

GALLERIA VALENTINABONOMO

CATERINA SILVA THE CRUELLEST MONTH

Presented by Anna Cestelli Guidi

Caterina Silva's Limbo Paintings

"The Cruellest Month": taken from the opening line of T.S. Eliot's towering poem *The Waste Land*, the title of Caterina Silva's exhibition clearly suggests that what unites this new cycle of works is the sense of a new beginning, much like the magical and stirring moment when nature reawakens every spring. The explosions of light and colour with which these paintings dazzle us recall the coruscating exuberance of the reborn natural world, but they are also the physical embodiment of the start of a new phase in the artist's pictorial research. Silva has left behind her the inky depths of an enigmatically darkened space, and it is now the colour white that unifies the grand airiness of these new works and floods it with light. From this whiteness, motile, organic forms emerge: watery algae, aery lianas, tendrils and flowers that intersect and chase after one another in thick clots and liquid fields of intense colour – pinks, reds, greens and sky blues, in all imaginable shades – merging and quivering in the space around them like disembodied flowers or a lustily erupting life force. Like vibrating explosions of sound, sparks of colour flare out from a still-inchoate primordial magma embodying a pre-linguistic stage of human development in which images and words contribute to a single cosmic totality. Worlds as yet undefined, limbos where everything is still potential, these primogenial amniotic fluids are painted onto the canvas with rapid brushstrokes, following no pre-imposed schema. A gestural expressiveness, born of the artist's need to wrestle with the canvas and with her painting's subject, in which we sense something dancelike, something happening in a state resembling a trance – that synchronicity of the spiritual and the corporeal, the divine and the human, intuition and rationality, in which the *élan vital* displays its unsettling side, its own intrinsic equivocality. As the poet writes, reawakenings bring with them the poignant melancholy of reminiscence, "mixing memories and desire," and inevitable thoughts of death, "breeding lilacs out of the dead land"¹. And so, for all their joyful lightness of touch and luminosity, the aether of these works resounds with echoes of a subliminal disquiet which is not just the artist's own and which regards the disorienting times we live in, prompting reflections on our sense that ours is a fragmenting world – the natural world, but also our political and historical world – a world we seem to find ever harder to comprehend. As beguiling as they are, Caterina Silva's works are not naïf, nor is their charm superficial: the expressivity they exhibit is born of a rigorous thought process. The feeling of improvisation that Silva's painting conveys is not casual: driven by both intuition and intellect, this is a profoundly conceptual artistic practice. There is, therefore, nothing accidental in her choice of a vertical format for these landscapes/cosmoses, which are slightly taller than a life-size human figure would be – a size that draws the surrounding space and the viewer into the work in a performative and radical way. There is also nothing accidental in the fact that Silva's paintings are grouped in cycles of work, because it is only as interrelated parts of a whole that their characteristic interplay of assonances and repeated forms acquires real meaning, like the notes of a piece of music or the phonemes in a new alphabet. An essence which, in Silva's case, again aims to deconstruct key elements of established pictorial and linguistic conventions: traditional perspectival figuration's centre point, the focal point of the image, is now a void – a luminous vortex thanks to which, like the digital light of our iPhone screens, the entire picture plane vibrates with novel resonances; and the same is true of her mysterious ideograms, with their suggestions of a reintroduction, into the initially and metaphysically silent visual realm, of a pre-linguistic *phônè* (voice) which, as Adriana Cavarero writes in her illuminating book on the subject of the voice, emphasises "the sonorous, libidinal and pre-semantic physicality of the logos"². The vibrating void and the quasi-aphonic sonority of Silva's painting challenge the certitude of Western culture's logos and the forms of power that derive from it. In an act of resistance, they give voice to the poetry and eroticism of the ineffable. Modern-day *Water Lilies*, these works are reaffirmations of the artist's faith in the language of painting. Indeed, the word "Fidelity" is written across – and provides the title for – one of the paintings in this show: it is an aggressive statement made in black spray paint, as if intended to convey the urgency of the artist's need to declare her love of painting. And these works are also reaffirmations of her belief in painting's power to provoke wonder and thus induce the suspension of disbelief that only art can bring about, setting in train a radical transformation of us, art's viewers, and of the world around us. In stark contrast with the "politically correct" artistic practices currently glutting the art market and art in general, Caterina Silva's painting shares something of the utopian impulse of that equally nomadic and unconventional innovator, Alighiero Boetti: in other words, his "bringing the world into the world" ("mettere al mondo il mondo"), politically as well as aesthetically, offering glimpses of another possible reality, an alternative to the prevailing hegemonic idioms. Similarly, in these new works of hers, Caterina Silva brings into the world other worlds of possibility, and does so with a visionary intensity that only grace, in the moral sense, can confer. As Simone Weil notes in her diary written at one of the darkest points in recent history: "Not to exercise all the power at one's disposal is to endure the void. This is contrary to all the laws of nature. Grace alone can do it"³.

Anna Cestelli Guidi, June 2022

1. T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 1922. translated by Mario Praz, *La terra desolata*, Einaudi, 1983, p. 16.
2. 2. Adriana Cavarero, *A più voci. Filosofia dell'espressione vocale*, Feltrinelli, 2003, p.114.
3. 3. Simone Weil, *L'ombra e la grazia*, Bompiani, 2017, p. 23.

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