as if biologically gifted with a vitality of its own. That is what the painter exalts, the vital urgency liberated by his pulsations.

Just like in the previous decades, with the sacks, wood, metals and combustions, Burri evokes the vitality of the different materials. Thus he remains committed to making bold choices with these, as in the search for organic and elementary evidence of life, a continuously renewed and newly imagined research in a different moment, in another shot. As was the reaction of the plastics to the fire, in the Sestante coloured series, the forms react by swelling or shrinking, the colours by fragmentation or compact expansion. It's like an eye moving further back to dominate vast horizons then coming nearer almost like a microscope to examine the swarming and flourishing, the waste, the penetrations of elementary protoplasm which are the coloured pieces.

The decade that spans from the mid Eighties to the year of Burri's death is dominated by the paintings titled Nero or Annottarsi. A disturbing and suggestive expression, "annottarsi" means "nightfall", entering the night. For Burri, who had reached the age of seventy it meant a "nightfall" of existence, to go beyond the final step. Black, a colour he often matched with red, from the time of the sacks or in the years after the gold, a potently expressive combination that is found even in the "cellotex", now occupies his imagination almost entirely, retrieving in its own perimeters a richness of connections and passages. The technique is mostly acrylic on a cellotex base, often combined with pumice.

Dark contemplation contrasts the sheer joyfulness of the previous moments. The intensity is the same but of the opposing kind; a quiet and hushed discourse of totally black shapes in an intense grey background, an opaqueness of almost faded light, like under ashes. Being nocturne, and seen from above like in flight, thoughts of the Absolute encounter horizons reaching towards silence. The rapport between the different tones of black, the course of the outlined forms and the dialogue of the pictorial weave of the different modules generate a resulting mute solemnity, almost glimpses of landscapes, or constructions seen in the night and yet without any naturalistic reference.

In the vast rooms of the old tobacco dryhouses which, in Città di Castello, Burri's birthplace, house the great cycles of the last years; from the 1979 's *Il Viaggio*, to *Sestante*, and the black and gold-black paintings, one can fully perceive the amplexness of their spatial capacity, inherited from the Italian tradition that began with Giotto on to Piero della Francesca and then the Renaissance. I confess that when I visited the old tobacco dryhouses for the first time, I had the impression of being in front of some sort of 20th Century Sistine Chapel, such is their "monumentality", an

impressively renewed monumentality in the most audacious sense and accompanied by contemporary expressions.

Radically free from any connection with passed expressions, in the purity of the authentic abstract tradition, but connected to an ancient line of Italian research in this renewed feeling for space, which in Burri's painting is laid bare and becomes not a stage for representation, but the main character, profoundly dramatic and pursued by tensions and contrasting forces. The will of the mind controls the psychic impulses that push from deep inside; not repressing them but containing them, nourishing with their thrust the force of their own *ratio*; firstly emerging with imperious lucidity, then lingering in the magma it is called to dominate. Compelling, instinctive, diving forces, loaded with dark and destructive energy, recompose while crossing the architectural zone of the intellectual light.

Space is this superior architecture recomposed, a space that immortalizes the "measure" (the *mens mensura*) of the ancients while subjecting it to the inedited confrontation with that breeding ground of unease, the subconscious, the psyche, over which borders the art of our century has so often - but never so solemnly- looked.

From *Percorso di Burri*, by Maurizio Calvesi